# MINISTER'S LETTER

In this Minister's Letter, I take the opportunity to share four theological principles that I have presented to the sessions of our 6-Week Learning Hub. Here is a summary of my paper published in 2022 through the UnitingCare Australia Network.

1. **Love God and Love Your Neighbour**

"Love God and love your neighbour" (Mark 12: 30-31) underpins the Uniting Church's social response to "God is love" and "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4: 8;19). Our shared mission as the Uniting Church, which includes community services ministry, is to embody God's love for all people and exemplify the Church's commitment to supporting individuals, families and communities through service provision.

The Uniting Church, in accordance with the *Basis of Union*, believes God guides the Church into union, and is calling people of the Church to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples from many lands. The Uniting Church and its community services ministry are not separate entities, but one in Christ. This unity is not dependent upon human aspiration, "but upon the will of God made effective through Jesus Christ". The Spirit of God permeates the boundary between the sacred, the secular, the Church and the world by creating life through the whole of creation.

The Church's community services ministry further broadens the horizon of God's mission by building relationships with multiple stakeholders, including within the Church, people, government and communities. Our compassion for people's lives seeks to incarnate God's love for the world (1 John 4: 8-10), so that the people may have life abundantly (John 10:10). God's love in Christ is bound neither by time nor space (Ephesians 3: 18-19), love never ends (1 Cor 13:8). Loving God is made visible in loving our

neighbour – “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord” (Micah 6:8).

God’s love is universal – everyone has the right to receive care. This equality extends to all people, with no discrimination on the grounds of age, gender, cultural origin, ability, sexuality, class, colour, or creed. The Church’s commitment to equality will continue to draw many skilled people into service, to involve diverse members of the Church and many others from society to build the whole mission of God in the world.

## 2. God’s Mission in the Margins

The large footprint of the Uniting Church’s community services ministry enables us to reflect broadly on where God’s mission is in Australia. Together with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), we learn that our experience with the Land and ancient cultures is a source of theology. The self-emptying God, vulnerable yet magnificently human, has broken unbreakable boundaries and become the suffering servant and risen friend. Living in a post-Christendom world, we affirm a paradigm shift in mission: from “Church’s mission to the margins” to “God’s mission in the margins”.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). Incarnation is the marginalisation of God. God the Creator participates in the world and lives among the people, who are God’s radical “other”. In Jesus’ ministry, we come face-to-face with the humble, non-violent, self-giving God, among humble people in difficult circumstances. Through service to the disadvantaged, the passion narrative of Jesus continues to unfold in communities, while our staff gather the suffering into hope. Many people of faith, such as lay leaders, chaplains, pastoral care and other workers, have collectively exercised servanthood ministry and witness to the Risen Lord, who pardons sin, restores life and

awakens faith: so, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Triune God is inviting us to see God as a divine community whose inner life is fundamentally about love-abiding relationships among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This inner community of God is constantly moving outwards by the virtue of self-giving love (John 3: 16), forming diverse communities of life through the Spirit. God is in all our communities through the Spirit. God has always been present in this land, and what has changed is that we are discovering and naming God through community services ministry.

In serving all people, especially the marginalised, the Spirit of Life continues to move us from the centre to the margins of society. This same Spirit calls the Uniting Church to be part of society, including in the margins of social service. This is a calling of God "to loose the bonds of injustice, undo the thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go free" and "share food with the hungry and open homes to the homeless poor" (Isaiah 58: 6-7). In so doing, the marginalised may come to the centre of social attention as they are already at the centre of Christ's attention. We are accountable to God's mission at the margins.

### 3. A Fellowship of Reconciliation

The Uniting Church was formed in response to God's mission in Australia; to be a fellowship of reconciliation. The mission of the Uniting Church and its community services ministry is one. This unity is a relational wholeness that accepts operational differences and follows God's mission in Australia. It affirms that God's reconciliation is radically open to the world.

The mission of God is larger than the mission to the Gentiles by the early church. In mission with the Gentiles, the horizon of God's mission begins to open, bringing the common good of life

into focus beyond the duality of the secular and the sacred. This outward unfolding of God's Self is the Incarnation of God's own life in the world, regardless of the Church's capacity to conceptualise its fullness in theology and practice.

As we look deeply into all services and reflect truthfully on this, we see one thing in common: suffering. Again, suffering unites us. On the cross, Jesus's suffering draws the world's attention to the irreducible problem of human suffering. The Uniting Church proclaims this risen crucified one in the Basis of Union: *Christ calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.*

"The Son of Man does not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Today many leaders, managers, and staff come from all faiths and walks of life to give a significant part of their own lives for the overall mission. In order to achieve the best outcomes for the people we serve, service providers work with partners and multiple stakeholders, including other organisations, congregations, communities and government. This collaborative work seeks outcomes where the restoration of a person's life and the reconciliation of the world are akin. To achieve this common good, partnerships are nurtured to influence government policies that enhance the dignity of people.

## 4. Mission with God

The Greek word *diakonia* is often narrowly translated as "service" to others. But Paul uses the term diakonia when he affirms his relationship to the Triune God (Acts 20:24; 2 Corinthians 3:8), and to Christ who has authorised him to be his *diakonos* (1 Corinthians 3:5; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:25). The notion of "service", therefore, denotes God's mission through a messenger like Paul to embody the relationship between God and the

purpose of God for the world. Therefore, the Church's affirmation that social service is not a secondary order of the Church but rather embodies the primary order of God's mission.

Social service is part of Christ's presence in Australia: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). The identity of faith-based service also grows by including values-based professionals and action-based service-delivering staff. All of them are called into Christ's mission in the world; their collective status also transforms from being agents delivering the Church's services and, in some cases, providing government programs, to being contributors informing the uniting identity of the Church.

Being a partner of God's mission also means bearing witness to the inclusive unity of the Uniting Church. From the personal experience of salvation to the delivery of social services, the community of care has broadened the scope of the community of faith, turning the outsider of the Church into the insider of social transformation. God has been calling into existence a new way of being for the Church, that is a Church for the "other" in the margins of faith and at the peripheries of society. There the commandment of loving God is like salt dissolved into community actions of loving our neighbour, so the light of God shines in people's renewed hope for life. Social service is the yeast which permeates every part of the dough of society (Matthew 13:33). The Church is a part of, not apart from, society.

Mission with God will enlarge the scope of our faith tradition. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6: 10). The Uniting Church's community services ministry is part of God's vision for how life should be lived. It actively discerns what God is doing in creation and history in the power of Spirit.