

Sermon – *celebrating 42 years of the Uniting Church*

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Athelstone Uniting Church #70

30 June 2019

Text: Psalm 100; John 15:1-8 NIV

Story: earlier in the service we read Andrew McDonough's Basil The Branch <https://www.lostsheep.com.au/stories/basil-the-branch/>

Let's pray

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight,

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen.

This week we celebrate the anniversary of the inauguration of the Uniting Church (42 years ago).

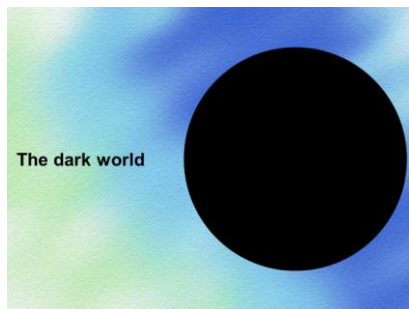
The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) was established on 22 June 1977 when most congregations of the Methodist Church of Australasia, about two thirds of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and almost all the churches of the Congregational Union of Australia came together under the Basis of Union (which was the statement/document of agreed understanding about what the Church was based upon, what it stood for and how it was to be organised).

A new emblem was developed, which has become the recognisable symbol of the Uniting Church.

You may know this emblem well, or perhaps you have never really looked at it closely.. I would like to introduce it to you:

The Uniting Church emblem

We begin with this black circle

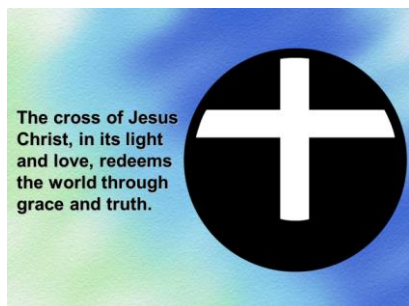


The dark world

The dark world

Or the darkened earth

Then we add the cross of Jesus Christ



The cross of Jesus Christ, in its light and love, redeems the world through grace and truth.

Which in its light and love, redeems the world through grace and truth



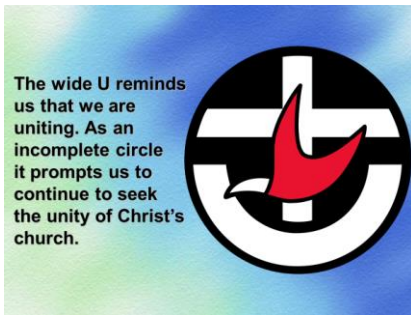
The dove with wings of flame represents the Holy Spirit which empowers and guides us to be witnesses.

Then we add the bird

– the dove – a symbol of the Spirit – and it is red – like Pentecost – this dove is flying – its not resting

It also looks like a red flame – another symbol of the holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit empowers and guides us to be witnesses

The wide U at the bottom:



Is it a U for Uniting? Or a bowl – perhaps symbolising hospitality?

We can also see it as an incomplete circle encouraging us to continue to seek the unity of Christ's church

Some look at the white and see an anchor

Hebrews 6 speaks of this hope we have – an anchor for the soul, firm and secure

Some see a boat – the boat is a symbol for the church

The three colours represent the three churches that formed the Uniting Church – Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational.

The darkened earth has received the light of the cross, the u-shape stands for the Uniting Church but also helps form an anchor or a boat, early symbols of the church. But the red dove expresses the movement of the Spirit, and just like it brings this logo to life, it brings the church to life.

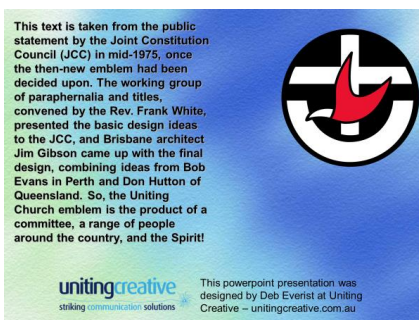
So here we have an image which shows the church, centred in Christ, empowered by the Spirit, working towards unity and offering hope to a darkened world



It symbolises something of the vision we have glimpsed for our church and the hopes we have for the future.



And it helps us to focus on the central gospel message, the need for constant reform and renewal and our commitment to worship, witness and service.



This text is taken from the public statement by the Joint Constitution Council (JCC) in mid-1975, once the then-new emblem had been decided upon. The working group of paraphernalia and titles, convened by the Rev. Frank White, presented the basic design ideas to the JCC, and Brisbane architect Jim Gibson came up with the final design, combining ideas from Bob Evans in Perth and Don Hutton of Queensland. So, the Uniting Church emblem is the product of a committee, a range of people around the country, and the Spirit!

And this powerpoint presentation was designed by Deb Everist at Uniting Creative

at the Inaugural Assembly in June 1977 a Statement to the Nation was read out:

I'd like to read it to you. Listen for what it is they wanted our church to be known for.

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

We, who are members of the first Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia address the people of Australia in this historic moment. The path to unity has been long and at times

difficult, but we believe this unity is a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race.

We acknowledge with gratitude that the churches from which we have come have contributed in various ways to the life and development of this nation. A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church. In the Uniting Church our response to the Christian gospel will continue to involve us in social and national affairs. We are conscious of our responsibilities within and beyond this country. We particularly acknowledge our responsibilities as one branch of the Christian church within the region of South-East Asia and the Pacific. In these contexts we make certain affirmations at the time of our inauguration.

We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race

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

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

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

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

We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere — the family of the One God — the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth the One who gave His life for others.

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

When I reflect on the words of that statement to the nation I hear how branches from the Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian churches were grafted together – a new expression of Jesus' church – centred in Jesus.

I hear how from the very beginning our church had at its very core the desire to contribute to the life and development of our nation; and that we would uphold basic Christian values and principles in the public space – through advocacy and service

At the Presbytery and Synod meeting held over the last 2 days it was evident that these values are still just as important. We resolved to ask our President Dr Deidre Palmer to pass on a number of our deep concerns regarding refugees and asylum seekers to the Prime Minister Scott Morrison, calling on his Christian values, and drawing attention to our Vision for a Just Australia. We were also encouraged to get involved in the World Suicide Awareness Day through the "it's no secret campaign".

Our church's desire is for part of its fruit is to be able to contribute to a just world.

A major part of the meeting was to celebrate the mission networks, dissolve the presbytery of South Australia and to form 2 new presbyteries: the Transitional Presbytery of SA and Generate Presbytery.

The first meetings of those 2 presbyteries were held yesterday.

As we celebrated the mission networks we heard of the good fruit produced over the last 16 years.

However, the vine was in need of some pruning by the gardener! Reform and renewal were needed! We said goodbye to the one presbytery and look forward with hope to the fruit that will grow through the missional leadership of the new presbyteries.

As we know, that fruit won't produce without the vine – without the light, without the time needed to shoot new buds

So over the next few months, further work will be done to thin out the branches and let in the light!

And we know from the words of Jesus, that if we abide or remain in him he will abide in us – and we will bear much fruit.

I hope that through this restructure we will see new growth and more abundant healthy fruit

If we think back to the story about Basil the Branch..

Here he is, one little branch on the tree, trying with all his might to bear fruit

He needed to be reminded – he can't produce grapes on his own: 'Stop straining' said the vine, 'and just stick with me'.

Friends: that same message is for us – as a church and as individuals:

Stop 'straining' and stick with the vine – Jesus

Allow yourself to be loved, to be nourished and nurtured, and yes, to be pruned when necessary!

Abide in Jesus and he will abide in you

Take a deep breath – slow down

Wiggle your shoulders – get yourself into a position where you can hear his Word – through prayer, and reading the Bible

And *focus on the Vine* – look, listen, become aware of what Jesus the vine is saying to you..

It is through this close intimate relationship with Jesus that healthy fruit will grow – that you will flourish:

Knowing you are beloved and sharing that love and blessing with others.

Centred in Christ, empowered by the Spirit, we can continue to offer hope to a darkened world

Amen