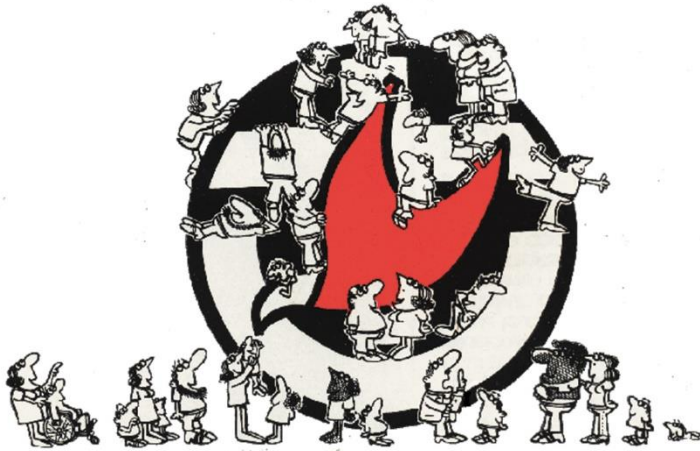


# High St Uniting Church Frankston

## Unity in Harmony

### John 17:20 – 26



In my life as a Lay Preacher, Presbytery Leader, Candidate, and Minister, I have conducted worship in over 70 Uniting churches. And that doesn't count schools, camps, other denominations, or Aged Care Centres. Congregations from less than five to more than 500. And I can say without hesitation that there is no such thing as A Uniting Church. We are a diverse denomination. Diverse in theology, in practice, in size, in music and in style. From churches

that don't seem to have changed since before union to churches that could be from another denomination. From traditional worship to worship in the round to casual gathering. And that is just my experience, I'm sure if I asked others of their experiences, we would hear of mega churches and house churches, small, self-led communities, and café churches. And yet here we are celebrating the anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia with a reading from John that has Jesus praying to God that the disciples, and all who hear the gospel, will be one. Have we got it wrong? Or are we not hearing Jesus correctly?

Through the Easter season we have had a lot of readings from the great Final Discourse in John, four chapters of Jesus sharing his last meal with the disciples; teaching them and praying for them and for all who will hear them and follow him. We get the story of washing of the feet, hear the New Commandment, and overhear this priestly prayer in which Jesus asks God to grant unity – that they may all be one. And we get a warm glow inside us that we have heard the words of Jesus and worked so hard for union and being the Uniting Church. However, I think we miss something if we think unity means unison.

*The glory that you have given me, I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.*

It's only a month since we celebrated Trinity Sunday, proclaiming that, while God is one, the Father is not the Son is not the Spirit, so we are called to be one in difference and not one in sameness. One Lord, one faith, one mission and one gospel, but not one building design, or one worship service, or one theological perspective. One in harmony and not one in unison.

*Many years ago, while a Pastoral Worker at Torquay, I received a phone call to organise a funeral. A few days before the funeral we discovered that the family had made an error and rung the Uniting Church instead of the Anglicans! With the Vicar's approval I still led the service and introduced myself as a Uniting Church Lay person. At the refreshments, a member of the family said to me, "It's no problem you are doing the service, after all you're all just branches of the same head office aren't you!" Someone who understood the church better than we understand ourselves.*

It is sad when we don't act like 'branches of the same head office' and difference becomes division. When difference earns judgement. Historically this was the cause of friction, acrimony and even war, as difference became a matter of right and wrong. We all have

stories of the catholic/protestant divisions of previous generations. There are still people from an older generation who say things like, "Are you a believer or just a Christian?"

Even sadder when, from the outside, denominations are seen as different religions. Jesus didn't just pray that we might be one, he prayed that we might be one so that the world will know the gospel of love. If the denominations are in competition with each other, how can the world see one gospel of love? It is a powerful symbol of God's love when the World Council of Churches says or does something. We are one in harmony, even though we aren't one in unison.

Difference is expected, even in scripture. The subtext of the Book of Acts is that there is not one way, one understanding, or one church. As the apostles and the whole Way of Jesus move out from the upper room to the wider world, they are taught to embrace difference. A difference that still shows in the letters of Paul versus the letters of John versus the letter of James. The very fact that we have four gospels is a big clue to God's understanding that people respond to the message of God's love differently. Those four gospels are one in message – one God who came to be with us in and through Jesus Christ, teaching the one message of forgiveness and love and mercy – but the presentation of Jesus is quite different in each gospel. Justice, community, tradition, theology, and simplicity are all highlighted in different ways, and each account of Jesus appeals to a different sort of person. Or appeals to each of us at different times and in different circumstances. We have different interests, passions, and talents, and all those differences are of value to the church, and not a disruption. One in harmony even if not one in unison.

Here, in this congregation, we are not all the same in our understanding of the faith, we are not all the same in our taste in music or style of worship, and that doesn't just mean the two different worship services. We are not all the same in our hopes and wishes for the church; but we are one in community and one in worship and praise of our God who is revealed in Jesus. We are one, as Jesus prayed for us to be one, in showing to the world that God is real and valuable. We are one in wishing that all could know the joy, peace, comfort, and challenge of God's love in Christ. And we can rejoice in our differences! We don't have to be the same as our neighbour churches, even our neighbour Uniting Churches. We don't have to conform to some model or plan of being church. Rather let us embrace our differences by enabling the strengths, talents, and gifts present in this community to be the best that we can be in worship and praise of the God. Let us embrace our different gifts and abilities to share God's love with the wider community in mission and love. We can be the Uniting Church in High St that unites all our different talents into the one task of being the people of God in this place. Then we can say we are one, as our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one.