

What is the Mission of Church? (Uniting Church Perspective)

The following seven reflections are based on the work done by the National Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Uniting Church in Australia. The Uniting Church members of the dialogue drew deeply from the Scriptures and the Basis of Union in their work.

You are invited to engage in these reflections to stimulate your own thinking about the nature of the purpose of the church and more specifically the Uniting Church in the Queensland Synod. The reflections can be used either as a personal devotional or as the basis for a group discussion.

Each reflection begins with a piece of scripture followed by a précis of the Uniting Church sections of the dialogue document. There are questions for consideration. A brief prayer is included to close your reflection.

1. The Mission of God in Jesus Christ

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (NRSV)

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

The mission of the church is clearly understood as originating in the mission of God in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. The *Basis of Union* expresses the mission of God in Jesus Christ in terms of reconciliation. "In Jesus Christ 'God was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5:19 RSV). In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin."

This statement points at two things which are occurring. 1. In Jesus Christ God was dealing with the problem of sin. 2. God was creating a new creation which was 'reconciled' with God. Thus, it could be said that the mission of God is about the reconciliation of the creation with its creator, which is the action of God alone.

God's mission is exhibited through the church in and through the power of the Holy Spirit in the following ways: worship, witness, service, communion (sharing in the life of God and each other's lives), proclamation, and teaching.

Share/reflect:

How do you personally define the word mission?

Who has inspired you as "an ambassador for Christ" in your life?

What do you think it means as a Christian to be part of a new creation?

Where do you see the reconciliation of God at work today?

Prayer:

Loving God, help me to receive wisdom from the presence of your Holy Spirit and so listen for Jesus, your eternal Word, leading and guiding my life as his disciple. Amen.

2. Worship as Mission

Hebrews 4:14-16 (NRSV)

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

Jesus' worship of God, which was exhibited in his obedience to God and which included his participation in and fulfilment of Israel's own traditions of worship, is the offering of human worship which is acceptable to God. This self-offering of Jesus Christ, culminating in the cross, continues through Jesus' ascended life where Jesus goes on mediating between God and the creation, offering praise to God on behalf of the whole creation.

The *Basis of Union* declares that Christ is present in the preaching of the Word and that "The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church." The Basis also "commits its ministers to... administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs of the gospel set forth in the Scriptures."

When we worship God together on a Sunday we are not simply imitating Jesus, we are drawn Jesus own worship of the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. The creative power of God which raised Jesus from the tomb draws us into new life as God's new creation and we offer with Jesus our worship for the sake of the whole world.

Share/reflect:

In what way does worship connect to the mission of God in Jesus?

How does the worshipping community draw you closer to God?

What aspect of worship speaks most strongly to you of God's grace?

Who is gathered worship for?

Prayer:

Father of all, help us to know your presence and power in our worshipping communities and so be empowered as agents of your grace and love in the world. Amen.

3. Communion as Mission

John 17:20-26 (NRSV)

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

Integral to the mission of God in Jesus Christ is God's will to draw all things into communion (relationship) with the triune life of God. The will of God for a communion in being is expressed poignantly in Jesus' prayer of John 17 when he prays, not only that the unity of believers will be the same unity as shared by the Father and the Son, but that they will share in the very unity of God.

This gift of union with God and one another, given through the power of the Holy Spirit, is cited as a fundamental imperative in the mission of the Uniting Church. Moreover, the gifts of the church's members are used for the building up of the whole and are understood as a means through which Christ works and bears witness to himself. Thus, the promised union of all things in God is anticipated by the unity of the church. Whilst division remains, seeking further unity continues to be an important aspect of the church's mission.

The way we exist towards one another within our congregation, as a Presbytery, as members of the UCA and as a church in relationship with other denominations can all express the bond we have in Christ.

Share/reflect:

How do you show your unity with others in your every day actions?

What does your congregation do to develop relationships with (the communion of) the whole church?

When the church struggles to exhibit the unity we have in Christ how does the 'world' respond?

Prayer: Father, Son and Spirit draw us into your communal way of life so that we might honour your name and help the world believe through our visible unity. Amen.

4. Service as Mission

Matthew 25:31-40 (NRSV)

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

God's mission in Christ is also expressed in Christ's compassion for the world. This compassion revolves around bringing reconciliation and wholeness to people's lives. The incarnation of Christ reflects God's concern for the creation and the promise of God is for a renewal of the creation.

Christ's compassion occurs at personal and communal levels as Christ forgives, heals, exorcises, and recognises people at the margins of society. God's compassion for the world is most fully expressed in Christ's death which takes away the sin of the world. The Basis expresses the belief that "the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died."

The Uniting Church has a strong commitment to serving the world as it participates in the mission of God. The Basis "acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ." All members of Christ's Body are expected to take upon themselves the form of a servant in order that God's loving care is known among people.

Share/reflect:

How have you experienced God's compassion for you?

In what way have you shown compassion in the last month?

How is Christ's compassion expressed through the Uniting Church?

Do you think Christ's compassion can be expressed by those who do not have a commitment to Christ?

Prayer: Compassionate Friend, help us know not only what it means to wash each other's feet but to serve this whole world that you love so much. Amen.

5. Proclamation as Mission

Luke 4:16-21 (NRSV)

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

In Christ God proclaims the beginning of a new order of righteousness and love, pointing the creation towards its promised end: union with God. This good news of salvation is given for the church to share. Just as “Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God whereby the poor in spirit could receive God’s love” (Basis) so too the church is called to preach “Christ the risen crucified One and confesses him as Lord to the glory of God the Father.”(Basis)

The gospel imperative to share the message of salvation reflects Christ’s command of Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” Hence, the evangelical tradition of the church which is particularly focussed on sharing the Gospel message is also essential in the participation of the church in the mission of God.

The proclamation of Christ as Lord takes place first and foremost in the context of the congregation and is given a sacramental quality in the Basis. “Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist.” However, the firm belief found in the Basis is that all people are called to respond to God’s love in Christ and the proclamation must be made beyond the gathered congregation also.

Whilst recognising that there are particular gifts in evangelism, that is to say bringing others to faith, “The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant.”

Share/reflect:

When did you last share your faith in Jesus with another person?

Can you tell about a sermon which impacted on your life?

Do you think people are reluctant to share their faith? Why?

What ways do you see the Uniting Church proclaiming the message of salvation to the world?

Prayer: Spirit of God, assist us to proclaim the story of God’s love in Jesus in all that we say and do and so provide the opportunity for all people to respond to your love. Amen.

6. Witness as Mission

John 5:31-38 (NRSV)

'If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that his testimony to me is true. You sent messengers to John, and he testified to the truth. Not that I accept such human testimony, but I say these things so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ bear witness to God's work of salvation. In bearing witness Jesus reveals the truth of his identity and the work of God that he has been sent to do. So it is that in John 5:36 Jesus declares, "The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me."

This witness is given so that the world may believe and partake in knowledge of God. Jesus' mission includes his witness to the work of salvation being carried out by God in Israel's history and conclusively through himself.

The Uniting Church reflects Christ's mission of witness through its own life. It does this by the very act of union in which it was "seeking to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church." (Basis) It seeks to continue this by responding to the call to be "an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself." (Basis)

The witness of the church is understood as a participation in Christ's self-witness and his witness to the work of God's Holy Spirit for the whole creation.

Share/reflect:

Where and when do you witness to Jesus Christ in your life?

How does the Uniting Church witness to the work of God's Holy Spirit in the whole of creation?

How is witness expressed in action as well as word?

Prayer: Loving God, in your Son we come to know you. Help us to be faithful witnesses to your love for all things revealed in and through Jesus. Amen.

7. Teaching as Mission

Matthew 5 (NRSV)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

What words or phrase stand out for you in this passage?

Précis

God's ministry in and through Jesus Christ is also typified as a teaching ministry. The predominant message of Jesus, standing in the Deuteronomic tradition, is the coming of the Reign of God.

Jesus teaches as a Jewish Rabbi of the period. He is recognised as such by his contemporaries who call him 'teacher' (e.g. John 3:2). Jesus' teaching takes place in the synagogue and in more informal settings. His teaching often, but not exclusively, takes the form of an exposition of the law. As part of his mission Jesus' teaching focuses on incorporating others into the vision of the coming Reign and its proclamation. This mission of teaching is handed on to the disciples, and thus to the church in following generations.

Share/reflect:

When did you last attend a Bible Study or read a spiritual book? (Can you share something that you learnt?)

What knowledge of the faith do you pass on, and to whom?

Is teaching given a high value in the life of your congregation?

How does the Uniting Church engage in the teaching ministry of Jesus?

Prayer: Jesus, help me to learn from you in order that in days to come I might share those insights of your love and care with all people. Amen.