

Presbytery of North East Victoria
Chairperson's letter of Encouragement, July 2026

Hello friends,

It is quite early in the morning, and I have been sitting here in the warmth of my little room, wondering how you are feeling about the state of the world. I am wondering if you have the same sense of dis-ease that I am feeling. In some ways, things are as they have always been. There have always been wars and rumours of wars, there have always been power struggles. I know that we see and hear a lot more than we used, and that this alters our perception, but still, things are moving and they are moving in a particular direction.

I try to make sense of what is happening, though sense is not quite the right word, I try to understand and then to shape some sort of response. In the light of what is happening what should my life be like, in the light of the gospel of Jesus, what should my attitudes and actions be? This is the Uniting Church so I can't (and don't want) to speak for you or tell you what to think or to do. All I can do is point you to the gospel, the good news of Jesus and trust you for the rest.

Right now, it seems to me, we are all being challenged to reassess, to recapture, the essence of what it is to be a follower of Jesus and I want to begin that reassessment with what it means to be part of the community, the little communities that gather around Jesus - to ask the question what is a congregation? Well, this is the Uniting Church and there is, inevitably, a definition and a regulation and I know what they say, but I want to ask us all to think about what comes before definition and regulation and what comes after.

Have you noticed that the Spirit of God, that enticing, inviting Spirit, draws together people who are different from each other - people who would not otherwise be together. Paul often gets bad press, but he really nailed it when he said *neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one on Christ*. The point is that for him to say this there had to be Greek and Jew, male and female, slave and free who all came together, as we do, with all our differences - those Paul names and more. They, as we, had to find a way to live together, supporting one another, giving dignity to one another.

Living in small communities, or even a larger ones, with the same people, year after year, all our differences, all our annoying habits, all our weaknesses become very, very, obvious. Like dodgem cars at the show we bang up against one another, and quite often live our lives striving for power over one another - we all like to win though we often call it something else - but this is the very thing that God in Christ asks us to set aside in the quest to be life-giving as God is life giving.

There are scholars who would offer a different understanding of the first words of the Bible...*In the beginning God created*. They would say that the words in their original language mean something more like *through wisdom creation begins, through wisdom existence takes form* - in which case we are left asking: "What is wisdom and how do we act wisely?" The clue for us lies in that Jesus is a wisdom teacher - wisdom is what he teaches and what he teaches is: love one another; be life-giving to one another as God is life-giving to us.

So, what is a congregation? I think it is group of people, generally very different from one another, drawn together by the Spirit, who against all the odds, against all current trends, are to treat one another with loving kindness, to build-up one another, to lift and protect one another. What is a congregation? A group of people who fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle each incomplete without the other. It is people who have a commitment to live in ways that are contrary to the current trend. How we live together seems to me to be very important right now, how we offer shelter in an increasingly angry and chaotic world, is very important right now. It is our high calling. My encouragement is for us to live from grace creating places of peace, not just for some, but for all who are one with us in Christ - the one who shows us the way.

Gereldine