

# Changing paths together - in the service of others

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 5 May 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Tracey Burton

Easter 3C

Acts 9: 1-6; John 21:1-19

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

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Good morning. I feel very privileged to be standing here today. Thank you for having me as part of your congregation. It's the first time I have been invited to provide a Reflection as part of a Uniting Church Service and in these days, after Easter, it is indeed a very significant time.

The reading from the Gospel of John that we just heard speaks to me of how this last encounter with Jesus, changed Peter's path, again.

Having returned to his life as a fisherman after the loss of Christ – he again encounters Jesus by the water's edge.

“Feed my lambs”

“Tend my sheep”

“Feed my sheep”

“Follow me” – Peter was forgiven, his relationship with Jesus was restored.

And Peter's path was changed. He was back in the service of God – called to nourish the vulnerable and sustain God's people.

I began rediscovering the Uniting Church in late 2017 – just over a year and a half ago – when I learned that the Chief Executive role at Uniting was coming up and began my research to see if I should change my path.

I discovered a Church that is really genuinely committed to diversity, that really deeply values diversity and literally welcomes you – exactly as you are.

I was surprised

I was curious

I was inspired – and I was called

And having been in the role now for 12 months, this encounter with Jesus, through the work of the Church has changed my path and has already changed me.

I think, thus far, I've lived a very privileged life, perhaps in a bubble.

Middle Australia

Safe

Secure

A loving (though complex) family to grow up in, including a mother who taught all four of her daughters (born in the 60s) that there's no such word as "can't"; and a loving family of my own. My husband, Mark of 35 years, my two boys Mitchell and Peter - and now their 2 lovely partners who've come to enrich our family. I had access to education and opportunity and a successful and meaningful career in health care.

As Margaret said, the majority of my career has been in Catholic Health Care –with organisations like The St Vincent's Group, The Mater Hospitals in Queensland and most recently St John of God Health Care. It was, for me, a great privilege to work in these organisations. I found great meaning being in the service of others.

These health care ministries are inspired by the healing ministry of Christ and I learned that anyone, religious or not, who acts with compassion in their hearts can bring this work to life.

So, coming to work with the Uniting Church, through its service and advocacy agency Uniting – I have already experienced some extraordinary events and insights just in my first year. They have changed me and I'd like to share some of these with you this morning.

I have been on the road a lot. Uniting is spread all over the state of NSW and ACT. And every time I have experienced a welcome to country from a traditional custodian of the land where I stood, I have been truly struck by the generosity of that welcome.

Even though I am part of the society that has benefited from their suffering and loss, I have been gifted the spirits to keep me safe wherever I was, and any time I return to that place. So generous. So inclusive.

I was really delighted to find and I'm very proud that Uniting employs almost 300 Aboriginal people and we offer a range of services to support Aboriginal people in their communities. But we know we can and we know we must do more. Our Board has just signed off on a renewed Reconciliation Action Plan, which calls us to be even better at employing Aboriginal people, to support Aboriginal people in their paths to self-determination and to use our loud voice to confront the injustices that affect Aboriginal people.

Before coming to Uniting, I think I was quite ignorant. I still am in many ways. I have a lot to learn about Aboriginal people. I think I felt hopeless, that what could one person do with all this difficulty? How could I make a difference? But now, as part of Uniting and as part of the Church, I can read something like the Assembly's Vision for a Just Australia (which is referenced in your newsletter this week) and the First Peoples Heart - I am hopeful and I'm inspired to act. To try to help indigenous cultures to be better understood and celebrated by all Australians. To try to support Aboriginal businesses and create even more employment opportunities.

I think at Uniting, and in the church, that we are inspired by Jesus – not so much the healing ministry, but as a social reformer. And this area, this part of Australia is an area that really does need more reform.

As part of my travels, I found myself in a car with one of our care workers taking a call; grappling with the difficulties of placing an aboriginal child with their grandmother, only to find that her new boyfriend makes the placement unsafe after all. It was a Friday afternoon! Where now?

In a recent very serious incident, our staff literally said “*The children’s safety matters more than our own and we must go*” – even though it was too dangerous. Not even the Police were willing to attend at this particular location. It was remote and it was already dark. Of course, we cannot compromise the safety of our people, even in the service of others. They have people who love them and rely on them. But, nonetheless, the dedication and capability of Uniting’s people, to be in these hard places is extraordinary. They too have changed me.

Uniting employs over 9000 people and over 2000 volunteers to do the work of Uniting, the work of the Church, to serve the most vulnerable, as Jesus served to make the world a better place. The Leadership Team at Uniting and myself are deeply committed to the safety of our people with an aspiration of making Uniting a place where they will flourish. And please rest assured, those children are safe; they were recovered the next day with the help of two other agencies, including the police. Diligent efforts that made them safe. But there is no denying that their paths ahead, because of family’s circumstances, is complicated and difficult.

At day break when Jesus stood on the beach and said to the unsuccessful fisherman “*cast the net to the right side of the boat*” he was calling out to these expert fisherman – that there may be another way of working.

In many ways, the people of Uniting are expert fisherman – or at least they are expert at what they do – nursing, teaching, caring, building things, managing the finances and so on.

But because we are part of the Church we are inspired to, and able to, work in other ways. We can throw our net out the other side. We are called to.

One of the ways Uniting is trying to work differently is through what we call our Future Horizons strategy.

Here we seek to invest in ways that will change the systems that trap people in cycles of disadvantage.

The State funds us to provide foster services like the ones I’ve been describing for children and young people and we do this to the very best of our ability.

But, putting on our Future Horizons hat – we endeavour to do more.

Knowing that young people whose foster support ceases when they’re aged 18 are far more likely to end up in jail, to be unemployed, to have insecure housing, perhaps to be pregnant at a very young age.

We are investing 7million dollars over the next few years to provide these young people with a service that we call “Extended Care” – support to transition to a home of their own, perhaps to enrol in TAFE – to get a job, to be successful in that job, to learn how to pay their bills. Just the things that my two sons had to give them a greater chance of a successful life.

The outcomes of this work will be independently and rigorously evaluated and documented as we hope to convince the Government that investing in services like these is indeed great value for money. Investing for social impact. Changing the lives of these young people.

And, of course, you would know Uniting for our very large Aged Care Services. In these services, we’re trying to find ways of working differently as well. Older people are some of the most vulnerable in our community. We are hopeful the Aged Care Royal Commission will awaken the apathy and the ageism that exists in our community. We want to debate what levels of care we aspire to for our older Australians - and develop new approaches and find way of funding so that they can actually live a life that is something that they can enjoy and we can be proud of supporting.

Institutional care has been abolished from children’s services, mental health and disability services with orphanages and asylums long gone. It needs to go from Aged Care as well.

Our vision, at Uniting, for older Australians will be delivered through an integrated community model where we meet the person wherever they are on their life journey.

Our residential facilities are one by one being transformed to a more home like environment, where they can choose when they wake, what they eat. Make their own choices to live a life that’s meaningful to them. Our staff are trained in and engaged in our “Inspired Life” program. It’s an approach where we’re looking to improve each person’s quality of life and supporting them in a holistic way. In the way that they choose and where they choose – their home or, perhaps, one of ours.

As the largest provider of Aged Care Services in NSW/ACT, and one of the largest in Australia, we are modelling new approaches and we’re working with Uniting Care Australia, trying to advocate for change right around the country.

In a world that keeps changing (and not necessarily always in the right direction) we are seeing suffering grow and inequality widen:

- the haves and the have nots
- the Muslims and the others
- Aboriginal people and other Australians.

We are seeing the planet consumed and polluted by that consumption – putting at risk the very future of future generations.

So, at Uniting, I’m really pleased to be part of a movement – inspired by Jesus as an inspiring and effective social disrupter – to make the world a better place.

Working with other parts of the Church – we can bring a loud voice to social injustice.

The last experience I'd like to share with you is the recent Town Hall event organised by the Sydney Alliance, where 2,500 people gathered to call for change in housing security and affordability and energy policy. On this occasion, the team from Uniting worked very closely with all of you here at Pitt St.

Everyone donned matching black T-shirts, gathered here for some warm hospitality and their marching orders, then we stood together to call for change. I was on the stage with other church leaders and could see literally hundreds of Uniting Church people in a block – rocking the boat to shift the systems that trap people in cycles of disadvantage. It was inspiring. It gives me great hope that we can cast the net out the other side and all work together in ways to change the world.

But, I'm also conscious of the history of how Uniting has been created; we know the relationship we have with some other parts of the Church needs more nourishment and continuing efforts.

In today's reading – we heard Jesus ask Peter three times if he loved him and Peter said "*you know that I do*". Their relationship was restored. The generosity of Jesus' forgiveness of Peter meant that Peter's past did not define his future.

He was back in the service of God – called to nourish the vulnerable and sustain God's people.

It is my great hope that, like the recent Town Hall event, we can keep repairing and regenerating our relationships, finding ways together to:

- Nourish the most vulnerable
- Share the opportunities of this wonderful country more fairly
- And to protect the planet

Together we can change the paths of many.

Thank you again for having me here this morning to reflect on the Gospel of John and to think about my work at Uniting in a different way. These days following Easter and the resurrection are very special and I'm grateful for the opportunity.