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A study resource for the journey
to the 35th Anniversary of
the Uniting Church
in Australia



together on the way
enriching community



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Welcome

In the New Testament the phrase “the body of Christ” refers to many things.

We first hear about the body of Christ when Mary discovers that she is pregnant. We meet Jesus as flesh and blood in the nativity at Bethlehem and on the cross outside Jerusalem.

The transformed body of Christ is encountered by another Mary in the garden beside the empty tomb and by Thomas in the upper room. One was asked not to hold onto him while the other was invited to touch the wounds with his own hands.

Then the work begun by the incarnate Jesus was handed over to the body of Christ, the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry on God’s mission in the world. That body of Christ is nourished for its journey by partaking of the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion.

This series of studies explores how the image of the body of Christ was used to teach the early Christians to live and serve as part of the whole. As the Uniting Church prepares to celebrate 35 years since union, you are invited to gather with other members of the body to explore meeting the challenges of being the many incarnations of Christ in our community today.

The Queensland Synod has embraced the call and vision statement and the values that underpin our work. As I move about our church I can see many expressions of the body of Christ. As you explore the teaching of the church about the body of Christ, think about the church in Queensland. Which parts are rejoicing or suffering or in need of special care and protection? We can achieve so much more for God when we worship, witness and serve together. I commend the studies to you.

Rev Kaye Ronalds

Moderator, The Uniting Church in Australia,
Queensland Synod

Preparing for the journey

Before each session, ask God for guidance and inspiration. Open your heart and mind to new insights and challenges. Savour the words and phrases in your heart noticing that which evokes a response.

Follow the reading with a time of silent reflection.

There are many accompanying resources at together.ucaqld.com.au. Log on to explore and prepare for the journey.



WEB

together.ucaqld.com.au



READ

The *Side by Side* leaders' manual on the website



LISTEN

Song: *A Heart for You*
by Rev David Macgregor



WATCH

Four short video clips
exploring collaboration





A people of God on the way

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Reflection on the *Statement to the Nation:* Introducing ourselves

People of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches have united. A new church has been born.

We, who are members of the first Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, address the people of Australia in this historic moment. The path to unity has been long and at times difficult, but we believe this unity is a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race.

We acknowledge with gratitude that the churches from which we have come have contributed in various ways to the life and development of this nation. 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 are conscious of our responsibilities within and beyond this country. We particularly acknowledge our responsibilities as one branch of the Christian church within the region of South-East Asia and the Pacific. In these contexts we make certain affirmations at the time of our inauguration.

This statement was made to the nation at the inauguration of The Uniting Church in Australia on 22 June, 1977. Here, we introduced ourselves as a church. We're new; we're three churches who have decided to become one. It was exciting.

We let people know how we got to the beginning, the historic nature of the moment, and we acknowledged that the journey towards union wasn't easy. Our union is a sign "of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race". This union makes sense of our heritage, tradition and understanding of the church working in the world. And we want our unity to declare our commitment to the reconciliation of the whole human race.

What a way to begin! We told the nation where we've come from; held up our union as a sign of reconciliation; and committed ourselves to our responsibilities as the Uniting Church both in Australia and within our region.

All this is like the trailer for the sequel: now you understand the context, we've got a few things to say.

A people of God on the way

Opening prayer or song see accompanying resources at together.ucaqld.com.au

Bible Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Biblical Reflection: Re-read verse 27

The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, three or four decades after Jesus' crucifixion, in an attempt to address the terrible conflicts and imperfections that he has heard about. This church is trying to be faithful in a city located on a strategic trade route between West Asia and Europe. The population of Corinth is a multicultural, multi-faith, and hard-living group who show little respect for much other than earning a living. Even within the church we find Paul helping them to confront divisions, the continuing influence of previous beliefs, disciplining members, sexual immorality, legalism, and a spiritual arrogance that had arisen (see chapters 5, 6, 8 and 10).

The behaviour of the Corinthian church contrasts with the account of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:1-21. At Pentecost, two decades prior, we have the inspiring story of the birth of the church. The presence of God's Spirit enables the infant church to speak to those gathered in Jerusalem of God's salvation for all humanity. Life for the believers in this church (Acts 2:43-47), was shared— addressing needs, worshipping together, breaking bread, and "having the goodwill of all the people".

This story of community inspires and challenges us. We yearn for something more than just membership of an organisation to which we feel an obligation to contribute our time.

Paul reminds us that the church is not an organisation but a body, a strange spiritual organism of all believers – "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it".

The church needs to be free of the shackles of the spirit of individualism that infests our age; to break free of the localism that limits our focus to what is happening only in our backyard. This leads to a preoccupation with personal religion and a blinkered mission not unlike the problems that occurred in the Corinthian church. To be a part of the body of Christ is to engage in an open and committed relationship with the church in its local, regional, state and worldwide expressions.

continued >>



Together on the way

In the Queensland Synod, the Uniting Church's vision is to look more deeply at the essence and future of our church. Individuals, congregations, Uniting Church health and community services and schools are asked to join the *Together on the way, enriching community* journey to lead us into fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world.

In response to the call of Christ, in the light of Holy Scripture and the *Basis of Union*, the Uniting Church in Queensland is committed to: Uniting in Christ: acting with love; living with hope; witnessing in faith; working for justice.

Discussion points:

- The church in Corinth reflected some of the same issues as broader society. What are the influences we confront today in our own church or faith life?
- Reflect on the similarities between the church in Corinth, Jerusalem, and the Uniting Church in Queensland. What are the most important things your community could do to address these and how could your community collaborate with another part of the Uniting Church community to enable mission?
- What might we change or continue to affirm in this section of the *Statement to the Nation* we read today?

Closing prayer or song

Further reading:

Living as Community by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove
www.theworkofthepeople.com

Statement to the Nation and the *Basis of Union* both available on the Assembly website
<http://assembly.uca.org.au>

The enthusiasm shared by the communities of Crossway Korean Uniting Church, Brisbane, and Mapoon Uniting Church, Cape York, has generated a partnership focused on learning about the different ways each other experiences God and participates as members of the wider Uniting Church in Queensland.

By trekking to each other's homes and communities, these two congregations express enthusiasm for different ways of being part of the Uniting Church and continue to encourage each other and journey together on the way without concern for the huge distance that separates them.

See them tell their story in a short video available at together.ucaql.com.au.

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The journey begins

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Reflection on the *Statement to the Nation*: Here we go!

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. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond. We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms.

We will challenge values which emphasise acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourage a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between the rich and poor.

Every time I [Colleen Geyer] read these words, I feel proud that, as a church, we had the guts to say these things, were courageous enough to set the bar high, and wanted there to be no doubt about what Australia could expect of us. Read these words and you will know how we're intending to be true to who we are. Our unity, which is a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race, will look like this.

Our concern was for everyone and we affirmed that we upheld "basic Christian values and principles". Some might say that the injustices we pledged ourselves to address are what everyone should strive for, and they're right. But as the church, we can't shy away from our responsibilities as part of the society in which we live and serve.

Whether as a church we understood the enormity of what we were saying, is not clear. The courage it took to write those words is small compared to the courage it has taken in the 35 years since union to be activists for change in Australia and to stand with the vulnerable, marginalised and dispossessed. Have we been brave enough?

If you look back over the statements that the Assembly and the synods have made about these issues, if you read the press releases or proposals from the councils of the church, it is clear we've been in amongst it! As the Uniting Church, we can't make these commitments and then be silent. Our voice has had to be loud and strong. At times our voice has had to be a lone voice, a voice that isn't popular, even amongst our own members. Remind you of anyone?

The journey begins

Opening prayer or song

Bible Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 and Romans 12:3-16

Biblical Reflection: Re-read verse 12

Here we go!

Uniting Church theologian and author Bill Loader writes that in this passage, "The theme is unity. Claims to spiritual prowess and the focus on gifts instead of the giver (see 12:1-11) led to disunity. Corinth's Christians seem to have developed a range of kinds of disunity and here, in Chapter 12, a failure to live out the unity of the Spirit. Paul goes on to develop a common illustration: communities need to work together as our body's parts need to work together (12:12-27). For Paul, the body is more than just a community; it is a participation in the ongoing life of the risen Christ which extends to encompass us in a realm of power and transforming love. The one Spirit brings the one presence of Christ to us. We drink it together (12:13). Or to change the image, as Paul often does, we have been incorporated into this body which is Christ (12:12). For Paul, in this letter, Christ is the whole body with many parts (12:12) and we have found our place in it and take on its various roles." (Adapted from Bill Loader's *First Thoughts on Year A* epistle passage from the lectionary)

Paul has chosen the metaphor of the body to help us understand the nature of the Church and our relationship with God and one another. There are also other metaphors that may help unpack this imagery, e.g. a soccer team or orchestra. Just like in the church, each member of the team has an important part to play, has to develop their own skills and focus on their performance rather than criticise others, and listen to the experienced and trained coach. They all need to work together for the group to achieve its goals.

The *Together on the way* journey begins

The Priority Direction A Report to the 29th Synod in 2011 identified the following challenges to a shared Call and Vision:

- There is a widespread lack of confidence in home grown models of mission and church life.
- There is an individualism that permeates all parts of our church so there is little willingness to engage beyond the immediate or look at ways in which various parts of the church can partner with one another.
- There is a deep-seated suspicion and cynicism among clergy and many lay leaders in our church. Just as the Corinthian church was challenged by Paul to confront its disunity, suspicion, mistrust, jealousy and partisanship, we too as individuals, congregations, faith communities and Uniting Church organisations need to free ourselves to fully participate as Christ's body serving the world (Romans 12:3-16).

We achieve this freedom not just by our own action but in the confession that we are all children of God (Romans 8:12-17).

Discussion points:

- What are the most important aspects of the body metaphor for your situation?
- Do you agree with the points raised in the Priority Direction report above? What are the barriers to being the body of Christ and how could you work to overcome them?
- Consider the three paragraphs from the Statement to the Nation for this session. How might you partner with others to be the body of Christ responding to these issues in local, state and national contexts?

Closing prayer or song

Further reading:

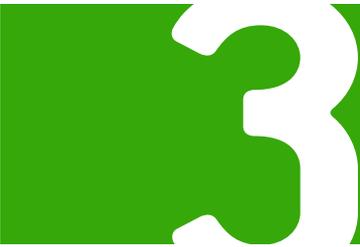
The body www.worshiphousemedia.com



The congregation of The Gap Uniting Church, in Brisbane's west, brought back plenty of awareness, craft to fundraise with and enthusiasm for sharing in God's mission following collaboration with UnitingWorld on a visit to our church partners in East Timor. The congregation are excited about continuing that collaboration as a way of learning about different ways of being church in less developed parts of the world.

In working together, this partnership fosters a mutual appreciation of how others experience God and the world.

See them tell their story in a short video available at together.ucaqld.com.au.



Taking our part in the bigger picture

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Reflection on the *Statement to the Nation:* It's not just for us

We are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for their use and enjoyment.

This one small paragraph let Australia know that as a church we weren't just interested in the here and now but that we would also be a future-focused church. We wouldn't just strive to make a difference for the generations surrounding us, but also we would be "concerned with the basic human rights of future generations". God's love and commitment to humanity is not limited by time, space or matter.

Sometimes it's difficult to be committed to actions for people we won't know, for years in which we won't live. Don't we have enough things to be worried about now? And yet, this whole statement calls us to look outwards: to identify injustices and how we can influence change, to see what's happening in our communities and how we can help in the future. It also acknowledges the impact of our actions for the future, in particular, on the environment; God's creation of which we are stewards. Isn't it amazing that this statement was made 35 years ago?

Taking our part in the bigger picture

Opening prayer or song

Bible Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:15-24 and Ephesians 4: 1-6

Biblical Reflection: Re-read verse 15

It's not about us

When we read this, we can see the absurdity of the idea that all the parts of the body should be the same. However, this is often one of the major sources of conflict within the church. We find it hard to share with those who think, believe or act differently.

Our reality is that there are very many expressions of the body of Christ today. As a uniting church, seeking wider unity, we need to be aware of both the pain and the indifference that exists towards ecumenical relationships.

Verses 21-24 challenge us to discern not only the gifts and callings that each one of us has to offer as a member of that body, but also how we live in relation to every other Christian.

In our modern context, when seeking to engage with people from different denominations, socio-economic backgrounds, or even life experiences, we can fluctuate between uninformed enthusiasm and guarded involvement. Both can hinder the building of mutual trust and commitment to working together. It is essential that we form authentic partnerships of equality, respect and integrity in furthering God's mission in the world.

Beyond the Christian church, we can collaborate with those in our communities who profess a different faith. This prospect can be difficult for some. But in the face of human need, the pressures of a secular society, and injustice and oppression, there can be a basis for interfaith cooperation that seeks to draw upon compassion, love and service to others. Interfaith dialogue is both a challenge and a gift.

Together on the way

The Uniting Church in Queensland's Vision 2020 incorporates nine action areas of significance for the church. Read them all at together.ucaqld.com.au. Three of significance to this session are:

Working for Christian unity

Engaged in authentic community relationships

Reaching out and speaking for justice and peace for all creation

Discussion points:

- Paul's analogy challenges us to show humility in our relations with each other. How is this expressed in partnerships with others in your local situation?
- At a local level, how are gifts offered in service to the wider church and humanity?
- How is your church or group engaged in the areas of significance listed above?
- The *Statement to the Nation* gives us an indication of issues we can address with other denominations and faiths. What are the key issues facing our society today that would benefit from people of faith working together?

Further reading:

Body of Christ www.theworkofthepeople.com

For more information on these issues visit the Assembly website assembly.uca.org.au and read the sections on Christian Unity, Multicultural and Cross Cultural Ministry, and Relations with Other Faiths. There is also good work being done by Queensland Synod committees and Queensland Churches Together www.qct.org.au.



What does a latte have to do with God's purpose for our church? A lot if you are Rev Marius Kruger and the Highfields Faith Community north of Toowoomba. Established with help from the Queensland Synod Support Services and The Downs Presbytery, Highfields Faith Community is exploring different ways of ministering to the community including at the Kruger's family-run café, the Forest Hill Coffee House.

It is over a coffee, BBQ, kid's playground or a Bible that this Faith Community explores what it is to be a Christian in today's society and how to do church in a way that enables their local community to engage in faith exploration in a comfortable setting.

See them tell their story in a short video available at together.ucaqld.com.au.

Reflection on the *Statement to the Nation*: It's all about hope

Finally we affirm that the first allegiance of Christians is God, under whose judgment the policies and actions of all nations must pass. We realise that sometimes this allegiance may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day. But our Uniting Church, as an institution within the nation, must constantly stress the universal values which must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive.

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.

In the spirit of His self-giving love we seek to go forward.

If you were wondering why we made all the commitments in this amazing *Statement to the Nation*, well here it is.

We're clear about whose we are – “the first allegiance of Christians is God”. As the Uniting Church, this is our bedrock. It secures us to who we are and why we speak and act the way we do. Because of this belonging, we acknowledge that this may mean we could come into “conflict with the rulers of our day”, not because we want it, but because we will be speaking out for “the universal values which must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive.” This isn't a statement that holds back.

“We pledge ourselves to hope...” Can you think of anything better to pledge yourself to? Because of this hope, we pledge ourselves to work for our nation – now that's a commitment which calls us to action! Our work however, is for a nation “whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone”.

Everything that has come prior to this in the statement has been about being God's church for others. Here “all persons everywhere” are identified as “the family of the One God”, and this God has been made known to us in a very special way – in Jesus who “gave His life for others”. In this statement, we are called to do that too and be part of the work of God's church in Australia.

Through Christ hope is offered to all humanity and at union, The Uniting Church in Australia committed itself to be the body of Christ, offering hope, with courage and love, to the nation in which it lives and serves.

How have we done?

Living with hope

Opening prayer or song

Bible Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:24b-27 and Mark 4:26-34 **Biblical Reflection:** Re-read verse 26-27

It's all about hope

Earlier sessions have pointed to attitudes and behaviours that prevent us from full participation in the body of Christ. Suspicion, mistrust, or jealousy, contribute to damaged or broken relationships. It may be our own attitude or behaviours that cause others to suffer. Or, it might be us who suffer neglect, rejection or marginalisation. Many of us carry wounds from an experience of a church that does not reflect the undeserved grace of our loving God.

The Corinthian church has become an example of the types of behaviours that can occur.

The passage reminds us that our relationship with each other is such that when one part of the church is in pain we all feel that pain.

If there is pain, then there is also hope. There is a way forward; it is a way of hope. Our hope rests in the great purposes and love of our Lord (Ephesians 2: 13 – 22). It is through God's Spirit, active in the body of Christ, that we can find true forgiveness and reconciliation with each other and with God.

Nothing is beyond hope. It is never too late nor too small a start for something to become a new beginning in Christ. The kingdom of God grows even from small beginnings (e.g. Mark 4:26-34).

Living with hope

Following this passage on the body, Paul speaks of faith, hope and love in chapter 13. This soaring reflection on God's love enshrines in one word that which our hearts yearn for, that which we seek in all relationships, and that which will bring us to a deeper and wider unity with each other and with the world for which Christ gave himself.

If Paul is right when he says, “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it”, then we will not know our full selves until we do so within the fellowship of the Church, and take our part in Christ's mission in the unity of the body!



Together on the way

The Uniting Church in Queensland's Vision 2020 incorporates nine action areas. You can read them all at www.together.ucaqld.com.au

The actions we haven't looked at in this resource yet are:

- A prayerful listening church
- God-centred and life-related worship
- Forming active and accountable disciples of Jesus
- Confident in sharing faith
- Theologically informed, creative and visionary in its leadership
- Organised for mission

Discussion points:

- From the list above, which of these calls your congregation or group to act in hope?
- Spend some time in personal reflection on these two questions:
Am I willing to surrender my agenda to that which serves the whole Church?
While I am happy to rejoice with those who rejoice, am I willing to suffer with those who suffer, or is it easier to walk away?
- What actions will be initiated to ensure that the mission in your local area remains strongly connected to the ongoing mission of the church at regional and state levels?
- The *Statement to the Nation* draws us back to our first allegiance. How will we pledge ourselves to hope and work with all who are part of the whole Uniting Church to bring that hope to our nation?

Further reading:

We need each other by Jean Vanier (L'Arche)
www.theworkofthepeople.com

The relationship between Aspley Uniting Church in Brisbane and the Bald Hills Mosque is promoting understanding and thoughtful discussion around different ways of experiencing faith. Awareness of and appreciation for their differences is opening doors to exploring ways of working together to support the needs of the local community.

The relationship also extends to other people of faith in their community. As Rev Mano says, to be able to enrich the community, you need to get to know the people in your community and they will invariably have a vast range of beliefs. Building ecumenical and interfaith relationships can be a long journey, but all agree the best way to start is to sit down and share a meal or a cuppa.

See them tell their story in a short video available at together.ucaqld.com.au.

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Call to action

Here we are; 35 years as a church, a community of people, working for God.

It's been quite a journey: sometimes an anxious tightrope walk and at other times a joyful, carefree dance. Reflecting on our journey as the Uniting Church in Queensland (*Together on the way, enriching community*), we can be assured that today, just as it was 35 years ago, the vision of the Uniting Church in Australia is vital and attainable.

We have discerned the parts of that vision that we need to realise by 2020, as drawn out of the Call: Uniting in Christ: acting with love, living with hope, witnessing in faith, working for justice.

Now is the time for us to be purposeful and intentional about how we achieve that vision. Trusting in and partnering with other parts of the Uniting Church in Queensland can enrich our Church community and commitment towards that shared vision of working towards sustainable mission. There is a synergy derived from different parts of the Uniting Church collaborating that, with God, can shape dreams into realities.

So, where to from here?

Take the opportunity to come together following the completion of these studies and share your ideas for mission. Dream big! Explore the *Together on the way, enriching community* Vision 2020 using the wheel to acknowledge and celebrate where your strengths lie. Identify those sections in which you see weakness and reflect on how you can become more effective in mission. Share your vision with other congregations, presbytery, the Synod office, and with our health and community services and educational facilities. Be open to ways of working together to develop a plan for making your vision for mission a reality.

With God's help we will live out our baptism, enact our commitments in the Statement to the Nation and truly work towards enriching our communities together, as part of the body of Christ.

A time to celebrate

The anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia is just one occasion to give thanks, seek God's forgiveness, and respond faithfully to the continuing presence of the Word of God, Jesus Christ, head of the body!

Preparing

How can we prepare ourselves and our faith community to renew our commitment to being a pilgrim people on the way to the promised end?

Reflecting on *Together on the way, enriching community*; what elements can we use in worship services across the period of Pentecost or other times, to commit us to being the church in our area, state and nation as we move together towards 2020?

Contributors

Colleen Geyer (reflections), Bruce Johnson, Neil Thorpe, Lyndelle Gunton, Mardi Lumsden and many others.

