



**VISION STATEMENT OF
THE UNITING CHURCH IN NSW & ACT
As heard and articulated by the Moderator, Jim Mein**

Moving with God
Transforming Communities

**To achieve this the Church will be
Courageous, Inclusive and Generous**

The mission

To transform the community, we will

- share our faith in Jesus Christ as our hope and unity now and in the future;
- recognise all who are appropriately gifted, theologically equipped and practically skilled for the variety of leadership roles the church requires;
- build on our strengths in community service, social justice and reconciliation of all peoples;
- strengthen our faith, spiritual and leadership development;
- be generous in spirit and with God's gifts to us;
- promote responsibility for the caring of God's earth;
- support both rural and urban communities by developing new approaches to church;
- celebrate and praise God in inclusive and alive worship that is accessible and relevant to the community;
- recognise that missional communities may or may not require church-owned facilities as the regular model of church;
- strategically organise our property assets to best serve the mission of the church, including
 - locating for the best regional contact with all members of the community,
 - combining resources, training, activities and community services for the development of faith communities and small groups away from regional centres rather than in church buildings, and
 - strategic sales of existing real estate in favour of funding new and varied ministries;
- work together with the community and other denominations and faiths;
- acknowledge traditional ownership of the land by Aboriginal people and walk in friendship and partnership with them;
- engage in continued theological reflection and formal mission research; and
- need more streamlined permission-giving processes, empowering local missionaries, faith communities and congregations to participate in mission.

Our guiding values

We value God's love and

- our commitment to Jesus Christ;
- the leading of the Holy Spirit;
- the inspiration of Scriptures;
- the challenge of the Gospel;
- that all people are made in the image of God; and
- God's creation.



introduction – Amelia Koh-Butler
I was not born into a 'Christian' household. Like most Australians, I did not particularly identify with a church or a Worship Community when I was growing up. So, it seems strange that I am sitting among books and papers full of concepts and discussions that demand Christian language skills.



The Vision Statement (at the front of the booklet) and the Theological Foundations Paper (at the back of the booklet) were written by some of our *prophets* and *theologians*. The Theological Foundations Paper was prepared after the Vision Statement to provide a way of seeing how the vision arose from our faith

It feels a bit funny to me to call them that, because they are also 'faith friends' – people I trust to struggle with faith issues with commitment and integrity. As I read their work, I can feel my brain being stretched and my heart being challenged. I begin to realise that they are talking about God's framework – to build a future that includes you and me.

When we asked Jim Mein to be our Moderator (2005-2007), we asked him to do a new thing...

'Come and listen to the people of the Church and hear from us what God is calling us to do and be. When you have done that, help us to stay focussed on what God is calling us to do.'

This is a prophetic role in our community. When we look at the role of the prophets in the Scriptures, we see that they spent a lot of energy reminding people about values, or *guiding virtues*, that were already written into 'the Regulations' (the Law). They also encourage communities to demonstrate these values in real actions (Mission). They call us to put belief into practice, even as our actions shape our beliefs (Faith).

This set of studies is about the last of these... because this is where we have to start.

God's Vision will be lived out among us as we respond to God in faith. This is where our

theologians come in. Their task is to nourish our spirits by focussing our minds on God. They do this by calling our attention to Scripture and to great Christian thinkers.

In 2005, the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church adopted the Vision Statement:

*Moving with God.
Transforming Communities.*

In 2006, the UCA Assembly took the theme:

*Transforming Lives.
Transforming Communities.*

Ever get the feeling God is doing something with lots of different people at the same time?

For me, the 'thriving Church' is the one that is excited about the new day... where we look forward to the new wonders of God to be revealed and experienced. It is a positive Church, less concerned with rehashing the mistakes of yesterday than in anticipating the divine discoveries of tomorrow... a Church that lives out its faith - that the future holds the promise of the renewal of all things.

*For to this end we toil and struggle,
because we have our hope set on the
living God... (1 Tim 4:10a)*

We come together to study in groups (as Church) to be formed and re-formed and re-educated and re-formed some more – not to delight in our own achievements, but to transform communities.

There are FIVE Studies (one each week):

Moving with God

1. forming faith friends
2. dancing divine music
3. a new house? – call the removalists
4. character body-building (1)
5. character body-building (2)

Groups may also choose to gather for a sixth week to work on local responses to Moving with God. A suggested Gathering Outline is included in the resource.

Thanks to Chris Budden and Clive Pearson, for their untiring encouragement of us all.

1. moving with God - forming faith-friends

To move with God is to recognize that we move as friends, and not simply as slaves or servants (John 15: 14-15). There is an intimacy in the journey, an intertwining of lives, a mutual desire to love the world into life. We are constantly watchful for the friends of God who do not name themselves as we do ('Christians'), but who share in the dance in search of the wholeness, peace and justice God desires.

(Foundations Paper)

Group Covenant

Together, we will value God's love and

- our commitment to Jesus Christ;
- the leading of the Holy Spirit;
- the inspiration of Scriptures; and
- the challenge of the Gospel.

We will show respect for one another, knowing

- that all people are made in the image of God; and
- God is continuing to create and transform us and our communities.

(based on the *Vision Statement*)

If the group does not already know one another, take some time to name some hopes...

When I go a new Small Group, I hope to form new faith-friends... people I can trust... people I can be honest with... people who will be companions for a time in their life-journeys, but with the special focus of encouraging one another.

- What do you hope for?

What is a Vision Statement?

Vision Statements seek to express in a few words the essential character of a community, who the community sees itself as being and who it wishes to be, what guides it on the journey, and what helps it to check its progress on the way. They seek to give focus to a community's life, and shape and inform a community's actions and priorities. Their concern is to point towards the source of a community's hope.

(*Theological Foundations Paper*, p.1)

Activity

Read through the following statements. Choose the three statements that most closely reflect your understanding of why you are participating in this group.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> to deepen my faith | <input type="checkbox"/> to understand the Uniting Church |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to be supportive and encourage others | <input type="checkbox"/> to be transformed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to deepen relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> to get ideas about how to move forward |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to learn more about God's plans | <input type="checkbox"/> to think about how to live |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to explore Christian values | <input type="checkbox"/> to explore Scripture from another angle |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to work out my priorities as a Christian | <input type="checkbox"/> to hear from other people |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to learn more about this Faith Community | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> to explore the purpose of the Church | |
| | |

Discuss the choices the group made.

- Which choices do people have in common?

Scripture

Split into two groups.

Group 1 – Read  **Revelation 21:1-6**

Group 2 – Read  **Isaiah 65:17-25**

Each group should summarise their passage, explaining...

1. What is the mood of the passage?
2. What are the visual images? (Hint: Could an artist paint a picture?)

Together:

3. Why do you think these passages were written? (If someone has a Study Bible or Handbook, can you figure out who the original readers would have been?)
4. What purpose might these passages serve today and in the future?

What is Our Vision for the Uniting Church in NSW-ACT?

This Vision Statement comes from conversations the Moderator had with people across the life of the Synod. It can be divided into three parts:

- i. **who** we see ourselves being
 - a. a community that is moving with God,
 - b. transforming communities, and
 - c. living lives marked by courage, inclusiveness, and generosity.
- ii. **what** we will seek to do as a Synod.
- iii. **how** - a set of central theological beliefs
 - a. things which we value in our life and
 - b. which we would like to see reflected in what we do.



Reflection 1

The *Basis of Union* (Paragraph 15) describes governance and organisation in the Uniting Church, particularly how we entrust Councils to be discerning communities.

The UCA believes that Jesus forms, speaks to (addresses) and renews the Church.

- ? How does Jesus speak into your local faith community?
- ? Why is the renewal of Church important?

In the Basis of Union, the UCA suggests that one of the ways Jesus rules and renews the church is through councils of the church.

The Uniting Church recognises that responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them. The Uniting Church therefore so organises its life that locally, regionally and nationally government will be entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing the gifts and graces with which God has endowed them for the building up of the Church. The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and the world. The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ alone is supreme in his Church, and that he may speak to it through any of its councils. It is the task of every council to wait upon God's Word, and to obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight. Each council will recognise the limits of its own authority and give heed to other councils of the Church, so that the whole body of believers may be united by mutual submission in the service of the Gospel.

To this end the Uniting Church makes provision in its constitution for the following:

(a) **The Congregation** is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ. Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world. The congregation will recognise the need for a diversity of agencies for the better ordering of its life in such matters as education, administration and finance...

(extract from *The Basis of Union*, Paragraph 15, 1992 Edition)

Think Locally

In your Congregation, Faith Community or Small Group, how would you describe...

- ? Who you are?
- ? What you exist for? (What is the purpose of gathering?)
- ? How you go about doing things? (Which virtues and beliefs shape your actions?)

Reflection 2

One of the most frustrating things about the Uniting Church is that we often struggle to make even the most straightforward decision. We cry out for leaders in the hope that someone will actually do something, but when they take up their roles they discover that this community expects consultation and input.

How we discern God's Vision for us: ***Seeking to discern the Spirit***

When a council of the church makes decisions, it is aiming to discern the guidance of the Spirit in response to the Word of God. In retrospect, however, some decisions are considered to have been visionary and innovative, others inappropriate and destructive, whether or not they were seen that way at the time - discernment is not something for which we can set down the rules.

But the processes we use to create community and communicate in our meetings can themselves assist in the discernment process. This will be enhanced if people come expecting to be open both to the Spirit and to each other. By creating and sustaining effective communications in the context of a Christian community, we will be more likely to discern the guidance of the Spirit and reflect this in our decision-making.

That is not to say that community should be 'nice' all the time. We will struggle through pain and difficulty together as well as experiencing the joy of open and honest communication, being unified in our brokenness and our common identity under God. When members are left hurt or the community is broken, poor decisions are likely to be made and the church has failed to be true community. Pressure to make a decision while ignoring the hurt of some members is likely to lead to poor decisions.

(A Manual for Meetings p.5)

- ? Why do you think we have so many meetings in the Uniting Church?
- ? Are we just trying to please or appease more people?
- ? Do we lack people who are capable of making decisions?

Read the extract from 'A Manual for Meetings' about

Seeking to discern the Spirit.

Why does the Uniting Church value community so much?

Read  **1 Corinthians 3:16**

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

In this verse, it is important to note that the 'you' is plural. It refers to the people, not to individuals. There is a clear expectation that the Holy Spirit dwells and operates primarily in and through communities and relationships, rather than manifesting in individuals.

Of course, individuals may well experience the blessings of the Spirit or display the fruits of the Spirit, but spiritual discernment is tested in the spiritual community.

Read  **1 Corinthians 12:4-7**

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Pray for one another

(Hint: If you need some inspiration, read  **Ephesians 3:14-21**)

* * * *

2. moving with God – dancing divine music

Group Covenant

Together, we will value God's love and

- our commitment to Jesus Christ;
- the leading of the Holy Spirit;
- the inspiration of Scriptures; and
- the challenge of the Gospel.

We will show respect for one another, knowing

- that all people are made in the image of God; and
- God is continuing to create and transform us and our communities.

(based on the *Vision Statement*)

Opening Prayer - Abiding in God

O loving God,
to turn away from you is to fall,
to turn towards you is to rise,
and to stand before you
is to abide for ever.

Grant us, dear God,
in all our duties your help;
in all our uncertainties your guidance;
in all our dangers your protection;
and in all our sorrows your peace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

(St Augustine, 354-430)

Theme Activity (5-10 mins - choose one)

1. Watch a Film Clip (e.g. A Chorus Line; Shall We Dance; Dirty Dancing; Chicago; American in Paris; or Riverdance)
2. Listen to a Jazz piece, preferably one with some improvisation (e.g. Goodman; Gillespie; Armstrong)
3. Do a Demonstration Dance (ask someone, or a couple, to demonstrate a dance they might have learnt for a show, a ball or a wedding and explain the story of how they came to learn it)
4. Read and/or sing the Hymn 'Lord of the Dance' (TiS 242/AHB 183 – S.Carter)
5. Look at still Images of Dancers (from different cultures and styles)
6. Share experiences of Dancing

For any of the above, reflect on the following questions:

1. How would you describe the choreography (the way the movements are planned and designed) of the dance/s?
2. What types of emotions or ideas are communicated by the dance?
3. In dancing, how do physical movement and music interact?

Reflection 1 – Dancing God

One of the images that emerges when we think of God moving is the image of dance, of the swirling, joyful interaction of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit whose unity is discovered in this dance. The first movement of God is within God, a God who is essentially communal, and whose life is best spoken of in language street party or dance or new wine or festival and banquet.

It is like people dancing. Dances are of different kinds, and involve different groups of people – couples, groups, whole communities. They can be structured or impromptu. When people dance they take their own steps, give expression to their own lives, yet are always weaving around the movements of their partner and other people involved in the dance, swirling and stepping, and in the movement they become something more than separate individuals.

(*Theological Foundations Paper*)

Scripture

Read the following passages about the Trinity Community of God...

📖 John 14:15-17

For each passage, ask the following questions:

📖 Colossians 1:15-20

? How do Father, Son and Spirit interact within the Godhead?

📖 Acts 1:7-9

? Do you notice any differences between the persons of the Trinity?

📖 John 16:3-15

Naming God *Trinity* will have an impact on how we organise our lives. Those that name the Trinity must respond relationally. The relationships within the Trinity are not 'one-way'. Relationship implies connectedness and communication. Robin Greenwood, in *Transforming Priesthood* (SPCK 2), talks of the *loving communion*ⁱ of God drawing the Church into *generous* relationships. The communion of God leads to Jesus' invitation to his followers to join the communion. It is by the loving nature of the relationships that the discipleship will be recognized.

Reflection 2 – Dance of the Trinity

Some of the early leaders of the church used the word *perichoresis* to describe the Trinitarian life of God, and that strange sounding word literally means 'circle dance' (you might see how the last part of the word forms 'choreography').

Brian McLaren says it very well:

the Trinity [is] an eternal dance of Father, Son, and Spirit sharing mutual love, honor, happiness, joy, and respect. Against this backdrop, God's act of creation means that God is inviting more and more beings into the eternal dance of joy.

(A Generous Orthodoxy, Zondervan, 2004, p. 56)

As this image reminds us, the movement with God is never solitary. We speak of human beings being made in the image of God. Because God is Trinity, because God is essentially dance, relationship, community, then we reflect God's life when our life together as human beings is open, inviting, welcoming, and caring. It is our socially open, hospitable companionship as people in community which corresponds to God's life and movement. We move with God as a people whose lives and relationships are inseparably tied to the lives of other people.

(Theological Foundations Paper)

Scripture

Read *three* of the following passages about the Community of God's People ...

📖 John 13:34b-35

📖 Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

📖 Colossians 3:12-17

📖 John 14:23-27

📖 Numbers 11:16-17

📖 Acts 2:44-47

- ? What are the guiding stories or texts that shape the central beliefs of your faith communities and households?
- ? What are the expectations (formal or assumed) about how resources and responsibilities are shared?
- ? If you could describe your community or household as a type of dance, what type would it be and why?

Reflection 3 – Out of Step

Of course we know that we do not always move with God. We are all 'sinners'. We are all alienated from God, from our true selves, from our neighbour and from the rest of creation. We are made in the image of God, yet sinners. As Brian McLaren suggests:

Sin means that people are stepping out of the dance, corrupting its beauty and rhythm, crashing and tackling and stomping on feet instead of moving with grace, rhythm, and reverence. (McLaren, B. *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Zondervan 2004, p. 56)

To move with God is not simply to walk beside God, but to participate in the divine life, to become, with the whole humanity together, the image of God, to become a new humanity. As Christ is the new humanity, the real image of God, we are called as disciples to conform to Christ. To move with God is to join Christ in the wedding feast, the party, the dance that is going on within the heavenly household that is God.

(Theological Foundations Paper)

Group Discussion: *Moving with God*

What does it mean for us as a community of the followers of Jesus to commit ourselves to "move with God"?

What do we mean when we speak of God 'moving', and how do we move with God?

The term 'moving with God' suggests energy, engagement, activity, direction.

It is in keeping with the UCA's idea of a 'pilgrim people' and a people 'on the way'.

It implies a covenantal relationship with God and the world.

It is open-ended and is inclined towards the future;

it carries within its embrace the theological virtue of hope.

(Theological Foundations Paper)

Read the following three quotes.

? Do you agree/disagree with the writers?

? What are the implications for you?

Christians who carry their discipleship into their place of work are undoubtedly performing a work on behalf of the Kingdom, but this is not necessarily a form of ministry ... Christian discipleship is a way of life, while ministry is something the Christian does explicitly for the Kingdom and the Church.

(R. Hannaford, *Order and Ministry*. Gracewing: Leominster, 1996, p.41)

There is no Christianity without a share in the Church, and in its ministry, which is Christ's own ministry. Baptism is a kind of ordination, and all Christians are called to live in the life of God, making that life manifest.

(Scott Cowdell, Charles Sturt University Lecture, 2005, Canberra.)

...the very point of discipleship is that it is for the kingdom and the church. Discipleship has to do with the election of a people to be a sign and foretaste (the church) of the reign of God. Ministry and discipleship are inseparable things, and one of the reasons we often leave ministry to others is because of this false distinction.

(Chris Budden, 2007)

Reflection 4 - All that Jazz!

For those who find their images in music, here is another image. On the surface it may appear that Jazz is simply a free-flowing set of sounds, with no structure or order. Indeed, the heart of jazz is improvisation, and the ability for the musicians to relate to each other, to play around what the other is playing.

But the movement is not simply random. The structure of any piece is found in the chords that give it its basic shape. The improvisation which occurs is dependent on the relationship between chords, the notes that are made possible by those chords, and the flow from chord to chord. The jazz musician then has the freedom to alter the beat, to play high or low pitched notes, and to vary the pattern of notes they draw from their basic chords.

Movement with God seems to be like playing a jazz piece with God. God has composed the basic structure, and plays that tune as we improvise. The pattern gives us the freedom to move and change and experiment, but there are some patterns that simply do not work, that are discordant, and all the while we are trying to be in the right place when the chords change and the piece touches down at different points.

As we speak of dance and music, our movement with God, we are assuming something about the nature of God, how God dances in the world, who God dances with, and how we recognize God's dance. We are suggesting that sometimes we may dance with the Father, at other times with Christ the Son, at other times with the Spirit, and sometimes with the God who is all three. The Scripture points to certain things that seem core to our sense of God and our moving with God: that the world exists because of God's creative love, that God calls us to an inclusive, just, peaceful, mutually respectful, and loving community, that God has a particular care for the outcaste, the lost and lonely, the abused and victimized, that God desires for us to become friends and companions of Jesus and to embody in our lives a glimpse of the new life he brings.

(Theological Foundations Paper)

Case Study: *Moving with God*

(Take some time to discuss the Case Study in the group, but remember, most of us have similar stories in our experience, so be sensitive to maintain a 'safe place'.)

Consider what happens when Sandy (35 and divorced a few years ago) visits her parents to tell them she is moving in with her partner Lee (48).


Which of the parents' responses might be 'moving with God' and why?

- ☞ They ask about the basis for the relationship... what is important? Companionship? Sex? Love? Partnership?
- ☞ They raise concerns about 'living together' without being married and question the couple's morality. They offer to help arrange a wedding.
- ☞ They ask about how permanent or temporary the relationship is likely to be?
- ☞ They insist that Sandy bring Lee to Christmas dinner.
- ☞ ??? What other responses might there be???

Stories such as this are increasingly common.

- ? How can we distinguish between human and a godly responses to such situations?
- ? When we look at Scripture, what types of answers are we looking for?
- ? Do we look for stories about the way Jesus Christ behaves?
- ? Do we look for guidelines or rules for living?

Pray for one another

(Hint: If you need some inspiration, read  **Ephesians 1:17-18**)

* * * *

3. moving with God – a new house? call the removalists

Group Covenant

Together, we will value God's love and

- our commitment to Jesus Christ;
- the leading of the Holy Spirit;
- the inspiration of Scriptures; and
- the challenge of the Gospel.

We will show respect for one another, knowing

- that all people are made in the image of God; and
- God is continuing to create and transform us and our communities.

(based on the Vision Statement)

Opening Prayer - The holy love of God

Deliver us, O God,
from a lazy mind,
all lukewarmness of heart,
and all depression of spirit.

We know that these must deaden our love for you;
mercifully free our hearts from them all.
And give us such a lively, fervent and cheerful spirit
that we may vigorously perform whatever you command,
thankfully suffer whatever you choose for us,
and always be eager to obey your holy love
in all things;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

John Wesley, 1703-1791

Activity

Take a few moments to fill out a questionnaire about what you packed for your last holiday.

Which of the following did you take with you?

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Underwear | <input type="checkbox"/> Phone Charger | <input type="checkbox"/> Sports Equipment |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Warm clothes | <input type="checkbox"/> Books | <input type="checkbox"/> The kids |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gloves | <input type="checkbox"/> iPod | <input type="checkbox"/> Games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hat | <input type="checkbox"/> CDs | <input type="checkbox"/> Anything work-related |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Swimming Costume | <input type="checkbox"/> Sunscreen | <input type="checkbox"/> Art supplies |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Towel | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 st Aid Kit | <input type="checkbox"/> Food |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Camera | <input type="checkbox"/> Picnic Basket | <input type="checkbox"/> Medications |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Passport | <input type="checkbox"/> Matches | <input type="checkbox"/> Maps/Guidebooks |

Was there anything you took that you didn't use?

Was there anything you forgot to take that you needed?

Reflection 1 – what I want to take with me

After the 1992 bushfires in Sydney, I recall making quite a few pastoral visits to households in our Parish. I could always tell who had been evacuated – they were the ones with the Photo Albums still on the dining table or coffee table. They had taken them but had not yet put them back on the shelves or in the cupboard. (AKB)

? If you had to evacuate your home, what 2-3 things would you take?

? Why?

Scripture

Luke 9:57-10:12

1. Choose one person to read. Everyone else, close your eyes and listen to the passage being read.
2. Everyone look up the passage and re-read quietly. Is there a particular point at which you pause? Are there any phrases that stand out?
3. Share in pairs about the particular points where you paused.
4. Discuss with the larger group:
 - a. What were the disciples instructed to take with them?
 - b. What implications would this have had for the mission relationships they would form?
 - c. How do you feel when you are forced to rely on someone else's hospitality?
 - d. What is the relationship between being a follower and being sent? What does it take to be prepared to be either?

Divide into two groups to look at the following passages:

Luke 10:16-24

Luke 22:35-51

Reflect on the following questions and feed back a summary to the larger group:

1. What did the disciples learn?
2. Did the context change?
3. Did the instructions change?
4. Are there contemporary examples of this kind of action?

Reflection 2 – Journeying on God's mission trips

To move with God can be a challenging and painful journey. It will mean that we will take up our cross and seek to walk in the steps and shadow of Jesus. We will stand in the valleys where the bones are left uncovered, in the places of massacre and destruction like in Rwanda, and we will give voice to the cries of God for God's children in the face of HIV/AIDS, poverty, tsunamis, the poisoning of the environment, starvation, or the impact of war and crime. We will give a name to those who have been dismissed as without name and worth. We will call them daughters and sons of God, as God does, and share with them in the dance to which God has invited them and us.

(Theological Foundations Paper)

5. Has anyone in the group been on a 'mission trip'?
6. Has anyone thought about 'going'? What holds you back?

Packed and Ready!

Working for the Church, Terry and I have moved house 11 times in 14 years of marriage. We now leave our crockery in plastic boxes in the kitchen cupboard - we have stopped fully unpacking. We have learnt to be ready to move with a minimum of fuss. (AKB)

Discussion

It has been suggested that people should have a 'Grab-and-Go-bag'. This is a bag with things in it for emergency evacuation. (This has particularly been related to what you should have with you in case of a terrorist attack.)

- ? What should you have in yours if you are to 'move with God'? ...especially if God's Call comes suddenly?

Reflection 3 – Moving towards enemies

We will move with God into places where those who have been called 'the enemy' dwells, not so we may label them as terrorists and destroy them, as political leaders wish to do at this time, but so we may love our enemies and turn our cheek to those who would destroy us (Luke 6:27-36). Indeed, so that we can cease to talk of enemies, but friends who share our dance with God. *(Theological Foundations Paper)*

Scripture

Read  **Luke 6:27-36** together.




- ? How do we define enemies?
? What is involved in overcoming enmity?

Read Reflection 4.

- ? Why do we fail to speak up for 'others'?
? How much is 'having enemies' related to how we think of ourselves?

Unity and International Mission (an Agency of the Uniting Church National Assembly) is involved in getting people together to build peace-generating relationships in places torn apart by religious and political conflict. Since 'Young Ambassadors for Peace' was launched in 2001, workshops have been conducted in 8 countries. The work is exciting and dangerous, with miracles being experienced through the spiritual nurturing of understanding and shared story.

Find out more about YAP, Advocacy for Peace and Relations with Other Faiths:

-  http://uim.uca.org.au/international_human_rights/yap/what_is_yap/
 <http://nat.uca.org.au/unitingjustice/reconcilinghumanity/unitingforpeace/>
 <http://nat.uca.org.au/relations/>

- ? What kinds of issues do you think might arise as 'enemies' come to a place to live together for an intensive period?

Reflection 4

Speaking up



Rev. Martin Niemöller, from a stamp by Gert Aretz in 1992.

First they came for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up,
because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me,
and by that time there was no one
left to speak up for me.

Rev. Martin Niemöller, writing at the end of the Second World War in 1945.

Reflection 4 – Moving to the margins

We will move to the places where those who have been marginalized are forced to live, so that we may share with God in offering hospitality, in the breaking of bread, in the pouring out of wine. We will move with God into the prisons, the hospitals, the hungry places and places without cloths, the mad and depressing places – and, if we are fortunate, discover the presence of God has moved into these places before us, and that all of us share in the dance with God. *(Theological Foundations Paper)*

Read  **Matthew 25:31-46.**


- ? How would you describe the margins of your local community?
- ? What does it feel like to be 'on the edges' of respectability or inclusion?
- ? In your community/household, who determines who is 'in' or 'out'?

Reflection 5 – Movement as Struggle

We will move with God in the struggle for human rights, and the struggle for rights at work. We will share with God in people's protests over war, the exclusion of people from our shores, the denial of human rights, carry our dance into the streets with protestors as well as the homeless. *(Theological Foundations Paper)*

- ? In what ways do members of your community 'struggle'?
- ? What are the ethical concerns in your workplaces and learning spaces?
- ? How could/does your faith community identify and research the needs of the disadvantaged in your area?
- ? How do you develop responses to the needs in your community?
- ? How can you build the capacity of people in your faith community to advocate for others?

Pray for one another

(Hint: If you need some inspiration, read  **Philemon verses 4-7**)

When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

(Philemon 4-7 – NRSV)

* * * *

4. moving with God – character body-building (1)

Group Covenant

Together, we will value God's love and

- our commitment to Jesus Christ;
- the leading of the Holy Spirit;
- the inspiration of Scriptures; and
- the challenge of the Gospel.

We will show respect for one another, knowing

- that all people are made in the image of God; and
- God is continuing to create and transform us and our communities.

(based on the Vision Statement)

THEME: Being 'courageous', 'inclusive' and 'generous'.

What do 'courageous', 'inclusive' and 'generous' mean for us as a church? It will mean many different things in different places.

Opening Prayer - For the graces of the Holy Spirit

O merciful God, fill our hearts with the graces of the Holy Spirit, with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Teach us to love those who hate us,
to bless those who curse us,
and to pray for those who abuse us,
that we may be the children of our Father:
who makes the sun shine on the evil and the good,
and sends rain on the just and unjust.

In adversity grant us grace to be patient;
in prosperity keep us humble;
may we guard the door of our lips;
may we lightly regard the pleasures of this world,
and thirst only after heavenly things;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. *St Anselm, 1033-1109*

Activity

1. Read through the following words...

Tick the four characteristics you would most like your faith community to be.

(Note: several of the words mean similar things, choose whichever you prefer)

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brave | <input type="checkbox"/> Heroic | <input type="checkbox"/> Inclusive | <input type="checkbox"/> Giving |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adventurous | <input type="checkbox"/> Bold | <input type="checkbox"/> Welcoming | <input type="checkbox"/> Charitable |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Courageous | <input type="checkbox"/> Fearless | <input type="checkbox"/> Hospitable | <input type="checkbox"/> Altruistic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Daring | <input type="checkbox"/> Determined | <input type="checkbox"/> Generous | <input type="checkbox"/> Warm |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bold | <input type="checkbox"/> Comprehensive | <input type="checkbox"/> Kind | <input type="checkbox"/> Caring |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gutsy | <input type="checkbox"/> Broad-minded | <input type="checkbox"/> Big-hearted | <input type="checkbox"/> Compassionate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Audacious | <input type="checkbox"/> Complete | <input type="checkbox"/> Open-handed | <input type="checkbox"/> Community-minded |

2. Discuss



- ? What biblical characters or stories come to mind when you think about these qualities?
- ? What attracts you to these characteristics?
- ? In what ways does your faith community already display some of these characteristics?
- ? What are the qualities which need strengthening in your faith community?

Scripture

We often think of sections of the Old Testament as being stories of violence and anger. The stories are passionate and often unpleasant. They do not seem to hold the spiritual words of comfort that we seek. Why is there so much horror and conflict?

We watch the evening news, look at instant global news on-line, read a tabloid newspaper or hear a radio report. On most occasions, we hear bad news. There are stories of war and starvation, natural disaster and global warming. It seems unattainable when people say they wish for world peace, but we long for breakthroughs amongst peacemakers.

When we think about life in biblical times and life today, we recognise that the stories of faithful people facing risky and dangerous situations (then and now) simply describe the reality of people living in societies that include politics, competition, power, lust and conflict. Even in our so-called peaceful society, we constantly hear stories of the inhumanity of humans and the dangers of our complex world.

Read  **Joshua 1:1-9** and  **Isaiah 41:1-10**

Stories of risk and danger also become the stories of courage and heroism.

- ? In these stories, how do people become courageous? (Where does courage come from?)
- ? How would you define a courageous act?
- ? What other characteristics are associated with courage?
- ? How does sharing stories of courage inspire and shape behaviour and culture?

Discussion:

- ? Does anyone have a story to share of courage in the workplace?
 - o e.g. taking a risky decision? How was courage built in order to go ahead?
- ? Does anyone have a story to share of courage in a family situation?
- ? Does anyone have a story to share of courage in a social situation?

Read  **Psalms 27** and  **Psalms 31**

- ? How could these words be used to inspire or encourage?
- ? Are there points of similarity or difference between these Psalms?
(Look at the structure.)
- ? Are there people you can identify who could use encouragement in difficult situations?

Reflection 1 – *Being ‘courageous’*

We will trust that life rests in God, and we are called to have a faith not just to live by but for which we are willing to die. It means taking God seriously – the God of grace, the God of forgiveness, the God who reaches out in love, the God who calls us to vulnerability and gain through loss, to solidarity with the marginalized, to inclusion and hospitality, and to costly discipleship that takes up our cross and follows Jesus. It means we will live in ways that are open-ended, and always open to the possibility of the unexpected, for we have the presence of God to guide us. *(Theological Foundations Paper)*

Read  **John 16:28 - 17:5**

The Uniting Church talks about 'risking the way of Jesus'.

? What does 'risking the way of Jesus' mean ...?

- To the writer of John?
- To the first readers of John's Gospel?
- To you?

Re-read  **John 16:33**

I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace.

In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!
(NRSV)

? How do you make sense of what Jesus does for us?

? In the light of the passage, what kind of *courage* will we need? Why?

Reflection 2 – Being 'inclusive'

We will not build barriers to exclude people. We will not label people enemies, aliens or strangers, and seek to destroy them, for even our enemies we are meant to love. We will become alert to, and give up, the exclusions of gender, race, wealth and poverty, sexuality, language and ethnicity, and call each other to account whenever they creep into our life. We will not ignore people, treat them in a paternalistic way, or impose conditions on their participation in the dance. We will be open, welcoming, hospitable and willing to learn from those who we see as different from ourselves. *(Theological Foundations Paper)*

Discussion

Everyone has limited resources. There is not enough time, energy or funding to be involved in everything. So, we learn early on to prioritise. We make choices about which relationships and activities we will invest in.

? Consider who you choose to spend time with. How do we 'filter' our relationships?

? How are people included or excluded in our workplaces and social gatherings?

? How are people included or excluded in our faith communities and church-related gatherings?

? Are you ever excluded from a group because of your faith? Have you seen this happen to others?

? Are you aware of 'minority groups' in your region? Is it possible to develop relationships with any of these?

Prayers

- **for 'others'** (especially the excluded and outcast)

- **for one another**

(Hint: Conclude with your Group Psalm.)

* * * *

5. moving with God – character body-building (2)

Group Covenant

Together, we will value God's love and

- our commitment to Jesus Christ;
- the leading of the Holy Spirit;
- the inspiration of Scriptures; and
- the challenge of the Gospel.

We will show respect for one another, knowing

- that all people are made in the image of God; and
- God is continuing to create and transform us and our communities.

(based on the *Vision Statement*)

Opening Prayer

- Offering ourselves to God

O God,
who has so greatly loved us,
long sought us,
and mercifully redeemed us;
give us grace that in everything
we may yield ourselves,
our wills and our works,
a continual thankoffering unto you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Westminster Divines, 1647](#)

Theme Activity

'Backyard Blitz' and 'Getaway' are examples of Australian lifestyle television programs. They are popular and manage to offer viewers the fantasy that they can make these lifestyle choices, too. Watch 'Getaway' and count up the number of times you hear the words, 'you can choose from...'

? What kinds of choices do you make about your life and your resources?

? How often do you participate in the following:....?

(Place an X along the line to indicate your response)

rare monthly weekly daily

1. Physical Exercise (e.g. swim, walk) _____

2. Mental Exercise (e.g. read, study) _____

3. Spiritual Exercise (e.g. pray, worship) _____

? What are the outcomes of your activity?

(e.g. fit, confident, energised, balanced or injured, tired, confused, frustrated, etc...)

Consider the following quote about the spiritual discipline of 'giving'...

"The only true motive for giving is the grace of God, the goodness of God to you. Giving is not something you do for others as much as something you do for yourself, because it has a tremendous effect on your own life."

(Pr Ray Stedmad, sourced from Generous Giving Bible Study by Rev Paul Swadling, available at http://buildafuture.nsw.uca.org.au/documents/generous_giving.pdf.)

Discussion

After the Boxing Day Tsunami, the Church received generous donations from all over the country, including from struggling drought-suffering communities. Even those who were experiencing the effects of natural disaster themselves were generous in the consideration of their fellow human-beings.

? What do you think motivates people's generosity?

.....
.....

Reflection 1 – from Buddhist writings...

These five are a person of integrity's gifts. Which five? A person of integrity gives a gift with a sense of conviction. A person of integrity gives a gift attentively. A person of integrity gives a gift in season. A person of integrity gives a gift with an empathetic heart. A person of integrity gives a gift without adversely affecting himself or others.

(Sappurisdana Sutta - A Person of Integrity's Gifts. Trans.i by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2004)

Buddhism teaches that giving is a good thing for all of society, but generosity is more than giving. By its sacrificial nature, generosity is also a spiritual form of giving.

? How does this compare with a Christian view of generosity?

Look at the following verses:

 Psalm 37:21

 Proverbs 11:25

 Proverbs 22:9

 James 1:17

? Are members of your Faith Community involved in acts of generosity involving any of the following...? (Giving Time, Money or Talent)

Environmental Renewal (e.g. Green projects)

Support of Refugees (e.g. legal or medical aid)

Ministry with the Elderly (e.g. visits, transport)

Language Assistance (e.g. English Conversation)

Child and Family Support (e.g. Playgroups)

Sponsoring Mission Projects

Providing Resources for Schools or Drop-in Centres

Food Help (e.g. tin food collection, providing meals for the ill)

Other

.....
.....
.....
.....

In the NSW Synod, the *Living is Giving* program helps us give out of our abundant life so that others might experience abundant life.

- ? In what ways, do you or your Faith Community participate in *Living is Giving*?
- ? Do you have any preferred *Living is Giving* mission focus areas?
- ? How would you describe the generosity of the giving?
- ? Are the same people who are generous with their money, generous with their time?
Is this important?

For more information, go to the Living is Giving website:

<http://livingisgiving.nsw.uca.org.au/>

Reflection 2 – Being ‘generous’

We will recognize that the life we have, the money and property, the gifts and skills and creativity, the knowledge and stories are not ours, and we must be generous in our sharing. We cannot hoard things to protect our futures, but share now with those who have little, and trust God with the future. Generosity is also about being hospitable, and not judging; creating a welcoming space for people to be with us without us controlling them or putting demands on them. Generosity is about what we offer willingly to others. *(Theological Foundations Paper)*

Scripture

Read  **2 Corinthians 8:1-24** together.

The sentiments of this passage are continued in Chapter 9 as Paul highlights some of the ongoing Mission needs of the Church and the need for generous giving. He has certainly prepared the way here by reminding the people in the Corinthian community that the gospel calls them to respond not just for themselves but for others too.

Reflection 3 – Characteristics of life, moving with God

As we seek to move with God we need to recognize that these three marks of our life – courage, inclusiveness and generosity - need to sit alongside the more obviously theological virtues that are celebrated in the wisdom of the church. Paul speaks of ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5: 22-23), of humility and gentleness (Ephesians 4:2), of faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13: 13), and of the call to share in the suffering of Christ (e.g. Philippians 1: 29, 1 Peter 4: 13). *(Theological Foundations Paper)*

Generosity of Spirit is not just about material giving.

Work as a group to make a statement about Christian generosity in 30 words or less.

.....

.....

.....

.....

Read one (or more) of the following passages:

 **Acts 15**

 **1 Corinthians 12**

 **Revelation 7**

These passages give us some clues about the thinking of early Church leaders and Mission workers.

- ? What characteristics are highlighted as being important for the Church to respond to God's mission?
- ? What type of relationships are necessary to *be* God's people?
- ? What do these passages have to say about a Vision for Church today?

Re-Read the **Vision Statement** (on Page 1).

- ? In the light of your shared conversations, what stands out to you in the Vision Statement?
- ? Are there particular parts of the Vision that call you to action?
- ? Are there bits that you disagree with?
- ? What do you hope for?

Reflection 4 – Hospitality, Reconciliation and a Vision for Renewal

In keeping with this call to be generous and inclusive is the biblical and theological tradition to do with hospitality, which is becoming widely used. Its biblical origins lie in how the people of Israel were called to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger in their midst. Jesus himself frequently likened the Kingdom of God to a banquet, a message he often conveyed through his own practice of table-fellowship. The Eucharist reminds us always of the hospitality of God and of Christ who is our guest and host. The early church welcomed the stranger, the one who was quite different from its own members, just in case it was the Christ who came to them in the form of a stranger. This hospitality is not about the hospitality industry; it is about welcome, embrace for Christ's sake.

The *Basis of Union* also calls us to be 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic', and to be a sign and instrument not just of transformation but of 'that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation' (Paragraph 3). These terms are classical marks of the church. They come to us from the early church and are a sign of our commitment to the world-wide ecumenical church, both between places and through time. In much theological discussion of the future of the church these marks are being frequently used and interpreted to meet the situations in which we find ourselves. These marks are defined by how we understand who Christ is.

It is arguably the case that in the future how we talk about being generous, courageous, and inclusive will require a deeper engagement with the biblical references noted above, with the biblical and theological tradition of hospitality and with these marks. *(Theological Foundations Paper)*

Pray for one another

Give thanks for the shared conversations.
Bless one another.
Pray for the work of the Church.
Share in the Closing Prayer together.

Closing Prayer

*Gracious, loving God
who invites us out of step, out of rhythm people,
into a holy dance of life
into a tapestry, a song, an adventure
with you as constant companion and life-changing friend
hold before us a vision of the risky life we are called to share
give us courage, the ability to invite others to share the journey
and the trust to be generous in our dealings with others.*

*May we allow the story of Jesus to form us
and shape the steps we are to follow,
the voice and movement of others to teach us new ways
the community in which we live to help us understand
what transformation means for them and us.*

*May your Spirit speak softly in our ears
whisper words of new life and adventure
tease us with the possibilities of a transformed life
help us risk all for a glimpse of the dance that draws us into your
ever-loving heart
and let us dance with love, joy, compassion, justice and hope.
AMEN*

Ways Forward...

A time of gathering thoughts for the journey ahead

Remembering Our Covenant

Together, we have valued God's love and

- **our commitment to Jesus Christ;**
- **the leading of the Holy Spirit;**
- **the inspiration of Scriptures; and**
- **the challenge of the Gospel.**

We have shown respect for one another, knowing




- **that all people are made in the image of God; and**
- **God is continuing to create and transform us and our communities.**

(based on the *Vision Statement*)

Reflection








- ? What have we learnt?
- ? What has excited us?
- ? Are there unanswered questions?

Prayers

-  For one another
-  For God's grace
-  For your communities

Developing an Action Plan

Last week, the group considered some possible areas for action and some hopes.

-  Where could we start?
-  Is there something which is immediately achievable?
-  Are there some longer term objectives?
-  What foundations need to be laid?
-  Who will do what?
-  By when?
-  How will we know when something has been achieved?

Closing Prayer (on the previous page)

Theological foundations for the NSW Synod Vision Statement: Moving with God, transforming communities, living with courage, inclusiveness and generosity

Introduction

Vision Statements seek to express in a few words the essential character of a community, who the community sees itself as being and who it wishes to be, what guides it on the journey, and what helps it to check its progress on the way. They seek to give focus to a community's life, and shape and inform a community's actions and priorities. Their concern is to point towards the source of a community's hope.

It might help us to understand what a vision statement is, if we consider what it is not. It is not a report, a rationale, or a mission statement.

The Vision Statement adopted by the NSW Synod in 2005 is not a theological vision. It is an expression of what the Moderator has discerned within a series of conversations throughout the life of the Synod. It can be divided into three parts:

- i. The statement of who we see ourselves being: a community that is moving with God, transforming communities, and living lives marked by courage, inclusiveness, and generosity.
- ii. A set of statements which indicate what we will seek to do as a Synod.
- iii. A set of guiding values, which really are a statement about things which we value in our life and which we would like to see reflected in what we do.

This paper seeks to offer a theological reflection on the Statement and the Moderator's discerning of our life.

When we seek to reflect theologically on a statement such as this, there are three things that we would usually do:

- i. We would ask who the audience will be for this vision and the theological reflection. At its most basic level this is an internal document concerned with the life and inspiration of the Synod. But its purpose also, and quite rightly, transcends that domestic, in-house consideration. This statement speaks of, and encourages an engagement with the wider, public spheres of our lives. There must be some thinking through of the way we engage in this Christian reflection and discourse in a multifaith, secular and, for some, post-Christian culture.
- ii. We would check how the claims of the statement fit within the traditions of the church (doctrine, theology and practices), to see how they fit with the wisdom of our community and its ongoing conversation about faith. Does our statement reflect the rich tradition, or have we forgotten some helpful insights? In the case of the UCA, how does it sit within the ecclesial and theological ethos of the *Basis of Union* and relevant Assembly documents that refer to the way we think faithfully inside this church.
- iii. We would seek to explore what the statement means when we take our particular context as central to our reflection. What does it mean for us to be a people seeking to be faithful to Jesus Christ in our day and place? This pivotal consideration does not stand alone. It leads naturally into consideration of what it means to be the body of Christ, how we understand the life of Christian discipleship. It is closely bound to a consideration of how we understand and put into practice the mission of God interpreted in the light of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom or reign of God.

The Statement has already been accepted by the Synod. In the circumstances the focus of the reflection will fall on the third task outlined above. The other two remain important and may need further consideration as we seek to strengthen and deepen our understanding of this vision and how it serves the Christian life in contemporary culture. What is offered here is theological reflection that gives

particular importance to the Trinity. It is hoped that this reflection might help us understand the Statement, and how it points to God and the way we live the Christian life within this community known as the Uniting Church. Occasionally we might suggest that there is a need to be careful how we interpret certain parts of the Statement if we are to honour our faith tradition.

It is arguably the case that the Synod should commit itself to a disciplined study of who Jesus Christ is for us in our contexts and consider how this might relate to other areas of Christian belief. The Vision Statement advocates the centrality of Christology but the thinking through of what this means for us still needs to be done. It is extraordinarily important and requires our best thinking, energy and effort. It requires more depth than was possible in this paper.

What follows is, in large part, a series of images to stimulate our imaginations, to help us see what the words in the statement might mean for us. If they sometimes seem to be not connected images, this may be because they are intended to give us different views, come at the topic from different places so we can find a new way of seeing.

Moving with God, transforming communities, living with courage, inclusiveness and generosity

What does it mean for us as a community of the followers of Jesus to commit ourselves to “move with God”? What does when means when we speak of God ‘moving’, and how do we move with God?

The term ‘moving with God’ suggests energy, engagement, activity, direction. It is in keeping with the UCA’s idea of a ‘pilgrim people’ and a people ‘on the way’. It implies a covenantal relationship with God and the world. It is open-ended and is inclined towards the future; it carries within its embrace the theological virtue of hope.

One of the images that emerges when we think of God moving is the image of dance, of the swirling, joyful interaction of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit whose unity is discovered in this dance. The first movement of God is within God, a God who is essentially communal, and whose life is best spoken of in language street party or dance or new wine or festival and banquet.

It is like people dancing. Dances are of different kinds, and involve different groups of people – couples, groups, whole communities. They can be structured or impromptu. When people dance they take their own steps, give expression to their own lives, yet are always weaving around the movements of their partner and other people involved in the dance, swirling and stepping, and in the movement they become something more than separate individuals.

Some of the early leaders of the church used the word *perichoresis* to describe the Trinitarian life of God, and that strange sounding word literally means ‘circle dance’ (you might see how the last part of the word forms ‘choreography’).

Brian McLaren says it very well:

the Trinity [is] an eternal dance of Father, Son, and Spirit sharing mutual love, honor, happiness, joy, and respect. Against this backdrop, God’s act of creation means that God is inviting more and more beings into the eternal dance of joy.¹

As this image reminds us, the movement with God is never solitary. We speak of human beings being made in the image of God. Because God is Trinity, because God is essentially dance, relationship, community, then we reflect God’s life when our life together as human beings is open, inviting, welcoming, and caring. It is our socially open, hospitable companionship as people in community which corresponds to God’s life and movement. We move with God as a people whose lives and relationships are inseparably tied to the lives of other people.

Of course we know that we do not always move with God. We are all 'sinners'. We are all alienated from God, from our true selves, from our neighbour and from the rest of creation. We are made in the image of God, yet sinners. As McLaren suggests:

Sin means that people are stepping out of the dance, corrupting its beauty and rhythm, crashing and tackling and stomping on feet instead of moving with grace, rhythm, and reverence.¹

To move with God is not simply to walk beside God, but to participate in the divine life, to become, with the whole humanity together, the image of God, to become a new humanity. As Christ is the new humanity, the real image of God, we are called as disciples to conform to Christ. To move with God is to join Christ in the wedding feast, the party, the dance that is going on within the heavenly household that is God.

For those who find their images in music, here is another image. On the surface it may appear that Jazz is simply a free-flowing set of sounds, with no structure or order. Indeed, the heart of jazz is improvisation, and the ability for the musicians to relate to each other, to play around what the other is playing.

But the movement is not simply random. The structure of any piece is found in the chords that give it its basic shape. The improvisation which occurs is dependent on the relationship between chords, the notes that are made possible by those chords, and the flow from chord to chord. The jazz musician then has the freedom to alter the beat, to play high or low pitched notes, and to vary the pattern of notes they draw from their basic chords.

Movement with God seems to be like playing a jazz piece with God. God has composed the basic structure, and plays that tune as we improvise. The pattern gives us the freedom to move and change and experiment, but there are some patterns that simply do not work, that are discordant, and all the while we are trying to be in the right place when the chords change and the piece touches down at different points.

As we speak of dance and music, our movement with God, we are assuming something about the nature of God, how God dances in the world, who God dances with, and how we recognize God's dance. We are suggesting that sometimes we may dance with the Father, at other times with Christ the Son, at other times with the Spirit, and sometimes with the God who is all three. The Scripture points to certain things that seem core to our sense of God and our moving with God: that the world exists because of God's creative love, that God calls us to an inclusive, just, peaceful, mutually respectful, and loving community, that God has a particular care for the outcaste, the lost and lonely, the abused and victimized, that God desires for us to become friends and companions of Jesus and to embody in our lives a glimpse of the new life he brings.

For this Vision Statement to be of use beyond the confines of the church, we must become more mindful of our language. It is sometimes said that in the contemporary situation the ordinary Christian must become bilingual. We must know the biblical stories and theological traditions of our faith, allow them to form and nurture us and, at the same time, be able to speak into the wider world that does not know or share these same traditions. The word Trinity is peculiar to the Christian faith. It has sometimes been called the Christian name for God. Our vocation is to find ways of talking about this understanding of God in a public domain that is godless, or is only prepared to talk about a generic God, or the god of other faiths.

The Statement points to some of the things we hold as central in the section 'Our Guiding Values'. The reader may wish to skip forward and skim through that section, before continuing with our movement with God. You will then be able to read the values again in the light of this section, so that each part can enrich the other. As you do so you might find that it is helpful to think of these as 'central theological beliefs', thus tying them more closely to the issue of faith and the ways of the church. The risk otherwise is that they get caught up in the way people understand 'values' or 'what is valuable' within the dominant economic world view.

To move with God is to recognize that we move as friends, and not simply as slaves or servants (John 15: 14-15). There is an intimacy in the journey, an intertwining of lives, a mutual desire to love the world into life. We are constantly watchful for the friends of God who do not name themselves as we do ('Christians'), but who share in the dance in search of the wholeness, peace and justice God desires.

To move with God can be a challenging and painful journey. It will mean that we will take up our cross and seek to walk in the steps and shadow of Jesus. We will stand in the valleys where the bones are left uncovered, in the places of massacre and destruction like in Rwanda, and we will give voice to the cries of God for God's children in the face of HIV/AIDS, poverty, tsunamis, the poisoning of the environment, starvation, or the impact of war and crime. We will give a name to those who have been dismissed as without name and worth. We will call them daughters and sons of God, as God does, and share with them in the dance to which God has invited them and us.

We will move with God into places where those who have been called 'the enemy' dwells, not so we may label them as terrorists and destroy them, as political leaders wish to do at this time, but so we may love our enemies and turn our cheek to those who would destroy us (Luke 6: 27-36). Indeed, so that we can cease to talk of enemies, but friends who share our dance with God.

We will move to the places where those who have been marginalized are forced to live, so that we may share with God in offering hospitality, in the breaking of bread, in the pouring out of wine. We will move with God into the prisons, the hospitals, the hungry places and places without cloths, the mad and depressing places – and, if we are fortunate, discover the presence of God has moved into these places before us, and that all of us share in the dance with God.

We will move with God in the struggle for human rights, and the struggle for rights at work. We will share with God in people's protests over war, the exclusion of people from our shores, the denial of human rights, carry our dance into the streets with protestors as well as the homeless.

To move with God is to enter into the heart of the reign of God, to discover new community, renewal of life, the meaning of salvation. It is to share with God in the gathering by God of the peoples of the earth into blessed community, the weaving of different stories and experiences into a narrative big enough to offer hospitality to all, and which points towards God's end.

For those who enjoy weaving and tapestry, this may provide another image of what it means to move with God, to be involved with God in forming a tapestry of life in which all have a place, where each thread is absolutely necessary to the whole and the pattern that emerges. We are not simply weaving a pattern that God has predetermined, as if – to use another image – we were painting by numbers, or just putting our coloured thread where it had to go. The exact design depends on how we co-operate with God, the times when we work with God and with other people, and the times when we pursue our own desires and life regardless of what happens to the tapestry.

The tapestry, the music, the dance – however we see our moving with God – is always larger than we can see. God dances with many different people in different ways. We need to be open to God leading the dance in directions we do not expect. We learn the steps of the dance as we participate, not from the sidelines. The dance is really a giant extravaganza, like the opening of an Olympics or an enormous community celebration, where each person plays a small and particular part, and no-one really knows the whole of the design or sees more than the bit in which they are involved. One has to trust the music-maker, the weaver, the one who calls us into the dance.

To move with God is to place ourselves within God's household of life which is given a specific shape in the life of Christian community, a household open to all who seek life, and where the boundaries are not drawn too tightly. It is the world where God dwells with us in the action of the Holy Spirit.

In this perspective, the household of life can include the visible church as well as others who are at times, metaphorically speaking, guests in the sanctuary. Such guests may represent other recognizably resonating, if theologically tongue-tied, readings of the meaning of Jesus Christ for the world.ⁱ

Within this household the feast of the household, its breaking of bread and sharing of wine, is not simply a domestic event for the faithful, but the wider meal of the whole inhabited earth. In this sense our moving with God is also a being with God, a community with whom God dwells and who are, thus, a sign and promise of what God desires at the end of all things. We are to be a place of justice, praise and peace.

We move with God towards a time when the whole of the human community will be the image of God, the place where God dwells, when the task of the church is over and there is the whole people of God, the human race. As we move with God, as we are church at this time, our lives and our speaking shape a community that can keep a space open in human life where people can respond to God's calling and moving. That is, our being church, our really holding to the story of Christ and our distinctive identity as God's people, allows a glimpse of the beloved human community towards which all things move.

In our life we seek to move with God and to share with God in the transformation of communities so that they are more just, peaceful, caring and inclusive. That is 'movement with God' and 'transformation' are not two sorts of things. The movement with God is transforming of us and all those with whom we share the dance. The Statement commits us as a church to be actively involved in the public life of our society, naming those things that do not reflect life with God, building partnerships with all those who share our hopes and struggles, stepping outside our comfort zones to be in the difficult places Christ leads us into.

We do not enter communities as if we know how they should be transformed. It is as we share in, interact and get involved in our local communities, that God's transforming love is made known. In the experience of loving, caring and walking with others, we too are transformed.

Think again about the image of dance. The dance we are in is not just couples on the floor doing their separate dance in one space, with other doing their dance alone. It is more like one dance where we move around with all other people (like a line dance, or a progressive barn dance). We also don't have all the steps sorted out before hand, and its not just us teaching others the steps. When we dance with the same partner or partners with whom we are familiar, there is a danger that we have learned all we can from each other, or become experts in a small space. It is when we seek to dance with a new partner, or to welcome others into the dance that we are challenged to make space, to learn new steps and movements – just as my movements might challenge and transform the new partners to learn new ways of being. And in the giving and receiving of new steps we come in time to a new dance, a transformed way of being together that might more closely reflect the dance that God calls us to join.

Or, to build on the jazz image, transformation means that we need first to listen to others in order that we might play along with them, must respect what they are doing, so that we might make new music together. The church is not the band, and the community the audience, but together we are seeking to play within God's life.

Care of the poor, hospitality to strangers, visiting the lonely and imprisoned, offering bread to the hungry, and seeking peace in the face of violence and war, are the practices of the Christian life that point to the heart of our gospel claims about Jesus. Within the NSW Synod that occurs as we provide services to people who are homeless or have mental illnesses; caring for children, the ageing and people with disabilities; and offering assistance to people whose relationships are failing or who cannot cope with addictions such as drugs or gambling. It occurs in our peacebuilding work, advocacy for the human rights of those whom governments tend to ignore, in challenging reliance on war to create peace and security. It takes shape in our working with people of goodwill to create strong people's movements to provide a different way of viewing the issues and to hold politicians accountable. These are glimpses and images of our moving with God that remind us across the church of what our journey with God might

look like, and which point to the things that we really believe about God and God's desire for human life. When we live as that sort of community we move with God, and people see in our lives a reflection of what we claim is true about the God who is revealed in Jesus. This is not an optional extra, but the heart of what we claim following Jesus is all about.

It is tempting for the church to speak as if we are already capable of being who we are called to be, as if we had all the rhythm necessary to dance and find our place with God. We may think of others as stepping outside the dance and stomping on feet but we are OK. But it is not so, for we are also a people who need to be transformed, continually changed and renewed if we are to share with God in transforming communities.

It is also possible for us to too easily see the dance as only a resurrection dance, a celebration in dance of all that overcomes opposition and death.¹ Yet we dance with the crucified Christ, the wounded One, the one who speaks of the hidden-ness of God, of a partner whom we do not seem to be able to find in the midst of pain, suffering, disaster and lostness.

Being 'courageous', 'inclusive' and 'generous'.

What do 'courageous', 'inclusive' and 'generous' mean for us as a church? It will mean many different things in different places. But it does mean that we will trust that life rests in God, and we are called to have a faith not just to live by but for which we are willing to die. It means taking God seriously – the God of grace, the God of forgiveness, the God who reaches out in love, the God who calls us to vulnerability and gain through loss, to solidarity with the marginalized, to inclusion and hospitality, and to costly discipleship that takes up our cross and follows Jesus. It means we will live in ways that are open-ended, and always open to the possibility of the unexpected, for we have the presence of God to guide us.

It means that we will not build barriers to exclude people. We will not label people enemies, aliens or strangers, and seek to destroy them, for even our enemies we are meant to love. We will become alert to, and give up, the exclusions of gender, race, wealth and poverty, sexuality, language and ethnicity, and call each other to account whenever they creep into our life. We will not ignore people, treat them in a paternalistic way, or impose conditions on their participation in the dance. We will be open, welcoming, hospitable and willing to learn from those who we see as different from ourselves.

We will recognize that the life we have, the money and property, the gifts and skills and creativity, the knowledge and stories are not ours, and we must be generous in our sharing. We cannot hoard things to protect our futures, but share now with those who have little, and trust God with the future.

Generosity is also about being hospitable, and not judging; creating a welcoming space for people to be with us without us controlling them or putting demands on them. Generosity is about what we offer willingly to others.

As we seek to move with God we need to recognize that these three marks of our life – courage, inclusiveness and generosity - need to sit alongside the more obviously theological virtues that are celebrated in the wisdom of the church. Paul speaks of 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5: 22-23), of humility and gentleness (Ephesians 4:2), of faith, hope and love (1 Corinthians 13: 13), and of the call to share in the suffering of Christ (e.g. Philippians 1: 29, 1 Peter 4: 13).

In keeping with this call to be generous and inclusive is the biblical and theological tradition to do with hospitality, which is becoming widely used. Its biblical origins lie in how the people of Israel were called to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger in their midst. Jesus himself frequently likened the Kingdom of God to a banquet, a message he often conveyed through his own practice of table-fellowship. The Eucharist reminds us always of the hospitality of God and of Christ who is our guest and host. The early church welcomed the stranger, the one who was quite different from its own members, just in case it was the Christ who came to them in the form of a stranger. This hospitality is not about the hospitality industry; it is about welcome, embrace for Christ's sake.

The *Basis of Union* also calls us to be 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic', and to be a sign and instrument not just of transformation but of 'that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation' (Paragraph 3). These terms are classical marks of the church. They come to us from the early church and are a sign of our commitment to the world-wide ecumenical church, both between places and through time. In much theological discussion of the future of the church these marks are being frequently used and interpreted to meet the situations in which we find ourselves. These marks are defined by how we understand who Christ is.

It is arguably the case that in the future how we talk about being generous, courageous, and inclusive will require a deeper engagement with the biblical references noted above, with the biblical and theological tradition of hospitality and with these marks.

The Mission: to Transform the Community, we will

As we read the points in this section, we need to see that there are different sorts of statements: a mixture of values, general intentions, and quite specific actions.

We might ask ourselves how these relate to the first part about moving with God, and each community will need to consider what they need to do in their particular places to pursue the vision, and reflect the things which are valued.

Our Guiding Values

In this section we are affirming things that are important to us, that we value, in the way we claim our faith. As was suggested earlier, it is very helpful to think of these as 'central theological beliefs', thus tying them more closely to the issue of faith and the ways of the church.

We value God's love

The Statement suggests that, of the many qualities of God, the one that is most important to us at this time, is God's love. To speak of love as the essence of God is to remind us that alongside our sense of God's omnipotence, holiness and perfection, we must also speak of God's compassion, mercy, justice, patience, faithfulness, and kindness which is revealed supremely in the life and suffering death of Jesus.

It reminds us that the courage to live in a still broken, painful and suffering world "comes from the faith that God graciously participates in these ambiguities, and that through God's participation the 'broken' character of existence is challenged and continually transformed". Because God does not desire to destroy creation but mend it, God dwells within the brokenness and overcomes its estrangement with love. God reaches for us, offers us life, desires to call us back into the heart of God.

and our commitment to Jesus Christ

While it is important to recognize the importance of our commitment to Christ, and the desire that others share that commitment, in reading this we need to remember that what is central is God's love for us in Jesus Christ. It is God's action which calls forth our commitment, and it is always God's action in Christ that shapes our life.

and the leading of the Holy Spirit

The Statement affirms the importance of the Holy Spirit as that which reminds us of Jesus, which empowers change in personal lives, and strengthens the church to be the church.

and the inspiration of the Scriptures.

This statement offers two important reminders. First, as a church we are saying that it is important to us to affirm the Scriptures as a witness that has been inspired by God. We are able to trust the Scriptures to help us understand God, to hear the teachings of Jesus, and to shape our Christian life. Second, because we believe the Scriptures are inspired, then we find inspiration in the Scriptures, encouragement for our Christian life.

and the challenge of the Gospel

This clause leaves us with a claim that needs to be explored continually within the church: 'we value the challenge of the Gospel'. This short-hand reference to the good news, to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, to salvation and redemption, needs to find particular expression in each community of faith. It challenges us to keep asking what is the central need in human life that needs the saving work of Christ, and to speak of that salvation in ways that offer wholeness, newness, and a new community that reflects the kingdom of God.

and that all people are made in the image of God

The affirmation that 'all people are made in the image of God' is an important one in a world that continually seeks to deny some people's humanity, that excludes, oppresses, demonises and destroys those who are not us.

Yet we should never think that this is all that the church has to say about what it means to be human. The other part of the affirmation is that we are a people caught in sin. Sin is part of what it means to be human. All people are caught in this state of individual, corporate and systemic sin, not just some. Some cannot claim to be better than others, more righteous, less sinful, for we all are sinful and fall short of the glory of God.

and God's creation

The world faces a challenging ecological crisis that is expressed in global warming and the constant loss of plant and animal species, and the desecration of parts of the world. This last statement affirms that we recognize that the world is God's and is to be valued and cared for, and not just exploited. It reminds us that, in all the things we do as church, we should consider the sort of foot print that we make upon the earth.

Gracious, loving God

*who invites us out of step, out of rhythm people,
into a holy dance of life
into a tapestry, a song, an adventure
with you as constant companion and life-changing friend
hold before us a vision of the risky life we are called to share
give us courage, the ability to invite others to share the journey
and the trust to be generous in our dealings with others.*

*May we allow the story of Jesus to form us
and shape the steps we are to follow,
the voice and movement of others to teach us new ways
the community in which we live to help us understand
what transformation means for them and us.*

*May your Spirit speak softly in our ears
whisper words of new life and adventure
tease us with the possibilities of a transformed life
help us risk all for a glimpse of the dance that draws us into your
ever-loving heart
and let us dance with love, joy, compassion, justice and hope.
AMEN*

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