

# 2006 Winter Studies



## Introduction

THESE FIVE studies are for groups or individuals as they reflect on what it means to live in Christ's community.

The sessions link Biblical texts from the Revised Common Lectionary (July 16 - August 13), passages from the Uniting Church Basis of Union and other writings, with a series of questions designed to explore the subject of being in Christ's community.

If used in groups these sessions are designed in a way that does not necessitate the group having a leader. Group members share in facilitating the conversation and encouraging all to participate in the discussions. This is also a reason for the suggestion that a different person speak the blessing each week. The role of ministry in the Uniting Church is a shared responsibility.

The material in this Journey Winter Studies "lift-out" is prepared by the Queensland Synod Theology and Worship Committee. It is copyright free for use in congregations.

## Group process

The studies follow a standard format but differ in content and emphasis.

## Opening prayer

An opening prayer from *Uniting in Worship* 2, a book of prayers and resources for leaders of worship. The same opening prayer is used for each session.

## Read

Read the Ephesians passage in a translation of your choice. Part of each study's Bible reading is provided, usually from *The Message*. There are also short extracts from *The Basis of Union* and quotes from other writers relating to the theme.

## Reflect

A brief reflection on the theme for the week including a mission story from Queensland.

## Talk about

Some questions for group discussion or individual reflection are given. The purpose is to explore the scripture, the understandings of the people of faith and the theme for the session. Feel free to pick and choose those questions which are most helpful to the group process.

## So what?

This question is to focus us on the practical application of the theme in our daily lives.

## Closing prayer

People are invited to participate in a shared prayer. Feel free to use other prayers or an open prayer time.

## Blessing

The same blessing is used for each session. It is recommended that a different person offers the blessing to the group each week.

### Opening prayer to use each week

#### Come to us, God of love.

Come with your extravagant kindness and your goodness.

Come, that we may see you in the people of every race and culture; that we may embrace you in the lonely, the bereaved and the rejected; that we may be an accepting and a caring church:

#### Come to us, God of love.

#### Come to us, God of unity.

Come with your forgiveness and your healing grace.

Come, that we may witness to reconciliation for a divided world;

that we may gather around Christ's table as one people;  
that we may affirm one church, one faith, one Lord:

#### Come to us, God of unity.

#### Come to us, God of hope.

Come to us with your promises, come in your mysterious presence. Come, that we may marvel at your faithfulness in past generations; that we may celebrate the new things you are doing among us today; that we may be your pilgrim people on our journey to your kingdom:

#### Come to us, God of hope.

## Blessing

Christ be with us, Christ within us, Christ behind us, Christ before us, Christ beside us, Christ to win us, Christ to comfort and restore us.

Christ beneath us, Christ above us, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love us, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

*(Adapted from the Breastplate of Patrick)*

Week 1

# Community of freedom



## Opening prayer

Ask one person in the group to lead the prayer with group members reading together the words in bold print.

## Read

Read Ephesians 1:3-14.

Christ also brought you the truth, which is the good news about how you can be saved. You put your faith in Christ and were given the promised Holy Spirit to show that you belong to God. The Spirit also makes us sure that we will be given what God has stored up for his people. Then we will be set free, and God will be honoured and praised. (Ephesians 1:13-14 Contemporary English Version)

In love for the world, God gave the Son to take away the world's sin. Jesus of Nazareth announced the sovereign grace of God... (*The Basis of Union*, Paragraph 3).

We have to learn again that in the everyday life of secularism every single Christian represents the church. For that, however, one must offer something more than order – namely, the disciple's freedom that is the fruit of the Spirit. (Ernst Käsemann, *Jesus Means Freedom*)

## Reflection

Russell Clark is chaplain at Lotus Glen Correctional Centre in Mareeba. In the April issue of *Journey* Russell wrote about seeing men in prison expressing their faith more openly than a lot of blokes in church. While these men may be locked away, they are experiencing an inner freedom in Christ.

Inner freedom is something that we all crave for. Given that it is a deep psychological and spiritual need, we would expect it to be a central concern of the Gospel. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians highlights for us the fact that indeed it is: "The Spirit is the guarantee that we shall receive what God has promised his people, and this assures us that God will give complete freedom to those who are his."

Ernst Käsemann was one of the great New Testament scholars of the 20th century. His book, *Jesus Means Freedom*, suggests that the essence of Jesus' life and message was liberating people from all forms of bondage.

Sin is another name for inner bondage. It holds us prisoner; we are unable to move freely in the world as God intends. The bondage has both individual and social expressions.

We are very familiar with the sinful tendencies in persons – individualism, narcissism, greed, aggressiveness, distorted sexual behaviour, and the like. We are perhaps

less used to thinking about the bondage associated with systemic distortions. Social and political systems are almost always set up with vested interests in mind. Those who have the education, power, wealth and influence in the society arrange society to support their privileged lifestyles. This means that there are those individuals and groups – those without power and status – who miss out.

Jesus came to break open all the constraining forces that are associated with our sinful tendencies. Freedom in Christ is now but not yet. Sin has been vanquished through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, but the victory is not yet complete. That's why the New Testament sets freedom in perspective, reminding us that our present freedom in Christ is a foretaste of the complete freedom which Christ will bring in the fullness of all time.

## Talk about

Recall a time in your life when you felt most free. If you feel comfortable doing so, share something of this experience with the group. What was going on for you then? How would you characterise your relationship with God at that time?

What does inner freedom mean to you?

What are some of the things that bind us up?

How would you describe personal sin, and sins of community?

What good news for your community do you find in today's readings and reflection?

## So what?

List three things that you could do to make Christ's gift of freedom more of a reality in your life and in the lives of those around you.

## Prayer

Loving God, in Christ and through the Spirit you gift us with freedom. In you the cords that constrain us fall away. You allow us to share more abundantly in the life that we have from you. Everything we are, and everything that we do, is transformed by your grace. Thank you for your amazing love and your deep generosity. May we live more fully in the freedom that you offer us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## Blessing

Ask someone in the group to offer the blessing.

Week 2

# Community without barriers



## Opening prayer

Ask one person in the group to lead the prayer with group members reading together the words in bold print.

## Read

Read Ephesians 2:11-22.

The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody. (Ephesians 2:14-16 The Message)

The Church... confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, (*The Basis of Union*, Paragraph 3).

Jesus calls us to each other,  
found in him are no divides.  
Race and class and sex and language  
– such are barriers he derides.  
Join the hand of friend and stranger;  
Join the hands of age and youth;  
Join the faithful and the doubter  
in their common search for truth.  
(John Bell, Iona Community)

## Reflection

Ashgrove Uniting Church has transformed a house into the place where they host 'Living Room', a home where people from many backgrounds can experience community. On Tuesday mornings people with a variety of disabilities and their carers, gather with friends to share life, worship, eat and drink together.

Most of us live in houses with walls that serve as boundaries of privacy. But we make a point of including living rooms in which we interact with other people. Our bodies provide us with a space in which we are clearly ourselves and not other people – space for differentiation. And yet our bodies give us the capacity to make contact with other people and with our environment. Healthy boundaries are clearly a part of living as persons in community. But what happens when we allow our points of difference to become barriers to interaction?

When Paul first arrived in Ephesus he spent three months speaking in Jewish synagogues before being told he wasn't welcome. He knew he wasn't welcome in the temples dedicated to the mystery cults or Artemis. He ended up renting a lecture hall for two years, developing a new community of people who could relate to one another, even in difference, because of their relationship with Jesus Christ. This was a new kind of community, not a club based on shared affinity, personality, theology or ethnicity.

The letter to the Ephesians refers to Jesus tearing down the wall that had separated Jews and Gentiles. This wasn't indicating that the distinctiveness of the Jewish people was being erased. Christ had broken down human barriers to unity by connecting each group with others in his community.

Today we are challenged to recognise and maybe celebrate our points of difference, without allowing our distinctiveness to separate us from Jesus and those he loves.

## Talk about

Talk about a healthy way in which you distinguish yourself from other people, in terms of space, personality, theology, cultural preferences.

In what ways have you seen healthy boundaries becoming unhelpful barriers to community?

What barriers did Jesus break down

during his life? In what ways did his death and resurrection break down barriers between us?

What makes it difficult to cross barriers that Jesus has already broken down?

What can your group do to be a 'fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself.?'?

## So what?

What will you do and say this week to join Jesus in the breaking down of barriers in your community?

## Prayer

Lord Christ, at times we are like strangers on this earth, disconcerted by all the violence and harsh oppositions.

Like a gentle breeze, you breathe upon us the Spirit of peace. Transfigure the deserts of our doubts and so prepare us to be bearers of reconciliation wherever you place us, that the hope of peace may arise in our world. Amen. (Brother Roger of Taizé, 1915-2005)

## Blessing

Ask someone in the group to offer the blessing.

Week 3

# Extravagant community



## Opening prayer

Ask one person in the group to lead the prayer with group members reading together the words in bold print.

## Read

Read Ephesians 4:1-16.

My response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent God who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit - not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength - that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3:14-19 The Message)

The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit of Christ. Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church and to serve the world. (*Basis of Union*, Paragraph 15a)

The Church which forgets to whom it owes obedience, which seizes power for itself and makes itself sovereign, becomes shut up within itself. But if - despite all its failures - the Church remains intent on the kingdom coming through God's act and remembers to whom it belongs, for whom it has decided and must again and again uncompromisingly and unreservedly decide, it becomes truly free: free in imitating Christ in service to the world, free for the service of people in which it serves God and free for the service of God in which it serves people. (Hans Kung, *On being a Christian*, 1977)

## Reflection

The congregations in Goodna and Redbank Plains are on a journey of prayer and discernment, exploring before God ways in which they might express the life of Jesus in the community. This journey is both exciting and painful. As a new life of witness, service and worship emerges, it is clear that there will be lots to work through, and new challenges to pick up.

The church is built on the extravagant love that comes from God, a solid foundation that has stood the test of time. God's extravagant love goes beyond the structure of denomination and church, constantly calling us to remember that it is God whom we serve. It is God whom we rely upon.

The challenge is to be constantly reviewing our direction as a community. Are we following God's extravagant love,

the unfathomable depths, and the boundless heights of God's love? Or are we protecting our patch and resting on our laurels?

When we confine God's love within a certain set of criteria we limit ourselves to being a club which will accept some and reject others.

The love of God is all encompassing, a love offered to all people, going beyond our human criteria and calling us to account. God's love shows commitment to reconciliation within the church and beyond the church, bypassing our rules and defying our human logic. This is the love we must strive to show as the gathered people. Are we reflecting that love and living it out in all we do and say?

As a people of God, as the embodiment of Christ, we need to be constantly questioning our programs, our outreach ventures, our missional imperatives. Do our activities reflect the extravagant love of God or are they simply reflecting our own needs and wants? Our need to feel that we have done something that will look good in the eyes of the world?

The extravagant love of God is a limitless resource, one which we must dive into time and time again in order that we as a people may be forgiven, renewed and fed along the way. Let us live out of that love and be freed by it to live as God's people.

## Talk about

If there have been times when you have felt unloved by the church and you feel

comfortable to do so share these with your group? How did you react?

Are there people within or on the margins of your faith community at the moment who you feel are unloved? How might you reach out to them in God's love?

Name one way your community of faith shows God's extravagant love?

Name one program, or initiative that is failing to show that love? How might it be changed to show the love of God more fully?

## So what?

What will you do and say this week to join Jesus in expressing the extravagant love of God in your community?

## Prayer

God of love, we come before you knowing that we have failed to show your love in all we do and say. We ask you to forgive us. Help us to know that we are a people who are bound together in your extravagant love. Help us to live out of that love and encourage us to be bearers of that love in all we do and say. This we pray in Jesus name. Amen

## Blessing

Ask someone in the group to offer the blessing.

Week 4

# Searching for common unity



## Opening prayer

Ask one person in the group to lead the prayer with group members reading together the words in bold print.

## Read

Read Ephesians 4:1-16 .

You were all called to travel on the one road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness. (Ephesians 4:4- 6 The Message)

The Uniting Church in Australia believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries... (*Basis of Union*, Paragraph 2)

Christian [community] is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*)

## Reflection

Jubilee School is a Prep to Year 7 school administered by the Catholic, Anglican, Uniting and Apostolic Churches on the North Gold Coast. Pupils, teachers, parents, and local church leaders carry out the motto of 'faith, learning, understanding' in everyday school life. It's a witness of unity to the wider community. However when a school mass (Catholic) or eucharist (Protestant) is held at the school, all share the tension of being different and to some extent separated from one another.

How often do we think that the writer of Ephesians is reaching for the impossible in his longing for the unity of the church? Can our present reality reflect the ideal and ultimate reality? Our life here is to be read from and tested by that vision of what God has in store for his people.

We do not only live each day as it comes, or look back to some idealised past, but move towards a future which God has promised. We are a pilgrim people, not just marking time. Paul and others also picture the church as athletes running towards a goal. The picture of the unity or oneness of the church in Christ gives guidance as to how our life together now is meant to function. That picture is above all, the maturity, the full stature of Christ.

Living in unity is not to be attempted in human strength alone. God gives us gifts

for living together, not just for individual achievement. As the Body of Christ we are growing together into maturity. When the people of the church are living well in the Spirit of Christ, the church as an organism (rather than an institution) will work properly in building itself up.

However, to understand this well, that final goal must be kept in view. This is not about a part of the church looking inwardly, simply concerned about its present organisation, but a church aiming to be what Christ wants his people together to be. This growth can only happen when people are respected and loved. No doubt this is why verses 2 and 3 refer to those qualities of humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love, and making great effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

## Talk about

What is the most helpful picture for you of the unity of the church: the body with every part working together, the vine and the branches or another picture? How can this picture help everyone in the church live in the unity of Christ?

Are you a person who lives mostly in the present, the past or the future? What would you say is the emphasis of the life of your congregation? Can all three be kept in balance?

When there are different opinions within the church, what does it mean for you personally to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"?

Today we have at least some awareness of the breadth of the church in many different countries, in different traditions of Christianity and different cultural expressions of the faith. What does this mean for your idea of the unity of the body of Christ?

## So what?

What will you do and say this week to join Jesus in the seeking of common unity with people who see the world through different eyes?

## Prayer

Gracious God, make me a channel of your peace. Build your church into the fully working body of Christ, and give us your Holy Spirit that we may not lose the way.

## Blessing

Ask someone in the group to offer the blessing.

Week 5

# Living in community



## Opening prayer

Ask one person in the group to lead the prayer with group members reading together the words in bold print.

## Read

Read Ephesians 4:25-5:2.

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behaviour from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that. Ephesians 5: 1-2 (The Message)

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life. The Church's call is to be a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. (*Basis of Union*, Para. 3)

Community is authentic only if all of its members are encouraged to assume and surpass their fears of loneliness, to develop greater inner freedom, to forgive, and to become more fully themselves, without hiding inside or behind the group. If obedience inside the group is too rigid, it can stifle the growth of personal conscience and inner freedom. (Jean Vanier, *Finding Peace*, 2003)

## Reflection

Every Easter young people gather for experiences of 'temporary community'. At Easter camps, teenagers from differing family backgrounds form a new family for the weekend. With the guidance of leaders, behaviour guidelines are negotiated. How much noise is acceptable after lights-out?

If you were going to make up rules about living together, what would they be? Always put the toothpaste lid back on? Ring if you're going to be late? Clean up after yourself?

These rules are based on the idea of respect and sensitivity to each other. What then, of the list of guiding principles in this Ephesians passage? One clue after the other to act with integrity and respect. And why? Because of the truth that is named for us in verse 25. 'In Christ's body we are all connected to each other after all.'

The final verses provide us with words of wisdom – watch what God does and do that. And what is it that God does? Mostly – he loves us – love in absolute extravagance – without conditions – the gift of everything. What a benchmark!

Learning how to love extravagantly, with respect and sensitivity, requires self-awareness and an understanding of the consequences of our behaviour to each other. The list in Ephesians provides clues as to how we might behave towards each other. We know from our experience that there are many more clues to learn as we grow closer to each other.

## Talk about

What are your rules for living together in community? At home? In other shared spaces?

From which rules would you never budge? Why? Which are negotiable? Why?

When you read Ephesians 4:25, who do you think of? Who are you connected to?

What have you learnt about being in community through your relationship with these people?

## So what?

With whom could you work together this week to negotiate clues for community?

## Prayer

Creator God. We read again with gratitude and humility the words that you loved us through the life and death of Jesus – an extravagant love that we barely comprehend. Help us Lord to fulfil our promise as your children, learning the lessons of love from you. Let us keep the gifts of gentleness and sensitivity and forgo our attempts to control love. Lord as members of your community we pray. Amen.

## Blessing

Ask someone in the group to offer the blessing.

## Textual notes

Readings for the Winter Studies are taken from the *Revised Common Lectionary* for July 16 (Ephesians 1:3-14), July 23, (Ephesians 2:11-22) July 30, (Ephesians 3:14-21) August 6, (Ephesians 4:1-16) and August 13 (Ephesians 4:25-5:2).

This lectionary is the work of two ecumenical bodies: the North American Consultation on Common Texts (CCT) [www.commontexts.org](http://www.commontexts.org) and the International English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC). [www.englishtexts.org](http://www.englishtexts.org)

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations in these resources are from *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright (c) 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group [www.navpress.com](http://www.navpress.com). All rights reserved. *The Message* is described by Eugene Peterson, the author, as a "translation of tone" or a "paraphrase from the original languages."

The original text of *The Basis of Union* was the document around which the union of three older traditions, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian, came into being in 1977. While the original text was finalised in 1971, where it is quoted in these resources the 1992 edition is used.

*Uniting in Worship 2* is a new set of worship resources released in the Uniting Church in 2005 which gives local congregations scope to develop worship relevant to their setting. The book and accompanying CDROM provide a range of worship services and resource templates for congregations to use for the production of local booklets. *Uniting in Worship 2* can be ordered through the Uniting Church in Australia's publisher, MediaCom 1800 811 311 or [mediacom.mediacomonline.org.au](http://mediacom.mediacomonline.org.au).

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# Further Studies

## NOOMA

*Nooma* (a transliteration of the Greek word *Pneuma*) is a set of thirteen DVDs and personal/group reflection guides presented by Rob Bell, founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan ([www.mhbcmi.org](http://www.mhbcmi.org)) and author of *Velvet Elvis*, *Repainting the Christian Faith*. Each DVD presents a short reflection with imagery, music and questions for consideration. *Nooma* DVDs can be purchased singly from Christian bookstores. The reflection guides are available for free download from [www.nooma.com](http://www.nooma.com)



### RAIN

Things don't always work out the way we want them to, or the way we think they will. Sometimes we don't even see it coming. We get hit with some form of pain out of nowhere leaving us feeling desperate and

helpless. That's the way life is. Still, it makes us wonder how God can let these things happen to us. How God can just stand by and watch us suffer. Where is God when it really hurts? Maybe God is actually closer to us than we think. Maybe it's when we're in these situations, where everything seems to be falling apart, that God gets an opportunity to remind us of how much he really loves us.

### FLAME

I love those shoes. Really? The same way I love my wife? What's up with the word "love"? It doesn't have much meaning when we use it so loosely. Maybe we don't really get it. Maybe we don't understand what real love is. What it involves to really love somebody.



What it means to give yourself to someone else. We mistake things like friendship, commitment, or lust for love, but God wired us a certain way to experience all that love was really meant to be. Not to hold us back or to make us miss out on the best that life has to offer. God created love, and wants us to feel it all in the way it's meant to be felt.

### RHYTHM

What does it mean to have a relationship with God? What does it look like? For a lot of us it's a hard thing to fully understand. If God is an infinite spirit with no shape or form, how can we possibly relate to that? And what about Jesus? He said he came to give everyone life in its fullest. He came to show us how to live. Maybe it's through trusting Jesus and living the kind of life he taught us to live – a life of truth, love, justice, compassion, forgiveness, and sacrifice – that we have a relationship with God. Maybe the way we live every day, every single choice we make, determines how in tune with God we are.

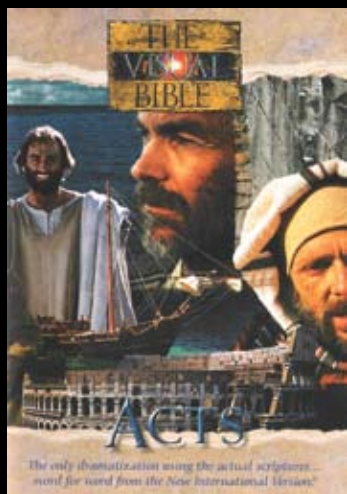
### BULLHORN

God loves everyone, so a Christian should, too. In fact, Jesus said that the most important thing in life is to love God with everything we've got and love others the same way. But it's not always easy to love everyone around us, is it? Sometimes we strongly disagree with other people's political views, religious



beliefs, behaviours, or something else, and it makes it hard to love them when we feel like we're right and they're very wrong. But Jesus doesn't separate loving God and loving others. So maybe the best way for us to show our love for God is actually by loving other people no matter how hard it sometimes is. Maybe it's the only way.

**Looking for more options? Try Duncan Macleod's excellent Educating Christians website, an A to Z of resources for Christian education in Uniting Church congregations. This site includes detailed reviews of small group and Christian education resources. [educatingchristians.unitingchurch.org.au](http://educatingchristians.unitingchurch.org.au).**



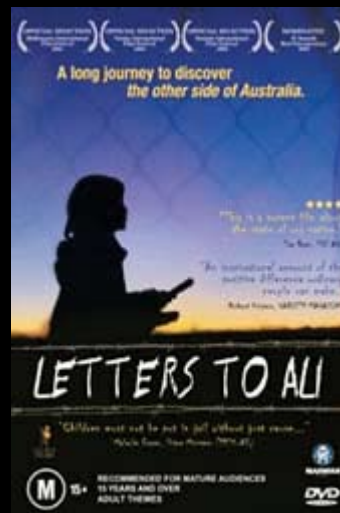
## ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The Visual Bible dramatisation using the New International Version. (G)



## TAKE THE LEAD

Pierre Dulain, a ballroom dance teacher takes problem teenage students and introduces them to the lessons of respect and community. Together they develop new dance steps. (PG)



## LETTERS TO ALI

A documentary following Trish and her family as they travel from Victoria to visit Ali, a 15 year-old boy detained in Port Hedland, Western Australia and take up his case for a visa. (M)

# 5 weeks of MOVIES

Here are five movies which explore the theme of community that you can rent from your local video store on VHS or DVD to watch. Please note the rating and that these are not necessarily "Christian" movies.



## BABETTE'S FEAST

Martina and Philippa are daughters of a devout minister who preaches salvation through self-denial. Their lives are transformed by the arrival of Babette, a mysterious refugee from France's civil war. At the heart of the movie is an extravagant gourmet French meal. Based on a short story by Isak Dinesen. (G)



## RABBIT PROOF FENCE

Molly Craig, her little sister and cousin escape from an internment camp to return to their family, finding their way by following the rabbit-proof fence over 2500 kms. (PG)

