

# A catalyst for renewal

July 20, 2022

Rev Mat Harry was in his 20s when he first came to faith. As he made the decision to be baptised, Mat says he felt a strong call to ministry. At the time, it was the last thing he wanted to do with his life, but he went on to train as a minister and was ordained in the Uniting Church at 33.

The experience of growing up unchurched has given Mat a unique perspective on Christian community. Now as the 'New and Renewing Communities Catalyst' in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, his job is to help others think outside the box about what it means to 'be' and 'do' church.

"I've often felt I bring this experience of being an outsider," says Mat. "I love Christian community and I love all that it can be, but there are so many cultural aspects of the Uniting Church that do my head in."

For Mat, if the Uniting Church is to be serious about making space for new and renewing forms of Christian community it needs to rethink some of the deeply ingrained ideas of what it means to gather and worship together. To take the risk to reimagine what might be.

In his first congregational placement, Mat was given a mandate to, "send the congregation out into the community."

"I was told it was the last roll of the dice for this community."

However, when Mat arrived at Hampton Park Uniting Church, he discovered that in fact the opposite was true. The congregation was operating two child care centres, two kindergartens and a playgroup. They already held a lot of trust within their community. They just didn't know how to use those relationships.

So, rather than rebuild the run-down church building, the congregation instead built a new community centre. A kitchen was placed in the middle of the space - a symbol of hospitality being at the centre of Christian community.

The community centre was named "Uniting Place". It was a hub of practical support, pastoral care and points of connection for the community. The role of the congregation was to provide the community. Over time, they developed 15 collaborative relationships with the wider community. On a Thursday, there was a food pantry, a music program and a two-course sit-down meal. More than 200 people came through the doors. They also began a new faith community that would gather for worship on a Wednesday night.

"What we do well as the church is caring for people and loving people, and that's what we need to concentrate on," says Mat.

The experience taught Mat that many faith communities already have a strong presence within their local community, either through missional activities or individual relationships.

“Quite often people take for granted the good stuff they are doing. The relationships are already there, it’s just a matter of knowing how to leverage those relationships and cast a vision for people to get onboard.”

Four years ago Mat began his role with eLM (equipping Leadership for Mission) in the Synod of Vic/Tas.

It followed a strategic review in the Synod which led to a focus on “the identity of Jesus Christ and Christianity in a post Christendom world” and a strategic priority of “ministry which fosters diverse gathered communities of renewal, Christian practice and mission.”

“Our theology of new and renewing ministries is informed by the story of Pentecost in which the Gospel of Christ is translated into the languages of those present (Acts 2:1-13),” Mat explains.

“All who were present heard the stories of God’s deeds of power in their own language. Today the church needs to respond to Christ’s leading in being adaptable in living and proclaiming the Gospel – embodied by the Christian Community – in ways and languages that make sense to all people.”

“The term New and Renewing encapsulates this movement of the Spirit that is sometimes referred to as Fresh Expressions and Emerging Church within other denominations. However, ‘New and Renewing’ is a uniquely Uniting Church terminology. It encompasses the action of new Christian communities being established for mission in order for the Gospel to be embodied by a community.”

“The renewal aspect invites existing communities to take seriously the “identity of Jesus Christ and Christianity in a post-Christendom world” and reimagine their life and practice with the context of their local community in mind. Ideally this will involve collaborative mission and service alongside the broader community.”

In his role, Mat works closely with individual congregations and faith communities. He sends emails that include stories, videos and resources. As part of the eLM team, there is monthly coaching of practitioners and leadership teams.

Mat says a big challenge for the Uniting Church is to move beyond what he describes as “institutional depression” based on a narrative of declining numbers.

“There’s a general sense of malaise around the place and a sense that we’re all failing. But that doesn’t have to be our story. There are many examples of innovation that are bearing fruit.”

“A really important question for Uniting Church communities is to ask who it exists for? Are people from the wider community joining in? If not, why not? Are the entry points obvious and welcoming?”

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, Mat played a big role in supporting communities to pivot to new technologies and ways of working to keep people connected.

“It was a fantastic example of innovation. A lot of people realised we can do things differently and now there’s a lot more energy and enthusiasm for that to happen.”

He gives the example of Heathcote Uniting Church where Bronwyn Jones and John Robertson began sharing worship and daily reflections on Facebook Live, building an online presence that connected their faith community and drew in others from further afield.

It is just one example of the exciting things taking place, says Mat.

“Our task – as has always been the task in every age and for every disciple – is to live and share the story of Jesus within the place we are planted. Therefore, congregational life needs to be ever adapting, and therefore innovative, in order to respond to the changes within our broader context.”

"God is always waiting on people faithful enough to be optimistic and bold enough to take the next step."

It is a wonderfully rich invitation. New and renewed community life is possible. Go seize the day!

#### **4 QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN THINKING ABOUT INNOVATION**

- Are people from the wider community joining in? If not, why not?
- Does the worship style we offer engage and enliven people for discipleship? Does the worship style primarily suit us?
- Are our people confident and happy to invite people to explore Christian spirituality within our community?
- How would people connect with our church community? Are the entry points obvious and welcoming?

If you would like to find out more, contact Mat at [mat.harry@victas.uca.org.au](mailto:mat.harry@victas.uca.org.au)

**WATCH SOME OF THE STORIES MAT HAS COLLECTED BELOW** and [more here](#).

#### **Stories**

Our New Ways video series showcases five examples of churches attempting new or renewed ways of being. We hope these short stories inspire you to think about the possibilities within the contexts that God has located you.

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SOUTH

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