

Rev. Adelene Mills (BA Dip Ed BD) and her husband, Alan, have recently built a spiritual retreat house on their beautiful, peaceful property, "Spring Valley", near Penguin in north-west Tasmania. In her retirement from parish ministry, Adelene now leads parish, small group and individual retreats at "Spring Valley". She also has a passion for (and 30 years' experience of) small group ministry in churches and in the community.

You can contact Adelene for retreats, or for assistance with training small group leaders and developing small group studies for your church. "Spring Valley Retreat" is self-contained and is available for retreats and meetings.

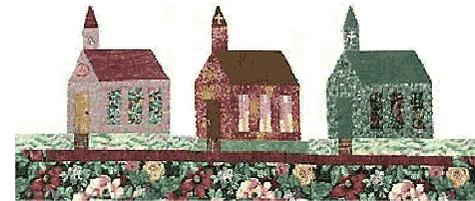
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DDEC Committee
Presbytery of Tasmania
Uniting Church in Australia

Changing Churches

A study booklet of
'unreal' stories that challenge
frustrate and inspire



In consultation with the Discipleship
Development and Education Committee
Presbytery of Tasmania
Uniting Church in Australia
2008
written by Adelene Mills

Changing Churches

'Unreal' stories that challenge, frustrate and inspire -

**A discussion booklet for churches who,
beginning where they are now,
want to follow Jesus into a 21st century world.**

with questions to encourage new insight, ideas and spiritual growth

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Introduction to the second edition of “Changing Churches”

The Purpose

These “Changing Churches” stories were originally written for the Tasmanian Presbytery’s “Live-in Weekend” at Woodfield Lodge, Dysart in August 2008. They are part of a courageous and necessary process undertaken by the Presbytery and its committees as it comes to terms with the urgent need for change in churches where ageing buildings are becoming an expensive liability, and financial resources and ordained leadership becoming less available. Of course these are only the current instigators of a change process that is part of the ongoing story of change experienced by God’s people since the beginning of Biblical history. As Dr. Andrew Glenn, Presbytery Chairperson, says in his paper, “Theology of Change: A Basis for Crossing the Jordan”:

“Our history as people of God is one of change, therefore there is nothing strange or unscriptural in our discussions. Change is a necessary process as we adapt to the changes in our society, in our understandings, and to the requirements of particular ages. Change was always envisaged as an important part of the Uniting Church.”

Andrew says that change in the church is, at its deepest level, primarily about change in our relationships - with God, with our neighbours, and with ourselves - rather than organizational change for its own sake. It recognizes and celebrates the gifts of all people and aims for efficiency in the organization so that more of our energy can be spent in relationship building. It’s about the maturing of the whole person-head and heart and spirit, and about the practices that would enhance our maturing. It’s about the giving of permission and the taking of risks. It’s about creating an atmosphere of trust and freedom wherein people can exercise their gifts. It’s about building relationships within communities of faith and with the wider community in all its diversity.

Essentially these stories are about relationships, as the church is about relationships – with our God, ourselves, our families, our brothers and sisters in Christ, with the communities in which we are placed, and with God’s world, which we, as the body of Christ in the world, are called to embrace. By their nature and purpose, these relationships need to change and to grow.

The Process

Much prayer and hard work went into preparing for the “Live-in” Presbytery before I came on the scene, and I want to pay tribute to the DDEC committee’s preparations for what turned out to be a very enjoyable and stimulating weekend. Part way into this preparation process, I was asked to assist with story writing.

YOU CAN USE THESE PAGES TO WRITE YOUR OWN NOTES

Questions for story 5: “Watershed”

1. How is Watershed UCA offering ‘extravagant hospitality’ through its
 - a) buildings?
 - b) Sunday worship time?
 - c) weekly activities?
 - d) people?
 - e) (any other ways)?
2. Where is there evidence of spiritual awareness, spiritual growth and integrity in the life of this church?
3. Would you like to belong to Watershed UCA?
If so, why? If not, why not?
4. What would you like to add to the story?
5. Is there anything in the life of this church that you see as useful and transferable to your own church?

Author’s Note: And a suggestion to finish with....

I must admit that this last story grew out of my passion for small groups and my conviction that small groups are where faith and love can grow. I had particular joy in writing this story because it illustrates my own passion and hopes for the church.

I suggest that a good finishing exercise for your group might be to either write a story about a church to which you would like to belong, or dream about your own church; or you could gather all the suggestions of your group in a visible, written list of the qualities of your ideal church. It doesn’t hurt to dream, and God might use some of these dreams to bring about a new reality.

May God’s love grant you peace and hope and joy in the midst of a rapidly changing world, and may you and your church continue to learn new ways to pass it on.

Adelene

The stories were written following a two day retreat at Spring Valley, which began after Gary Kelly and Janine Romaszko (from the DDEC committee) and I analysed feedback material from congregations across the Presbytery, finding common themes in their needs and hopes for change.

We then spent periods of time alone with God, seeking inspiration for stories that might pick up on these themes and engage people in discussions that could bring new light and life into the Tasmanian churches’ thinking and hoping and planning. These stories were a direct result of this retreat, and it is thanks to God that they were written, and it will be thanks to God should any stirrings of positive change and new life eventuate in our churches from the writing of them.

The Content

Although you might recognize your congregation in some of the events and people and interactions and struggles in these stories, none of the churches or individuals described in the stories is ‘real’. I was able to write the stories out of an accumulation of experience of many congregations, from my early days on this earth as a Congregational minister’s daughter, to my Uniting Church roles as member, elder, pastoral assistant and small group co-ordinator, and to my more recent personal experience of ordained ministry within congregations during the past 13 years.

As with individuals, it is good to know that we are not alone as congregations in our dilemmas and struggles, and that others too have had similar experiences and, for that reason, can better understand what is happening to us. In our discussions at the Presbytery weekend at Dysart, there were many such moments of recognition and mutual sharing and support, often graced with a sense of humour, as things were seen from a new perspective. Indeed, if this were all that eventuated from writing the stories, the writing will still have been worthwhile.

“Extravagant Hospitality” and “Spiritual Growth”

These two phrases were chosen from the Presbytery feedback material as two growth areas for our Presbytery, which, if taken seriously by congregations, could bring about significant positive change. These phrases have been used in the stories and questions and need defining:

a) “Extravagant hospitality” is about the way we make people welcome by our attitudes, and by our commitment to provision for their needs, comfort, enjoyment and wellbeing. It is about our openness to our community beyond the church and the way we use our resources and gifts within that community, and about our openness to people who are different from ourselves. It is about offering the love and open arms of Christ to all, most specifically those outside our church walls.

b) “Spiritual Growth” is about growing up in our love for God and our “neighbours”. It’s about developing our relationship with God, being open to God’s guidance and seeking God’s will for our lives. It’s about learning from each other how to live a life of faith, and praying with and for each other. It’s about growing in wisdom and understanding and love of other people. It’s about change – about forgiving and letting go and moving on. It’s about learning what really matters to God, and acting on this understanding. It’s about being willing to face our own insecurity about change, stepping out in faith, and risking the way of Jesus.

Thanks

My sincere thanks go to our chairperson, Andrew, to Gary and Janine and the DDEC committee, to Graham Booth and Sue and Bronwyn in the Presbytery office. Without their enthusiastic encouragement and practical assistance, the stories would not, and could not, have been written.

Adelene Mills

November 26th 2008

How to use the stories:

The “Changing Churches” stories are about **gifts** and **opportunities**.

All our congregations have people with God-given gifts in them, and there are often opportunities to use these gifts in the church, and in the community beyond the church, that go unrecognised.

These stories offer a new perspective on situations that occur in our churches. As people encounter some of their own story in a fictitious congregation in the stories, they are enabled to stand back and see things differently and in a broader context. Hopefully then, sometimes at least, a “problem” situation in their own lives and churches can become an opportunity for trying something new, or for a change in attitude and understanding.

The first 3 stories have 2 sessions of questions each, and the last two stories have one session. This format was designed for a specific Presbytery weekend, and you are invited to use the material as best fits your available time and resources.

There is also an invitation to write your own story at the end.

d) Sarah is studying environmental science and she and some of her friends, who have expressed fears for their own future on this planet, would like to start a group for people of all ages who share their concerns, and want to find ways to make a difference. She has suggested to her friends that the newly renovated church hall would be a warm and comfortable and environmentally friendly (and no cost!) place to meet.

After 2 weeks of listening to their community, the NCYC group members are bubbling over with stories and ideas. Lindy shares some of these ideas with the Church Council, and says that she will be encouraging the young people to participate in the service in two weeks time, and will ask them to tell their stories.

When, on the next Sunday, he hears that the young people will be sharing their stories in the service the following week, Stan asks if he can also tell his side of Ben’s story.

The congregation is challenged deeply by what the young people share. They are confronted first with the fears of young people about the future of the world they have participated in creating, and then with having to think through their own attitudes towards people of different faiths than theirs.

Finally, they are moved deeply by Stan’s account of what one of their young folk did for him. He talks about the despair he was feeling before his accident, and how Ben’s loving care for him at the time, and over the weeks after his accident, changed his attitude to life. He says that what Ben has done has had a “ripple effect” in his life, which is continuing. He has now joined a small group of people who live alone, that meets at the church hall on Wednesdays for lunch and a chat, and has made some good friends. He can now stand tall again, and doesn’t need his stick any more.

At a congregational meeting last week, the Watershed congregation has decided to call their community contact activities “The Ripple Programme”, and the minister and interested congregational members are following up the leads the young people have offered.



In that time he got to know a bit about his ground-hugging companion, Stan. Stan had no family near to Breakwater, so Ben offered to go with him in the ambulance. They had to wait in the hospital waiting room for 3 hours before Stan was attended to. Ben decided to skip classes for the afternoon, and waited until Stan was settled into a bed. He called back to see Stan after school the next day.. and the next... and the next .

Stan found out that Ben attended Watershed Uniting Church, and asked if he could come too. Ben talked to Lindy and, when Stan had recovered enough, they arranged for him to be picked up by a church member who lived close to him. Ben met Stan at the church door and introduced him to as many people as he could, and sat with him in church. Stan has returned each Sunday since.

b) Gillian is a student at the University and has met and formed a strong friendship with a couple of Muslim students. She talked with Lindy about her concerns about the Muslim religion. Lindy suggested that it might be possible to get her friends to come and talk to the NCYC group about Islam. When Gillian asked them, they were happy to come, and they asked if they could bring some other Muslim friends with them.

Lindy felt very positive about this request, and saw the potential for on-going dialogue between these young people of different faiths. She would like them to be able to use the hall facilities for a “peace circle”, a movement she had been part of in her previous parish. When she spoke to Council members, some of them were very dubious about making connections with a faith they had learned to distrust. One member sees Muslims as “enemies of Christ.” Lindy is all the more keen on setting up such a dialogue, not only for young people, but also for older members of the congregation. She believes that building understanding between people of different faiths is essential for peace in the world today.

c) Liam is working in a local store with an African refugee, who, he discovers, is a Christian. He is still very new to this country, and very shy. He says he is not ready to come to church on Sunday yet, because his English is not good, but, when Liam suggests he and his family could come to a group at the church, just to get to know a few people, he says, with tears in his eyes, that he is very lonely, and his family, though happy to be here, are really missing other family members and friends. He would like to come to the group. Liam wonders what his church will be able to offer his friend and his family.

Story 1: Little Winbig UCA

Little Winbig Uniting Church is an attractive, well-maintained church in one of the four main streets of a country town, about one hour’s drive from Winbig City. The 50-strong church is made up of older folk, the youngest being 61. Most of them have grown up in the area, going to the local area school, and then working on family farms or in local businesses. Their families also attended the school, which became a primary school, and subsequently they went in to Winbig City to high school. Many of them, on leaving school, chose to work and live in the city.

Some of the elder-folk from Little Winbig and the church have moved to Winbig Close, which is a retirement village about 10 minutes drive out of Winbig City, in order to have easier access to family, shops, entertainment and health facilities.

The Uniting Church is a close-knit group, and each time someone leaves or dies, the members feel it deeply. It is obvious that some of the older folk in the congregation need more support, particularly three who have been widowed in the last 12 months.

Six couples, the “younger set”, have grandchildren in the area and look after the children while their parents are at work. They also go to the monthly grandparents’ day at Little Winbig Primary School.

The school is on the same block as the church – about 5 minutes’ walk – and one of the teachers has expressed an interest in using the church and its spacious hall for school events while the school hall is being renovated, and has approached the Church Council about this possibility. Some of the members of the Council are afraid that things will be broken or go missing, and the property will be damaged. David, the new chairman, and his wife, Jill, two of whose grandchildren are attending the school, and who are both assisting with a reading programme (for children who are slower at learning), are very enthusiastic about building links with the school.

David and Jill also have a keen interest in a group (9 of them) of older teenagers, to which one of their older grandchildren belongs. When they are not at high school in the city, they often meet in an old shed on one of the parents’ farms, and rumour has it that they are involved with drug-taking. Some of these young people have met at David and Jill’s home, and started to talk about their lives, and their personal struggles with school and parents, to David and Jill. When church is mentioned, they say it is not their thing and it’s too boring and irrelevant.

David and Jill (she was a drama teacher in her earlier life) would like to start a drama group with these young people on Friday nights at the church, and are seeking the Church Council's support. They will initially need some funding to make the room they have chosen attractive and welcoming to the young folk, and are wanting to get the youngsters involved in setting it up. There is some youth group money available from a previous era, which the Council has considered using to put a dishwasher in the kitchen.

When asked by one of the church elders, Paul (who also has a grandchild in this teenage group), how they think they will be able to win these young people for Christ through a drama group, David and Jill told the Council that they will not be "evangelising" the young people in an overt way, and do not expect that they will become church members. Their aim is to assist them to come to terms with some of their life issues through acting them out. Paul says he cannot see how a drama group could help, and would rather have the money spent on the dishwasher. He thinks they'll probably bring some of their drugs with them, and that the church's good reputation in the community would be affected by encouraging this well-known group, some of whom are seen as trouble-makers, and allowing them to use the church's property.

Some of the other members of the congregation are also concerned about the risks of allowing the school and the drama group to use their property, which they have struggled to maintain as they have got older, but have managed to do well. In all this talk about the needs of young people, who don't belong to the church and probably never will, they feel their needs, as they get older and less able to contribute, are not being heard. They are looking forward to welcoming their new minister in a couple of months. She'll understand their need for a dish-washer!

The new minister (called to be part-time minister to Little Winbig UCA and part-time chaplain at Winbig Close) indicated in her conversations with the JNC and the congregation that her primary focus will be on the spiritual growth of congregational members: "Everything else depends on our growing relationship with the God who calls us to be Christ's body in the world."

of each committee meeting, at least while they had no minister to remind them. And that's what they did. Their goals were also displayed on the overhead screen before worship began each Sunday, so that the members of the congregation, too, understood the basis for their decision making.

When Lindy arrived, she was delighted to discover the integrated way in which her new church had maintained its focus on their agreed strategy 6 months after she had accepted the call, and she was able to begin her time of leadership with a training and support course for the leaders who were leading small faith-sharing groups once a month on Sunday morning before the worship service.

In her first year, Lindy focussed on fostering faith-sharing small groups that met weekly, and the Sunday groups changed to being daytime and night-time week-day groups, so that more people could attend. The programme varied from month to month, sometimes focussing on a Bible study, other times on people's own faith stories, or a book which gave insights for faith and life.

Now, in her second year, with these groups successfully established, Lindy is wanting to focus on connecting with the community.

She is delighted to find that a small group of older young people, who attended NCYC in January, want to continue to meet in the church hall weekly, and are looking for a challenge. After spending some time with them and listening to what has come out of NCYC for them, Lindy helps them to begin a process of listening to the wider community, seeking to find new and meaningful ways in which the church could make connections "out there" in the city. The following stories emerge:

a) Ben, a secondary college student, assigned himself the task of sitting in the mall on his own at lunch-time each day for two weeks. He noticed that discrimination was rife, and that people with disabilities, people from different ethnic backgrounds (particularly those with dark skin colour), and elderly folk were sometimes jostled and pushed and laughed at by younger people.

Ben was shocked when an elderly man on a stick was bumped into by a young person on a skateboard and knocked down. The young person did not stop. By the time Ben arrived at the man's side, someone nearer to him had called an ambulance. Ben offered to stay with him until the ambulance came. He was in a lot of pain. During the 10 minutes that it took for the ambulance to get there, Ben, was sitting on the pavers in the middle of the mall, propping the elderly gentleman's head on his knees, oblivious of the stares of passers by.

Story 5. Watershed

Watershed Uniting Church is one of the larger churches in the city of Breakwater. It currently has 150 members and the regular congregation on Sundays is around 90-120. The church building has undergone some renovations in the past two years and a new enlarged sanctuary area, opening up a couple of side rooms, and replacing walls and doors with room dividers, offers space for personal prayer and small group activities, as well as extending the possibilities for Sunday worship. As small group activities have become a significant part of the life of this congregation, the large and long re-lined hall has had its ceiling lowered and also has room dividers positioned for maximum flexibility, to create welcoming and comfortable- sized spaces, and for heat conservation. Heating and lighting and wall fittings have been changed appropriately (and with conservation in mind), and the walls have been re-painted in warm colours. Pictures and pin-up boards, and a few well-chosen symbols have been arranged artistically to create an atmosphere of warm hospitality and expectancy. A UCAF group has helped raise money for the comfortable and attractive chairs and modular connecting tables. New industrial carpet, purchased with the money raised from the selling of some old pews by the Property Committee, completes the picture. The spacious kitchen needs a bit of attention, but was renovated 10 years ago, and is seen as adequate for the present, though a new stainless steel kitchen is on the 3 year plan.

Rev. Lindy Newheart, the ordained minister, has been with the Watershed church now for just over a year. She is the first female minister they have had. Her call to Watershed was largely motivated, from both sides, by Lindy's conviction that small groups are essential for individual spiritual growth and learning, for building a sense of community, for pastoral care, and to grow churches.

Before Lindy came, the previous minister, Roger Stillgood, had helped the congregation to set goals for the future, and "small groups" had become a key strategy for achieving their congregation's goals of care, spiritual growth and contact with the wider community. Roger had stressed the need for all decisions of the congregation and its committees to be reviewed in the light of their new goals, so that the spiritual life of the church guided the way property was utilised and money was spent.

In the time between ministers, the Church Council members realised that they were losing sight of their goals in their decision making, and decided that the congregation's goals should be read at the beginning

Story 1: Session 1: Questions 1-5

Discerning the issues, putting yourself in other people's shoes, aiming for win / win, and finding growing edges

You will need to read the story a couple of times before answering the questions.

1. What are the issues for each age group mentioned?
2. Who do **you** identify with in this congregation and why?
3. Now, **put yourself in somebody else's shoes:**
Divide into pairs and each pair chooses a different one of the following people to identify with. (If you're feeling brave, you might like to choose someone you could not immediately identify with!):
 - a) One of the widows, **Olive**, who lost her husband, Ian, 4 months ago, and is desperately lonely, and tired of washing up at the church.
 - b) **David**, the chairman of the Church Council, and grandfather to one of the teenagers in the group (Ellen), who wants to begin to help her and her friends in a way that will enable changes in attitudes and personal growth. David also sees encouraging contact between the community and the church as an important part of his new role as chairman of the Church Council.
 - c) **Paul**, another grandfather, who believes his grandson, Jamie, needs more parental discipline, not a drama group, and prays for his conversion every night. He is having problems in his relationship with his son and daughter-in-law, who do not go to church, although they profess some belief..
 - d) A church member, **Graham**, who has faithfully attended working-bees and church services for 40 years, and is afraid the church which has meant so much to him, will have to close in the near future. His prayers are that some younger people will come to the church and will take on some of the responsibilities, which he and others are now no longer able to fulfil. He is worried about letting the school use the church hall.
 - e) **Margaret**, the new minister, who will arrive in 2 months' time, with her sense of God's call renewed by this new placement that she and the JNC are very happy with.

Firstly: In pairs explore how your person, out of the list above, might feel about the current issues to be decided upon at Little Winbig UCA. Fill the gaps with your imagination. (One of the pair might like to speak as if they were that person when they return to the whole group.)

Secondly: Each pair shares their insights into their person with the whole group.

4. Discuss as a whole group: Can the needs and / or hopes of each of these different but valuable church folk be met? (ie a “win-win” outcome, not win/ lose!). If so, how? If not, why not?
5. Where are the growing edges of this congregation’s ministry?

Story 1: Session 2: Questions 6-10

Getting our feet wet: taking risks: spiritual growth and extravagant hospitality

Before you begin, you will need to read the story again to refresh the memories of group members.

6. What are the assets / gifts this church has to share?
7. a) If we see these assets as gifts from God to be used to bring God’s kingdom of love, joy, peace and justice into the world, what difference does this make to the way we might use these gifts? How might they be used? (ie make suggestions)
b) Who are the people in this story, who seem to have a more Christ-like perspective, and how have you discerned this?

8. *Spiritual growth is about growing up in our love for God and our neighbours. It’s about developing our relationship with God, being open to God’s guidance and seeking God’s will for our lives. It’s about learning from each other how to live a life of faith, and praying with and for each other. It’s about growing in wisdom and understanding and love of other people. It’s about change – about forgiving and letting go and moving on. It’s about learning what really matters to God, and acting on this understanding. It’s about being willing to face our own insecurity about change, stepping out in faith, and risking the way of Jesus.*

- a) If all of this is true, which attitudes need to change at Little Winbig UCA and why?
- b) How do you imagine spiritual growth could be encouraged in this church community?

9. *Jesus offers us the hospitality of being the branches of his vine. He offers to dwell in us, so that we may dwell in God (“I in you and you in me”)– always and forever. That is extravagant hospitality. Then we are told to “Love as I have loved you – by this shall others know that you are my disciples.”*

Questions for Story 4: Gift of Grace:

1. What are the issues raised by Anna Kingsman’s letter?
2. How are you challenged personally by this letter?
3. You, as a group, become the Church Council at Windy Hill UCA:
 - a) How could \$80,000 be used to help to give young people some hope for the future, as Anna requested?
 - b) What will you do with the money? Does the organ win?
4. Together, draft a response to Anna’s letter.

Sequel to Gift of Grace story:

Anna’s Mum, Phyllis, found a copy of the letter under Anna’s mattress. She decided to talk to Anna about it. She told Anna that, although she hadn’t agreed with Grandad giving all that money to the church, they had to respect his decision and couldn’t tell the church how to spend it. She told Anna how embarrassed she had felt that Anna had told the church people that she (Phyllis) was angry about them not visiting Grandad, and was upset about the money going to the church.

Phyllis insisted that they should ring Mabel, Anna’s Sunday School teacher, and ask her to apologise to the Council for Anna’s letter. Anna was not impressed! Her Mum rang anyway.

When Phyllis rang Mabel, Mabel told her that Anna’s letter was the best thing that could have happened to them, and that the Council had had some very interesting discussions since they received the letter. She said that the Council would be writing a reply to Anna, but she would like to talk with both of them about what Anna had said about giving young people hope in today’s world. She said that the church is not very good at knowing how to do this, and needs to listen to young people like Anna.

They have arranged a time for Anna and Phyllis to visit Mabel in the next week.

Question 5:

- a) Mabel seeks guidance from the Council about what she should say to Anna and her Mum. If you were in Mabel’s shoes, what would you want to say? You might like to role play the meeting between Anna, Phyllis and Mabel.
- b) In the light of the new information, would you change your letter?
- c) Write your own ending to this story.

When you are my age and nearly all you hear about on the news and in newspapers is about people hurting and murdering each other in wars, and about global warming, which we're learning about at school, you get scared. Grandad used to say that if we all learned how to forgive each other there would be no wars, and that greed and not respecting God's creation is the reason for global warming. He used to say that the church should be teaching people how to live in God's way of loving each other and all the other people who are different from us, instead of spending so much time and money on old buildings. But he believed that one day God would show people in the church what was really important. He said they needed to get to know God better and that Jesus is the one who can show us what God is really like. I'd love to meet him. I think my grandfather did.

I just wanted to tell you what my grandfather said. I think he would like you to spend the money on giving people like me some hope for the future, and teaching us how to love people we don't particularly like (I've got two in my class at school!) and how to forgive. Then maybe there will be some hope for the world. I read the book "The Power of One" at school, and that's why I'm writing to you. I'd like to think I can make a difference. I'd like to get to know God better. Can you help me?

I would love it if you could reply to my letter in writing, so that I can think about what you have written. It might help, now Grandad has gone.

*Yours sincerely,
Anna Kingsman*

PS I came to your church once after Grandad died. You had 4 readings from the Bible – 2 from the Old Testament. One was about a war God told the Israelites to fight. It was awful. Did God really tell them to kill their enemies? Grandad told me that "Thou shalt not kill" is one of the Ten Commandments. Excuse me for saying this, but somebody said at the end of the reading – "This is the word of the Lord" - and everybody said "Thanks be to God". I was shocked. No wonder there are so many wars and the Middle East is such a mess. I read the Sermon on the Mount to my grandfather many times. It was one of his favourite passages, and I learnt this bit where Jesus said to love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. He talked a lot about forgiveness. I don't think reading such stories about God telling people to fight wars is going to help the world today. I wonder whether God really did say these things? I don't think he would. That's not love.

Write down as many ideas as you can think of for the ways that Little Winbig UCA might be able to offer "extravagant hospitality" to such people in their community as-

- a) the local school
- b) Winbig Close
- c) young people
- d) lonely and grieving people
- e) people who are ageing
- f) local church folk
- g) ??????

Finally: Question 10

What changes do you think this church could make during the next couple of years?

Prepare a plan. Seek the affirmation of each of your group members (not just the loudest voices!) for each Initiative before you move on to the next. Seek consensus, don't assume it! Be yourselves. (ie this is not a role play!).



Story 2: Edgecliff Uniting (St. Matthews)

St. Matthews is a “traditional” Uniting Church in Edgecliff, an attractive seaside town that is undergoing considerable change and growth from the arrival of a many “sea changers”. Some of them are now attending St. Matthews.

The church is situated on a 5 acre block of land above the beach, and has a magnificent view over the town and the beach and ocean. It is often used for weddings because of its ideal situation. The locals take great pride in this stately church, built in 1908, with its bell-tower and its lovely gardens. The church’s quarterly working bees have, in the past, been a community and family event, when the church folk have put on a free barbecue lunch for all who came to help. St. Matthews features in tourist brochures, and is visited often by tourists and locals.

St. Matthews has a kindergarten operating on part of the church’s property, which is closed to the church on weekdays, but can be used for Sunday School activities on the weekend. There is also a safe enclosed playground.

The older generation of church members have worked long and hard to establish and maintain sound and valuable buildings, and have a reputation in the town for their “good works”. In the past, St Matthews has been one of the largest churches in the town, with over 200 members, including a number of young families.

Recently a young couple and their family, who have arrived in Edgecliff from South Australia, have started a new “Community Church”, with their family band and “with it’ music, in a renovated warehouse near the beach only two blocks away, and 11 of the young families from St. Matthews have moved over to this new church in the last 6 months, leaving a large gap in the younger age group at St. Matthews.

Some of the middle-aged and early retired “sea changers” who have joined St. Matthews have come with some radical ideas, and two couples have suggested that the church’s property could be developed with a coffee-shop / café / craft shop in the centre of the extensive gardens on the sea side of the property (the opposite side to the kindergarten).

and he got so tired. Why does God let these awful things happen to people?

My Grandad thought the Uniting Church was great, but he couldn’t get there any more, so he stopped going 10 years ago. My Dad stopped going to church when he left home to go to University. I think he still believes in God, but he doesn’t talk about him. Mum’s family never went to church, and she says that she finds it all very confusing, and she thinks that living a good life is what Jesus is on about, so why does she need to go to church? She has been working for a financial advisor who goes to church, but she says he seems to have no moral scruples. I’m not quite sure what she means by that and she doesn’t want to talk about it, but she’s looking for another job.

When Grandad died we all went to his funeral at your church, which was very sad. There were lots of people there. I didn’t know so many people knew my grandfather. I learnt a lot about his life that he didn’t talk about. He helped a lot of people before he got sick.

After we got home, my Mum and Dad were talking about Grandad and said that he had left a lot of money to the church - \$80,000! They didn’t sound very happy about it, and Mum said that she isn’t impressed that Grandad left so much money to the church, especially since nobody visited him.

I hope my mother forgives Grandad and forgives the church. Grandad used to talk a lot about forgiveness. He called it a ‘gift of grace’. I don’t really know what grace is yet, but it sounds good. I think my grandfather was one of the best people in the world. I loved him very much. I like to think he was a gift of grace to me from God.

I hope you don’t mind me writing to you, and my mum and dad do not know I have written this letter. Please don’t tell them.

I’ve been thinking about how I would spend \$80,000 if I was part of the church, and I thought that you might like to know some of my ideas. Grandfather said that when we were making decisions we should always ask ‘what would Jesus do’, and then you might have some hope of coming up with the right answer. I think my grandfather might like me to tell you this, but I guess you know it already because you belong to the church and know more about Jesus than I do.

Story 4: Gift of Grace

Background information

Windy Hill UCA folk have been having problems with their pipe organ. They have had a specialist in to look at it, and he says repairs will cost around \$80,000. The Church Council members have been considering ways in which they can raise this amount of money, and are finding it hard going. This problem is symptomatic. Their once beautiful city church which seated 400 people, is ageing, as they are, and before long they will need to paint the whole of the inside of the church. It's looking a bit shabby. There are 120 members currently on the role, but usually between 50 and 70 attend each Sunday, except on special occasions. Despair is setting in.....

Until suddenly they receive a bequest of \$80,000 from someone who has not been to church for 10 years. Council members are ecstatic – a gift from God!

They are meeting to decide when and how they will get the organ fixed, when the secretary, Mabel, who has in the past been an inspirational teacher and Sunday School teacher and is passionate about children, says she has a letter she would like to read before they begin.

This is the letter she has received:

***4 Invitation Avenue,
Sonsborough 8927***

***Windy Hill Uniting Church
20th July 2008***

***Dear church people,
I don't know much about church, but I went to Sunday School at Windy Hill when I was in kindergarten. I know there are some kind people there, so I decided to write you this letter.***

My name is Anna Kingsman, and I'm 15 years old. I want to tell you about my grandfather, Arthur Kingsman. He died about 3 month ago, and I miss him terribly. We had a special friendship, and it is hard to live without him.

Grandfather read his Bible every day, and when he got really sick, he asked me to read it to him. He had multiple sclerosis, which is a very sad disease. He couldn't walk or eat by himself at the end,

Another new couple, Jeanette and Peter, have suggested starting small faith-sharing groups during the week, and they talk a lot about spiritual growth. Peter had originally felt a call to ministry, but had been pressured by his parents and others into doing medicine at University. After a couple of years, he left medicine to do a doctorate in clinical psychology. He and a couple of friends have bought a practice in Clifftown, about half an hour's drive from Edgecliff. Jeanette and Peter are both trained lay-preachers.

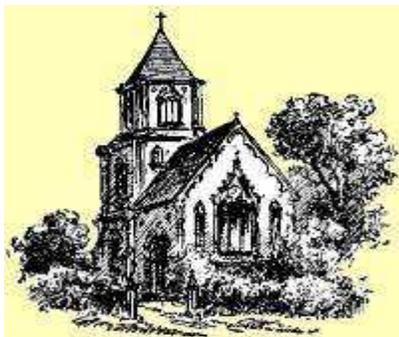
Although some of the church folk are excited by this influx of new members, and the consequent flow of new ideas, some of the older members and elders are finding the changes in their town and church difficult. It is all happening too quickly, and they feel a deep sense of loss of the old and familiar, including the loss of their young families to the Community Church. The last thing they want at this point in time is more change. They are wanting to focus on organising their church's centenary celebrations in November, and have asked that no changes be made before then, and that all the church's efforts be put into this significant community event, and into celebrating the history of their beautiful church. Understandably, the new members are not as excited about this as those who have been in the church for generations.

The minister, Rev. Steve, who is in his fifth year of ministry at St. Matthews, is trying to see things from the differing points of view. He has had a regular Bible study group going since he first arrived, but it has only half a dozen of the older members attending now and is a bit tired, and he is trying to think of a way to end it without causing offence. He is happy that new people are coming to St. Matthews and bringing new ideas and skills, but is still feeling very much the loss of the 11 families to the Community Church, as are the Sunday School leaders, who only have 10 children left out of 32. He is concerned about the future of his church and its grounds, and has recently been approached by a JNC in Victoria to begin a conversation with the parish about becoming their new minister. He does not want to leave, but is feeling tired, and wonders whether it would be better for his church to have a new minister with a fresh perspective and new energy for change. He secretly wonders whether he contributed to the loss of the 11 families. The parish folk, of course, are unaware that their hard-working and generally popular minister has been approached by a JNC.

Steve's wife and 2 daughters (12 and 15 years old) like living in Edgecliff, and have many friends here. They want to stay. Clare (15) would like her Dad to start a youth group for her friends. There's not much to do in Edgecliff on Friday nights, so she'd like to help her Dad create a programme that her friends would enjoy and benefit from. One has just started drug-taking, another runs away from home often and drinks too much alcohol, another has been sexually abused by an uncle. She knows they won't come to church, but thinks they would come to St. Matthews if there was a youth group. Steve is a little daunted by the prospect of starting a youth group when his energies are running low, and is looking for someone else to do it .

Less people are attending the working bees now, and more work is falling on just a few. Maintaining the buildings is expensive, and some of the young families who left were committed givers. The newcomers are more concerned about paying off the houses they have built or bought recently. There had been a policy to keep kindergarten fees at a minimum, so that some of the more disadvantaged parents in the area, who could not afford to pay for their children to go to the larger kindergarten on the other side of town, could continue to use it. One of the Church Council members has recently suggested that the fees should go up, so that the extra income can go into maintaining the buildings and grounds, and employing a full-time gardener.

Rev. Steve has indicated that he is not happy about this suggestion for raising funds, but is willing to consider other proposals / ideas.



understanding. It's about being willing to face our own insecurity about change, stepping out in faith, and risking the way of Jesus.

- a) If all of this is true, which attitudes might need to change among the people in the story and why?
- b) How do you imagine spiritual growth could be encouraged in these church communities?

9. Jesus offers us the hospitality of being the branches of his vine. He offers to dwell in us, so that we may dwell in God ("I in you and you in me")— always and forever. That is extravagant hospitality. Then we are told to "Love as I have loved you – by this shall others know that you are my disciples."

Write down as many ideas as you can for the ways in which Cowmeadow and Sheepsfold UCAs might be able to offer "extravagant hospitality" to their communities –

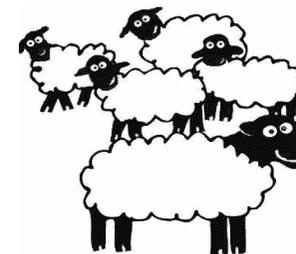
- a) separately
- b) by combining the two churches at Sheepsfold

Finally: Question 10

Can you think of creative ways to overcome the renewed and heightened tensions between the Sheepsfold and Cowmeadow churches, and to move forward?

What would your group like to do with this situation?

Try to come to an agreement after each person has expressed their opinion. Make a consensus decision if you can.



centres on the needs of her community, and she would like to see Sheepsfold church and hall developed as a place where people can meet and encourage and support each other. She was dismayed when plans for combining the two churches were disrupted by Rev. Wiseman's letter, and is trying to be open to God's will in this changing scenario.

Firstly: In pairs explore how your person, out of the list above, might be feeling about the current issues to be decided upon in the Sheepsfold and Cowmeadow churches. Fill the gaps with your imagination. (One of the pair might like to speak as if they were that person when they return to the whole group.)

Secondly: Each pair shares their insights into their person with the whole group.

4. Discuss as a whole group: Can the needs and / or hopes of each of these different but valuable church folk be met? (ie a "win-win" outcome, not win/ lose!). If so, how? If not, why not? Be creative!
5. Where are the growing edges of this congregation's ministry?

Story 3: Session 2: Questions 6-10

Getting our feet wet: taking risks: Spiritual Growth and Extrava-gant Hospitality

Before you begin, you will need to read the story again to refresh the memories of group members.

6. What are the assets/ gifts these 2 churches have to share? (Use your imagination to fill the gaps.)
7. a) If we see these assets as gifts from God to be used to bring God's kingdom of love, joy, peace and justice into the world, what difference does this make to the way we might use these gifts? How might they be used? (ie make suggestions)
b) Who are the people in this story, who seem to have a more Christ-like perspective, and how have you discerned this?
8. ***Spiritual growth is about growing up in our love for God and our neighbours. It's about developing our relationship with God, being open to God's guidance and seeking God's will for our lives. It's about learning from each other how to live a life of faith, and praying with and for each other. It's about growing in wisdom and understanding and love of other people. It's about change – about forgiving and letting go and moving on. It's about learning what really matters to God, and acting on this***

Story 2 : Session 1: Questions 1-5

Discerning the issues, putting yourself in other people's shoes, aiming for win / win, and finding growing edges

You will need to read the story a couple of times before answering the questions.

1. What are the issues for each group mentioned?
2. Who do **you** identify with in this congregation and why?
3. Now, put yourself in somebody else's shoes:
Divide into pairs and each pair chooses a different one of the following with whom to identify:
 - a) **Rev Steve**, who is tired and wondering whether it would be better for the congregation if he leaves. He doesn't want to, and neither does his family, but he still feels badly about the 11 young families who have left. Also, through pastorally caring for some of the parents of the kindergarten children, he understands their needs and feels the church should be generous with the fees, and do its fund-raising in other ways.
 - b) **Jeanette, wife of Peter, the psychologist**, who is a deeply spiritual person, and is aware of the various needs of the different groups at St. Matthews. She believes that starting faith-sharing groups, in which individuals are able to share their personal stories, will help people to understand each other better, and will help them to grow through this time of change. She has the skills and is happy to lead.
 - c) **Gerald, the chairman of the Property Committee**, who has spent quite a large slice of his lifetime keeping St. Matthews church buildings and gardens beautiful, and now has back problems which make it difficult for him to help at all. He is very keen on employing a full-time gardener, so that he doesn't have to worry about the gardens any more. He'd like to spend more time travelling with his wife, Eileen. It is his suggestion that the kindergarten fees be raised. He is also on the centenary committee.
 - d) **Mavis, who, with her husband, Bert, has recently moved to Edgecliff** and would like to find somewhere to sell her needlework projects and quilts. She would love to start a craft group for the community at the church, and has managed a craft shop in her earlier life, which was so successful that it gave a percentage of its profits to UCA mission projects overseas.
 - e) **Claire (15), the minister's daughter**, who is very concerned about some of her friends and schoolmates, and wants her father to start a youth group.

Firstly: In pairs explore how your person, out of the list above, might be feeling about the current issues to be decided upon at St. Matthews. Fill the gaps with your imagination. (One of the pair might like to speak as if they were that person when they return to the whole group.)

Secondly: Each pair shares their insights into their person with the whole group.

4. Discuss as a whole group: Can the needs and / or hopes of each of these different but valuable church folk be met? (I.e. win/win rather than win/lose) If so, how? If not, why not?

5. Where are the growing edges of this congregation's ministry?

Story 2 :Session 2: Questions 6-10

Getting our feet wet: taking risks: spiritual growth and extravagant hospitality

Before you begin, you will need to read the story again to refresh the memories of group members.

6. What are the assets/ gifts this church has to share?

7. a) If we see these assets as gifts from God to be used to bring God's kingdom of love, joy, peace and justice into the world, what difference does this make to the way we use these gifts?
b) Who are the people in this story, who seem to have a more Christ-like perspective?

8. Spiritual growth is about growing up in our love for God and our neighbours. It's about developing our relationship with God, being open to God's guidance and seeking God's will for our lives. It's about learning from each other how to live a life of faith, and praying with and for each other. It's about growing in wisdom and understanding and love of other people. It's about change – about forgiving and letting go and moving on. It's about learning what really matters to God, and acting on this understanding. It's about being willing to face our own insecurity about change, stepping out in faith, and risking the way of Jesus.

- a) If all of this is true, what attitudes need to change at Edgecliff UCA and why?
b) How do you imagine spiritual growth could be encouraged in this church community?

9. Jesus offers us the hospitality of being the branches of his vine. He offers to dwell in us, so that we may dwell in God ("I in you and you in me")– always and forever. That is extravagant hospitality.

Story 3: Session 1: Questions 1-5

Discerning the issues, putting yourself in other people's shoes, aiming for win / win, and finding growing edges

You will need to read the story a couple of times before answering the questions.

1. What are the issues for each of the two churches?
2. Who do **you** identify with in these congregations and why?

3. Now, **put yourself in somebody else's shoes:**

Divide into pairs and each pair chooses a different one of the following people to identify with. (If you're feeling brave, you might like to choose someone you could not immediately identify with!)

a) **Rev. Lightfoot**, - His life is full of divided loyalties, which include his loyalty and commitment to his own church at Hopesburrow, as well as his divided loyalties between Sheepsfold and Cowmeadow churches. He had hoped that the latter was no longer a problem, but, with recent developments on the property front, tensions have heightened again, and he now finds his relationship with Rev. Wiseman also hangs in the balance.

b) **Albert Longfellow** (75) – He is a lay-preacher at Sheepsfold UCA, who does not like change. He has been happy with the way his church has continued the traditions of his childhood and does not understand why the church membership numbers have been dropping off. He is a sincere evangelist, and a genuinely caring person, but believes Armageddon can't be too far away. There is not much he likes about the modern world, and change to him is a worldly thing.

c) A member of the Cowmeadow congregation, **Rita**, - She is close friends with Rev. Robert Wiseman and his wife, Ruth, and, although earlier having resigned herself to the inevitability of becoming part of the Sheepsmeadow congregation, is now delighted that there is a possibility that Cowmeadow church might be saved from extinction by these friends. She has had a lot to do with the refurbishment of the kitchen and toilets, and loves the possible new name, "Daisy Creek Uniting". She also has another friend who will be moving in to one of the new units down the road from the church. She is one of the two elders at Cowmeadow UCA, and one of the stalwarts of the Cowmeadow community.

d) The youngest member of Sheepsfold UCA, **Irene** (53) – She is a deeply spiritual person, and has been concerned about earlier divisions in her community, and the drought situation. Her prayer life

it would be possible to seek Presbytery's approval to renovate their kitchen and hall with some of the money from selling the Cowmeadow church. They had even thought about extending the centrally situated hall to create a larger space for community events, as there is no community hall in Sheepsfold and this need has been deeply felt during the drought. And they were looking forward to increasing their numbers with the addition of the Cowmeadow members.

One of the Sheepsfold Church Council members, John Upton, who used to be a builder and is also a member of Presbytery, hears that the developer at Cowmeadow, who is building the units near the church, is looking for some more land along Daisy Creek on which to build 8 more units, as there has been a lot of interest in the first 8. He knows that the developer will pay well for the church land, which is in an ideal location, but the church would have to be demolished. He believes that the Presbytery should take advantage of this sound economic opportunity, and that Sheepsfold church should be developed, with some of the sale profits, as the Uniting Church in this rural community. When he is told of Rev. Wiseman's letter, he says that this gifted retired minister would be a great asset to Sheepsfold church, which, after all, is only 10 kilometres from Cowmeadow.

Rev. Wiseman is not impressed with this "paternalistic attitude", and says that if the decision is made on "purely economic" grounds, he will leave the Uniting Church and he and his wife will attend the Cowmeadow Baptist Church, which is just around the corner from where their unit is being built.

Rev. Lightfoot is torn between loyalty to his much-respected friend, Rev. Wiseman, and his friend's retirement dream, and the potential he himself sees for developing the Sheepsfold church property as an asset to the whole community. He is afraid that conflicting loyalties in these two churches may bring any new development to a halt, and leave the churches in a worse position than they were in before discussions about change began.



Then we are told to "Love as I have loved you – by this shall others know that you are my disciples."

Write down as many ideas as you can think of for the ways that St. Matthews might be able to offer "extravagant hospitality" to such people in their community as the following:

- a) the parents of the kindergarten children
- b) the new Community Church
- c) Claire's friends
- d) Sea-changers
- e) older members of the community, feeling displaced / threatened by change
- f) tourists
- g) their own church folk
- h) others ????

Finally: Question 10

What changes do you think this church could make during the next couple of years?

Prepare a plan. Seek the affirmation of each of your group members (not just the loudest voices) for each initiative before you move on to the next. Seek consensus, don't assume it!

Be yourselves. (ie This is not a role play.)



Story 3: Sheepsfold Uniting

Sheepsfold Uniting Church is situated in a small country town at least an hour and a half's drive from a city. It used to be the Methodist Church, and there was a lot of resistance to changing the name to "Uniting", and to joining with the Presbyterian church at Cowmeadow, 10 kilometers away. So it didn't happen. But both rural communities have undergone hard times with "The Drought" since, and they have pulled together in ways which have built relationships and broken down barriers and the competitive spirit that divided them. This new co-operative spirit in the community has infected the church, and the church folk are now discussing how they can move forward together.

Until now, the churches at Cowmeadow and at Sheepsfold have both maintained their separate services, their old hymn books, and their own traditions and worship style, and not much has changed since before 1977, except that there are now only 30 members at Sheepsfold and 17 at Cowmeadow and most members are "ageing". Since 1987, they have not had a minister of their own, and are now part of the Hopesburrow parish. Each has the minister from Hopesburrow, the closest larger town, leading one service a month. At first, both churches tried to continue with weekly services, but, as church members got older and some of their leaders and lay preachers died, they both changed to holding alternating fortnightly services, and so it is.

Annually, Sheepsfold Uniting holds a "Blessing of the Fleece" service in its church, a tradition continued from its Methodist days. In the past a large proportion of the community attended, and the church was bursting with happy people, but numbers have been diminishing, and Rev. Jacob Lightfoot from Hopesburrow wants to make some radical changes. He thinks that numbers are dwindling because people cannot relate to the old church building and the style in which the service is conducted, and he wants to move the next "Blessing of the Fleece" service out into the community, where it can also develop a more ecumenical flavour. He has already spoken to the Anglican and Catholic priests who have oversight of their respective Sheepsfold congregations, and they are very keen on participating, and encouraging their "flock" to do the same.

One of the older and very dedicated lay preachers from Sheepsfold, Albert Longfellow, is adamant that, if the service is not in a church anymore, it will lose its sacredness and become more and more secularised. He's seen this happen to the Anzac Day service, and he doesn't want this to happen to his church's one annual community event. Albert is a retired sheep farmer, and has always loved the sacred

symbolism of the service, and its evangelistic potential. One of his neighbours is now a committed member at Sheepsfold Uniting after attending a "Blessing of the Fleece" service 12 years ago.

Recently, there has been new and positive talk with the Presbytery of combining the Cowmeadow congregation with Sheepsfold, and selling the smaller of the two churches at Cowmeadow. But, contrary to trends elsewhere, a developer has decided to build some retirement units in Cowmeadow, in a beautiful and peaceful area next to Daisy Creek, a creek that is named for the abundance of daisies of all kinds which flourish on its banks. Cowmeadow Uniting Church also faces onto the creek and is on an acre block only 6 housing blocks away from where the new development is about to begin. (The creek slowed down considerably during the drought, but it has never been known to dry up.)

A couple of the people who are buying these units are known to church members, and have indicated their delight that the church is so close to where they are going to live. One is a retired Uniting Church minister, Rev. Robert Wiseman, who is very keen on attending the church and doing some preaching. He already has some ideas about how Cowmeadow Uniting can offer care and friendship to the 13 residents in the new units, and he and his wife, Ruth, are both looking forward to putting their energies into this little church. They are not concerned about numbers, but see this picturesque little church, in its quiet and lovely position next to Daisy Creek, and with its newly renovated kitchen and toilets, as an ideal place to encourage church people from the city and surrounding townships to come for picnics and retreat days. They have also wondered, in their wildest moments, whether part of the church's large block could be used to build some comfortable and inexpensive accommodation where people could stay for a few nights, or to park campers or caravans or/ and tents.

Rev. Wiseman knows Rev. Lightfoot well, and is devastated to hear that there is new talk of selling the Cowmeadow Church. He has written a letter to the Presbytery and Church Council about his hopes and dreams for "Daisy Creek Uniting", his new name for the church he longs to be part of and minister to. He says he and his wife feel called to this retirement ministry and that he cannot afford to buy the church, but he would give his services freely in helping to develop a new kind of ministry there.

The Cowmeadow Uniting Church folk are delighted to hear about this turn of events, but the Sheepsfold folk are not. They had hoped