**SHARE SUNDAY 2023**



**God’s call to unity**

**1. Introduction**

Share Sunday is an opportunity for the whole of the Uniting Church to celebrate the incredible community services being undertaken by our agencies, parish missions, presbyteries and congregations. It is also an invitation to continue to explore how we can partner together as we respond to Christ’s calling to serve humanity seeking to create an inclusive, connected and just world.

A picture containing graphics, symbol, design, art

Description automatically generatedThis year, the focus of our Share Sunday resources is **‘God’s call to unity.’**

These resources include a complete sample service, with all prayers and responses, sermon/reflection, intergenerational activity resources & suggested hymns. An additional PowerPoint with the complete service accompanies this resource for those congregations who use data projection in worship. These resources are available to download, but not in hard copy. However, if you are unable to download them, you may request a USB memory stick to be posted to you. Please adapt the material to suit your context and congregation(s).

This year’s occasion might be the time to invite some local Uniting staff, board members or volunteers along to be present in worship. We are happy to connect via ZOOM for congregations where that is appropriate. If you need a local contact to extend such an invitation, please let Megan Osborn know: E: Megan.Osborn@vt.uniting.org.

As we pray, reflect and worship together as part of our Share Sunday services, we can continue to build on the rich history of Share, and the incredible contributions we as a church community make as we engage with lives shattered in so many ways and find ourselves mutually transformed as we meet Christ in the stranger.

Thank you for participating.

**2. Sample Worship Service for Share Sunday 2023**

Share Appeal Sunday 20 August 2023

Based upon the lectionary scripture readings for Sunday 20th August 2023, Pentecost 12.

(These resources could be used on other Sundays or times of worship if departing from the lectionary is permissible in your context.)

**Acknowledgment of Country**

*According to your local custom.*

**Call to Worship**

*(We gather together as the people of God)*

God who calls all to unity

**We give ourselves to be shaped by you**

As we are embedded in you, you are embedded in us

**We sing your praise in joyful unity.**

**Opening Hymn**

(some suggestions)

TIS 690 Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair

TIS 188 Where wide sky rolls down and touches red sand

TIS 693 Come as you are, that’s how I want you

TIS 351 Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim

**Greeting**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ

and the love of God

and the companionship of the Holy Spirit

be with you all.

**And also with you.**

**Welcome & Introduction to the Share Sunday theme**

Share Sunday is an opportunity for the whole of the Uniting Church to celebrate the incredible community services being undertaken by our agencies, parish missions, presbyteries, and congregations. It is also an invitation to continue to explore how we can partner together as we respond to Christ’s calling to serve humanity seeking to create an inclusive, connected and just world. This year our theme is ‘God’s call to Unity’. What might that look like for you? How are you responding to God’s call for unity? How are all the relationships we build through our community services by congregation, Presbytery, and agencies reflective of God’s call for unity.

**Announcements/News**

(or your usual place in the service)

**Opening Prayer**

God, of the broken heart,

And for a broken world,

We come seeking your presence

To dry our tears,

Share our joys,

To hold us close

And for your dream to rise again,

In us and through us.

**Prayer of Confession**

God of everlasting hope and mercy,

We weary you with our excuses,

Our petty jealousies,

Our long-held grudges,

Our self-righteousness and supposed superiority.

May our hearts be broken like yours is broken

May your cleansing tears flow through our lives

May the boat of our ego be lost in the depth of your sea

May your tender heart be found in us.

**Declaration of Forgiveness**

Hear the Good News of our shared faith:

A bruised reed, God does not break

A dimly burning wick, God does not snuff out;

From God’s broken heart you are made whole,

God’s tears become for you a cleansing stream,

For in Christ God says

“Your sins are forgiven”

**Thanks be to God**

[If your congregation passes the peace and is mindful of the COVID guidelines, continue with]:

**The Peace**

*The peace of the Lord be always with you*

***And also with you.***

[and invite people to exchange a sign of peace with one another]

**Thanksgiving Song or Hymn**

(some suggestions)

TIS 685 The power of your love

TIS 693 Come as you are

TIS 717 Give thanks with a grateful heart

TIS 738 Shout to the Lord

**Scripture Readings** (Any scriptural quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition – NRSVUE)

(The Revised Common Lectionary for Sunday 20th August 2023, Pentecost 12)

Genesis 45:1-15 Joseph forgives his brothers

Unity within the family

Ps 133 How blessed is unity

Unity within the nation

Romans 11:1-2a,29-32

Jew and Gentile reconciled – God’s mercy on all

Unity between ethnicities

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

The Canaanite woman

Jesus’ conversion to a greater unity

**Sharing Together** (Early Word & Activity)

This an opportunity for an intergenerational activity and conversation around the Question

**“How can we respond together to God’s call for unity?”**

Choose one of today’s texts to focus on.

The lectionary readings for today describe an ever-widening call for unity.

Genesis 45:1-15 Joseph forgives his brothers

Unity within the family

This Genesis reading contains one of the most powerful and emotional events of family reconciliation. After years of separation caused by the betrayal of brothers and lies told to their father, brothers embrace, kiss each other, and Joseph sheds tears at the family together again.

*13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” 14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him.*

Qu. How does your family come together after a disagreement?

Psalm 133 Unity within the nation

This psalm uses very visceral metaphors to describe how wonderful unity is – anointing oil running over the head, down the forehead, over the cheeks and through the beard, down over precious robes – sweet aromatic oil. Not only that but it is refreshing like mountain dew on thirsty hills. This is one of the psalms that pilgrims sang as they approached Jerusalem. It is more than unity within the family it stretches to unity for the nation.

*2 It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.3 It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.*

Qu. What picture would you use to describe the Australian people being unified?

Romans 11:1-2a,29-32

Jew and Gentile reconciled – God’s mercy on all.

Unity between ethnicities

Sometimes we can get lost in following St Paul’s use of rhetoric to get his point across. But his point is clear and simple – God’s action through Christ ensuing unity between Jew and Gentile, between all ethnicities.

*I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. 2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew…*

*29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. 30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, 31 so also they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy. 32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.*

Qu. Which ethnicities do you find hardest to embrace?

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

The Canaanite woman

Jesus’ conversion to a greater unity

This incident is often misinterpreted because it is shocking, showing Jesus in today’s language to be racist. In his day he would have been applauded by many devout people for keeping himself separate from the unholy ones. The subheading to this text in many bibles is ‘The Canaanite Woman’s Faith’, but that only tells half the story, it needs to also include ‘and the Conversion of Jesus’. It is at this point in his ministry that Jesus sees the god-yearning and godliness of foreigners. He is converted from being exclusive to being inclusive. There were hints of this earlier, ‘God causes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust’ but in his encounter with the foreign woman, he is encountered by God’s throbbing heart for everyone, everywhere.

*21 Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 22 Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23 But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” 24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26 He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” 27 She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28 Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.*

Qu. What will it take for you to be converted to the inclusion of all people?

**Hand out the Activity Sheet provided in the resource pack** and encourage everyone to work together in pairs/small groups to complete the activity sheet. Encourage a mix of generations.

Invite contributions in words, drawings, sculpture, mime!

Share in small groups and report back to whole gathering if appropriate.

Another question for reflection:

**What might be some of the challenges if your group cannot agree on a common purpose, and/or a common set of values?**

Close with prayers of thanks for the unity of God, Creator, Redeemer and Life-giving Spirit, overflowing in our lives and communities.

**Hymn**

*A great song to finish of this shared time is:*

TIS 690 Beauty for brokenness

**Sermon/Reflection**

*There are some sermon/reflection materials in the resources pack (below) for the core reflection time, including some information on current statistics, information about some programs, and stories of how fractured communities and lives are being healed and divisions overcome.*

**Hymn**

(some suggestions)

TIS 618 What does the Lord require?

TIS 607 Make me a channel of your peace

TIS 640 Kneels at the feet of his friends

TIS 474 Here in this place a new light is streaming

**Offering**

The path to unity within ourselves, our church, and the world, is a never ending task;

yet by the spirit of Christ we are emboldened and strengthened,

so we bring our offerings and lives,

to be dedicated again to collaborate with God

in the reconciliation and renewal of all.

We make our offering.

**Offering Prayer**

Broken-hearted God with you we cry for the world;

With you we give our lives for the unity of family, church and world.

**Bless and multiply these gifts,**

**so that divisions are healed**

**and the world rejoice in your gift of unity.**

To the glory of you name.

**Amen.**

**Prayers of the People, concluding with the Lord’s Prayer**

In this prayer the words ‘Lord in your mercy’ are followed by the response ‘may the love of Christ in us bring healing to a fractured world’.

Unifying Spirit of Christ

We pray that our false unity be laid bare

That our clinging to peace at all costs

And our desire for uniformity

Is torn apart and stitched together

by your celebration of diversity

**FIRST NATIONS PEOPLE**

We are aware that the blindness of our desire for uniformity and fear of difference

Caused storms of terror and unending clouds of grief for First Nations peoples

May their corroborees celebrating their song lines

Vibrate throughout the land

May we be caught up in their dance and song

May the land heal, may the people lament

Until Voice, Treaty and Truth is established in this land

Lord in your mercy: **may the love of Christ in us bring healing to a fractured world**

**REFUGEES**

Mostly on planes they come, flying in with money in their pockets, seeking asylum, and they are welcomed

Mostly on boats they come, impoverished, desperate, selling all they have for a boat to freedom

And we imprison them, indefinitely, breaking their spirits

O God, ravish our desperation for security and wealth

Grow in us kind, gentle and courageous hearts

Extravagant with the love of God

May we dance the intercultural dance of diversity

Until we lay exhausted with happiness in finding our true self

by embracing the stranger crying for help.

Lord in your mercy: **may the love of Christ in us bring healing to a fractured world**

**MENTAL HEALTH**

O God, we know the fracturing of our own minds and spirits

In the face of the stress of contemporary life

We pray for those whose minds are not their own

Minds that speak and shout obscenities and confusion

May they find unity of thought and purpose

As wise and kind people come beside them

So friendships, therapies and medications can heal

Lord in your mercy: **may the love of Christ in us bring healing to a fractured world**

**THE ENVIRONMENT**

Mother earth is fracturing, her atmospheric cloak is shredding,

Her systems are unbalanced, and we totter with our opinions

on our lemming like march to destruction.

May the light of sanity dawn, the long view become clear

So we are prepared to make the sacrifices required

for the mending of our one and only common home.

Lord in your mercy: **may the love of Christ in us bring healing to a fractured world’**

**THE ECONOMY**

What is this economy we have created

With rules that favour those who have -

Those who already have houses and are able to finance more;

Those who have more than they need,

so their surplus continues to accumulate.

All at the expense of those who have less.

Lay bare the myths we tell of their laziness

Our smug self satisfaction

Bring unity of common values and common purpose

So that all have a home,

all have networks of encouraging friends

all have access and ability to learn and work with gladness.

Lord in your mercy: **may the love of Christ in us bring healing to a fractured world’**

**THE CHURCH**

God you are the unity of Creator, Redeemer and Life giving Spirit

Laughing and weeping, dancing and falling

Ever generous, and ever one.

May your church on earth be healed of all divisions

Lay down it’s holding on to its own truth

Be released into the reality of your love for diversity,

And walk again the path of the service and love.

Lord in your mercy: **may the love of Christ in us bring healing to a fractured world’**

**The Lords prayer:**

We pray together our shared hope in the words of The Lord’s Prayer

**Our Father in heaven**

**hallowed be your name,**

**your kingdom come,**

**your will be done,**

**on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins**

**as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial**

**and deliver us from evil.**

**For your love is for everyone,**

**Now and always.**

**Amen.**

**Closing Hymn**

*(Some suggestions)*

TIS 547 Be thou my vision

TIS 658 I the Lord of sea and sky

TIS 650 Brother, sister, let me serve you

TIS 674 Inspired by love and anger

**Word of Mission & Blessing**

The rolling rollicking world, on the sea of its own making,

Is calmed by the love of God, made daring through the courage of Christ, and transformed by the ever calling Spirit – so now go in the love of God.

**We go in the unity of God, delighting in diversity, embraced by Christ, steadfast in purpose.**

**Amen!**

**Blessing Song**

*(As per local custom)*

**3. Activity Sheet – What does God’s call to Unity look like to you?**

Share Sunday 2023-Activity

**In what ways do you respond to God’s call to unity?**

Draw, paint, write your responses here, then SHARE with others 😊

**** ****

**4. Sample sermon/reflection Incorporating two video reflections:**

**THEME ‘God’s call for Unity’**

The context:

* The Uniting Church and Uniting as part of the Church
* The unity of the Uniting Church and its community service arm
* The Uniting Church and its never-ending quest for respectful unity shaped by the life and ministry of Christ. Unending Uniting
* Referendum on the Voice
* Uniting – Go and do likewise – practice unity and inclusion

**LECTIONARY READINGS Aug 20, 2023, Pent 12**

The lectionary readings for this Sunday hold out the theme of ‘Unity’ – an ever-widening unity – unity within the family, unity within the nation, unity between ethnicities, unity between all. A unity called for and enabled by God.

Genesis 45:1-15 Joseph forgives his brothers

Unity within the family

Ps 133 How blessed is unity

Unity within the nation

Romans 11:1-2a,29-32

Jew and Gentile reconciled – God’s mercy on all

Unity between ethnicities

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

The Canaanite woman

Jesus’ conversion to a greater unity

Let’s be clear from the start. Unity is not uniformity, nor is it peace and the absence of conflict.

The unity God calls for is:

the ongoing collaboration of all who want to join,

in the mending of the world

by coming together with over lapping values

Striving within a common purpose – for the reconciliation and renewal of all things.

There will be conflict as we have different ideas about how to go about this. We need the humility of the spirit of Christ (blessed are the poor) to be prepared to work alongside others, discern the way ahead with others, sometimes with patience, sometimes with daring, but always with love.

Unity is not unfamiliar to the Uniting Church. It is a never-ending task, we are not already united, we have not achieved some static union, we are uniting – the ever-ongoing endeavour of living in, and calling others to join, to live out of a common set of values and a common purpose. For the pilgrims of Christ, it is collaborating around the values Christ taught in the beatitudes and the great themes of Scripture – compassion and re-distributive justice.

The needs and threats of our current time are matched by the call of God to unity of values and purpose. There can be no unity without diversity. Unity is the collaboration and mutual respect of and for distinct entities. It requires respect as an ever-widening process – it is first given unconditionally -

Carl Rogers’ ‘Unconditional positive regard’. Gradually the other comes to respect their self, the sure foundation for respecting others.

The life of St Francis of Assisi provides an instructive example. It is reflected in the much-loved hymn,

‘Make me a channel of your peace – withhold judgement - seek first to understand. His life’s story involves navigating a dynamic unity within an estranged society. It involves estrangement from his family, an estranged church, estrangement between classes, estrangement between humanity and nature. His whole life was dedicated to overcoming this estrangement. He is a model for our times.

So, Unity is not uniformity. The Uniting Church upholds unity within diversity, built around a common purpose and common values, which requires respectful dialogue. Hence it has worked hard on a respectful process of discernment – it comes together in the Manual for Meetings. It held up studies like ‘Living with the neighbour who is different’ – a theological and practical guide to living in respectful unity. We shouldn’t be surprised at this track, as the climactic book within Scripture, Revelation, holds out the vision chapter 7 v 9: 9 *After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. 10 They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!”*

We can ask, “What are the boundaries of unity and inclusion?” but it is like asking “Who is my neighbour?” and we know how Jesus answers that question.

In preparation for this liturgy to get a more reflective understanding of unity I turned to parts of Rowan Williams ‘On Christian Theology’. Williams speaks of the sharing of a common life through time in which certain understandings of self and the world become normalised. Into that ordinariness we are struck by the coming of Jesus of Nazareth , grown out of Judaeo history and tradition, appearing as prophet, healer and movement initiator and leader, crucified for defying the empires claims of its ultimate authority, instead holding to the vision of God’s kind of empire and world that is compassionate, steadfast loving, non-violent, peace-making, justice seeking, where all have enough to become who they were created to be and growing into a rich and full community, best described by St Paul’s metaphor of ‘the body’

Paul also reflects on unity in the opening chapter of his first letter to the Christians to that cosmopolitan port city of Corinth.

In preparation to write the liturgy in an experience of meditation the phrase ‘unity of being’ arose and drew my attention. The question became, how can we have unity if we do not have unity within ourself. On searching the phrase Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher of the Twentieth Century came into view with his call to live authentic lives less distracted by so many trivialities of modern living. This bought me back to Williams and the power that consumerist, globalisation and large corporations wield.

That is the background to seeking to respond to God’s call for unity that arises from our texts set for this Sunday 20 August 2023.

Some will say. What more can be said about Unity. We all know it's about unity in diversity. The unity for the church is around the acclamation “Jesus Christ is Lord”; and then together, working through what that kind of Lord Jesus Christ is. Diversity brings different kinds of responses to that question. And other questions too, “what are the bounds of unity?” Is there boundaries to God’s love and our unity, or is it as some say, when we define the centre as God’s love, then we know there are no boundaries. So, we need to listen respectfully to the different responses. So, the answer is not as simple as what we might first assume.

We return to the work of former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan William’s in his book, On Christian Theology, published by Blackwell Publishing in 2000.

When Christians talk about unity, whether it is the unity of God, unity of the church, unity with God’s dream for the world, Williams offers the challenge to keep our thinking broad and open, he reminds us to ask: *Does it presuppose and serve the conviction that the lives of men and women are open to the horizons indicated by those models of ‘Christian humanity’ which the church’s history has developed around the focal sign of Jesus’ living and dying? Does it … continue to offer intelligible roles for the living out of new creation? Does it conserve a hope for shared, unrestricted human renewal/ liberation/ salvation?* Pg 26f

Williams goes on to say: *When theological unity or coherence looks most threatened, the problem is likely to be an underlying anxiety or confusion about the characterization of God's activity - and thus about the nature of holiness. Such confusion is caused by uncertainty about how to read the Bible in a post critical age, by intensified awareness of challenges to the Christian model from other persuasive accounts of human wholeness, for the sense of a lack of focus or integrity in how the church as an institution behaves - in short, by all kinds of factors endemic in the situation of the church at the present time.* Pg 27

So how do we arrive at a vision of unity appropriate for our context? Williams suggests some helpful paths: *‘by way of a newly critical and constructive reading of Scripture, - the revived analogical skills of a base community, the profound hermeneutic (interpretation) of parable, … the whole process of claiming the Bible as a source of critique. And it is also more likely to emerge by way of the demanding and sometimes alarming conversations that must be pursued in our society about what human beings and societies may hope for; and by candid engagement with the Church’s liability to treat its unity as an end in itself not much related to its honesty. All the time, though, we must remember that none of this makes any sense without some confidence in the possibility of the reality of our own transformation in Christ, the confidence that can be nurtured only by the disciplines of praise and of silence.* Pg 27f

In the fleeting mortality of our lives, in the sometimes ordinariness of it all, in the triviality of many of the options available to us, we are called to recall God’s dream of the unity and reconciliation of the whole creation.

This unity of course is not uniformity of any aspects of personality or culture, but the unity derived from the common hope collaboratively built with God and each other in all our diversity.

It is a gift from God yet also hard won. It is to stand against the principalities and powers of our age. It is to participate with God in judgement of the world which includes judgement of the church. The critique of the world by the church has to be earned to be heard. It cannot talk about where it has not walked. Its stands for justice lack credibility when there are injustices in its own internal relationships, nor call for respect when it fails to respect the diversity of the voices in the church. The long hard slog of listening well while we work, pray and praise for God’s collaborative vision for the church and the world described in Revelation 7:9.

Unity is a gift from God, deriving from the unity within the Triune Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, otherwise described as Creator, Redeemer and Spirit, or Lover, Beloved, and Love. However, it is described, there is the attempt at putting into words the experience of the church through its first half millennia of the source and sustainer of reality, that source being seen in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth who the church came to understand as the Risen, yet crucified Messiah/Christ/anointed one, who is ever present through the Holy Spirit. The Eastern Church has gifted us the metaphor of perichoresis – the sublime internal dance of the Triune God, that overflows to transform all creation.

No word exists by itself, no value or descriptor. We need an interwoven web of ideas from which we have insight into what is being described or highlighted. So we can’t talk about unity, without its opposites of division, without the clarifying of unity in diversity, without the expected benefits of love and peace or are they the precursors to unity – and so the conversation goes. But all our speaking is aimed at a way of seeing and acting that is collaborative with God as God continually brings the renewed and reconciled into being. St Paul’s use of three words to describe the Christian life lived in the light of God – faith, hope and love – they give light to each other, but the greater light belongs to love, which Paul goes on to describe from the God he knows through Judaism seen through his encounter with Christ- as the steadfast one who never gives up, always forgives, is patient, kind, not seeking its own way, listening to the cries of the exploited and calling for our collaborative response. God both transcendent and imminent providing filaments of love that touch our heart, open our eyes to those close and that far beyond – but never beyond God as God is all in all.

This listening well involves more than words, it includes the real giving up of some power, the handing over of company secrets, the changing the rules of the game, so that the losers can be winners, and even more so that the game is changed all together – where all are able to participate, all have access to what they require to become all that God created them to be, not as marbles bouncing off each other, but an ecological network, or in St Paul’s wonderful metaphor of ‘the body’ where each has a part to play and exist for the well-being of the genuine whole, not what elites define as the well-being of the whole, but actually participating, giving and receiving, in respectful and sustainable economic and social relationships for everyone. Where none can say, “I have no need of you” and in another way “we are all responsible for each other” made practical by loving those close at hand and those far distant who have been brought by whatever means into our experience.

In the insidious lure of the consumerist society with its allure of safety – if I only purchase the next item, if I participate in the race for education and mobility, or acquiesce into the rewards of a system that has its focus on evangelising trivial objects as your personal saving moment, to be incessantly repeated with each ubiquitous advertisement – God’s lure into a reality more kind, connected and peaceable is drowned out, smothered, like the morning fog veiling the rising Sun.

God’s call for unity is a call for our time. The initial fervour of union has given way to fighting over property, coming to terms with declining numbers and finances while championing inclusive ministry of women, LGBTQI+ communities, intercultural ministry, seeing the personal possession of small amounts of prohibited substances as a medical rather than a criminal justice issue, advocacy for Asylum Seekers and refugees, speaking out for a just economy, and a sustainable world – climate activism. Yet the challenge of declining numbers and finances is daunting, as is the ageing of congregations, as is less volunteers due to aging, and the liberation of women to pursue further education and work beyond the home; so, some go through the motions of being safe at church. Don’t rock the boat, pretend there is no conflict, remember Jesus is the Prince of Peace. But we must remember he is reported to have said, “I did not come to bring peace but a sword”. This sword is not a weapon but the division that happens when people decide to move away from the status quo to collaborate with God in the adventure and challenge of building communities on earth as they are in heaven.

God’s call to unity is a challenge for the church when it fails to understand the interdependency of congregations, presbyteries, and Synods with its growing community services arm – Uniting. We are finding it difficult to move away from the church as it used to be into the shape of a church that God is remaking. Not grasping this vision is one of the greatest challenges to the Uniting Church’s survival.

With that extended introduction here are examples of how God’s call for unity (a unity respecting the diversity within our common humanity) is being practiced by Uniting Vic Tas, always on behalf of, and sometimes in partnership with, congregations throughout the Synod.

**5. THREE STORIES FROM UNITING SERVICES**

**1 - Unity through solidarity - 20 years of welcoming**

Since August 2002, Uniting’s Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre (ASWC) in Brunswick, despite divisive social and political climates, has stood firm as a place of refuge, unity and humility.



While waiting for decisions on their applications to be recognised as refugees, many asylum seekers are isolated in the community with very little or no form of assistance and with few rights or entitlements. With the support and collaboration of congregations like: Coburg, Warrandyte, Camberwell, and Brunswick we have come together in Unity with the ASWC to help ensure asylum seekers feel safe, welcome and part of the community.

Uniting's Asylum Seeker Program Team Leader, Aimee says the centre supports people at all stage of their settlement journey.

"The centre provides a dual service in responding to people's basic needs and empowering people to learn how to navigate the Australian context," she said.

"It is important to understand where people are at in their settlement journey.”

From English programs to digital literacy or piano lessons to employment workshops, the ASWC offers a myriad of programs to better prepare asylum seekers for life in Australia.

And beyond practical support, the centre also provides emotional support. The migrant experience is known to be a complex one.  
“It might be sitting with someone while they cry for 10 minutes or smiling at someone and you’re the only person they have talked to that day. Being reminded of that role that we have in people’s lives and that the connection is meaningful for them,” Aimee said.

Aimee expressed her gratitude to congregations for their long-standing support of the program, “congregations have always been behind the work we do. Their commitment to advocating for justice and supporting those seeking asylum is truly inspiring.”

**2 - Unity through partnerships – putting faith into action**

Some of you may remember Nancy\* from our Winter Appeal.



A year ago, Nancy found herself on the edge of crisis. “One day I saw I'm alone. Really alone,” Nancy reflected. “I didn't know where to go, what to do. I just thought I can’t continue.”

As a new migrant in Australia, Nancy had travelled all the way from Iran in search of new beginnings. However, life was not as she had dared dream.

While grappling with the grief of losing her mother, Nancy was forced to leave a violent marriage. Alone in a new country she was suddenly without stability, support, or safety.

“You make some plan for yourself before leaving your country,” said Nancy. “Everyone makes that plan. But then you realise everything is completely different. Not what you expected.”

Although Nancy has limited memory of that dreadful day, she fortuitously found herself one afternoon at the doors of Uniting’s emergency relief centre in Melbourne’s east.

“I went to Uniting by accident,” said Nancy. “I was in tears, crying. I just remember after that, everything happened very quickly.” “They helped and they put me [on the path] to a normal life.”

Nancy was supported into crisis accommodation and then offered transitional housing. This accommodation is a partnership of the local congregation and Uniting Vic.Tas; the realisation of a shared vision.

The Uniting program offers women who are at risk of homelessness and have experienced family violence, a safe haven while they set about securing a long-term home. Women also receive help with finances, mental health, food relief, employment coaching and other support services.

The local Uniting Church congregation advocated for and carefully planned the specialist accommodation. Congregation members generously donating their time to help prepare a joint funding application with the Wesley Mission, now Uniting Vic.Tas, to the Victorian Government.

For more than two decades, congregational members continued to lobby governments to realise their missional purpose on the Church’s excess land.

Today Nancy is now living in her own apartment and completing a degree in data analysis.

“The good people in my life were Uniting. Honestly, even all the Australian people. They all had some role in my journey. They helped me a lot,” said Nancy.

*\*This is a true story about a real person. Some details such as names have been changed to respect the wishes of the person featured.*

**3 - Unity in allyship - compassion and a listening ear**



Anthony volunteers as a Crisis Support worker for Uniting’s Lifeline in Prahran.

He supports people over the phone who may be facing a mental health crisis, and those who call asking for advice about a loved one or friend in trouble.

“I truly feel that I am making a difference,” said Anthony.

“My role is to be their ally, to let them know that they are not alone, to acknowledge what they are going through and how it impacts them.

“So many times, people just need to feel listened to. They need to have someone else ‘get it’ and acknowledge the hardship they are feeling.”

Anthony stresses that mental health impacts more than the individual.

“Suicide and depression are huge burdens on not just the individual but also their family and friends,” he said.

“So, being able to play a role where we can alleviate that, we are not only just going to be helping the caller but also their family and friends as well.”

Since volunteering, Anthony has found his outlook on life has shifted.

“This role gives me a lot of perspective on people and keeps me centered. It serves as a reminder to feel grateful for what I have, and to equally recognise when to call out for help.

Anthony explains that mental ill health doesn’t discriminate.

“Mental illness affects everyone and at every age,” he said.

“Feelings of loneliness, isolation and fear are often the key characteristics that drive depression.

“Almost all of us face significant challenges and hurdles sometime in our lives. These can weigh us down impacting not just our own health, but the health of our family and friends who love us.

“Lifeline volunteers are there to form that connection with you. To listen. To hear you without interruption or judgement. To be your ally, to empower you.

“Connecting with someone and helping them to realise they do matter to the world, can be an incredibly empowering and enriching experience for the soul.”

Uniting Vic.Tas is a trusted delivery partner of Lifeline Australia in Melbourne and Ballarat.

Uniting’s Ballarat service began operating in 1971. The service was a developed vision set forth by a band of keen volunteers from the Uniting Church. Today over 1,000 volunteers have helped people in crisis in the Ballarat community over the last 50 years.

**

**6. Acknowledgement**

These resources have been created and compiled by Uniting for use in congregational worship and may be modified and used according to local custom with acknowledgment.