

Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod

Lenten Studies 2004 – We are the church

Introduction

These studies are offered to Uniting Church congregations in Queensland for study and reflection during Lent or at some other time during the year. They will work best for small groups but may be used by individuals. Please feel free to provide photocopies for each member of your congregation or group. It is suggested that you copy each study onto one sheet, back-to-back. Copies can be enlarged to A3 size for older eyes.

The studies link some biblical texts and passages from the Basis of Union with a series of questions designed to focus the participants on some key issues about what it means to be the church and what God is calling the church to do. The studies link the foundational and historic texts to the current missional context of Queensland in the year 2004. The key issue for congregations and individuals is to discern what it means to be Christian in our local community and church.

There are some underlying assumptions in these studies about how God speaks to us. *The Basis of Union* acknowledges 'that the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which it hears the Word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated'. It also refers to foundational documents and God's continuing revelation to the church. *The Basis of Union* is itself a foundational document for our church. We are indeed people on the way, but not without guidance

These are not leaders' notes as such. The studies are designed in a way that does not necessitate the group having a leader, simply a person who facilitates the conversation and encourages 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 studies

There are five studies in this Lenten study series for 2004:

- Session one – Journeying together
- Session two - Worship
- Session three – Discipleship and evangelism
- Session four – Justice and service
- Session five – Moving on

The order of the studies follows the convention of thinking about worship, witness and service. Our witness to the Good News of Christ and our service with God in the community are grounded in relationship: relationship with God and relationship with each other. Unless we start with our worship of God, our actions in the community are no different from the many service and justice organisations which also serve those in need.

The studies follow a standard format but differ in content and emphasis. Each study will have:

- An **opening** litany which is taken from *Uniting in Worship*. The same opening litany is used for each session.
- A **passage or story from the Bible** in the Contemporary English Version Translation. As this is not a 'Bible study' as such, it is preferable for people to use the simple translation provided on the sheets rather than rely on various versions.
- An **extract from *The Basis of Union*** (1992) relating to the theme.
- A brief **reflection** on the theme for the study.
- Some **questions** for group discussion or individual reflection.

- A second reading and some **optional questions** for further conversation.
- A **final question** to allow people to pick up on any other things they might want to talk about around the theme.
- A **prayer** to share. Please feel free to use other prayers or shared prayer time in this place.
- A **blessing**. The same blessing is used for each session. It is recommended that a different person offers the blessing to the group each week.

There will probably be more questions than some groups can use or have time to talk about. Feel free to pick and choose those questions which are most helpful to the group process for your people.

Textual notes

All scripture quotations in these studies are from the *Contemporary English Version* Copyright © 1991, 1992, 1995 by American Bible Society, used by Permission. The CEV is an American Bible Society translation. The text is easily read by school age children, second language readers and those who prefer the more contemporary form. The CEV is not a paraphrase. It is an accurate and faithful translation of the original manuscripts.

While the original text of *The Basis of Union* was finalised in 1971, where it is quoted in these studies the 1992 edition is used. The historic text of *The Basis of Union* was prepared at a time when the desire for gender-inclusive language was only just emerging. By the 1990s some people were finding aspects of the language of the Basis to be rather curious, and at certain points jarring and even alienating. The Assembly Standing Committee therefore approved the publication of the 1992 edition, which incorporates relatively conservative changes to the language of the Basis, while seeking to retain its meaning.

Week one – Journeying together

Opening

Almighty God,
you have been the dwelling place of your people
in all generations;

**your mercies are more than we can number,
and your compassion is without end.**

Grant us now the help of the Holy Spirit,

that we may praise you for your goodness and mercy,

receive your word with joy and thanksgiving,

**and give ourselves again to you in love and service;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Amen

Scripture

So Paul stood up in front of the council and said: People of Athens, I see that you are very religious. As I was going through your city and looking at the things you worship, I found an altar with the words, 'To an Unknown God.' You worship this God, but you don't really know him. So I want to tell you about him. This God made the world and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth, and he doesn't live in temples built by human hands. He doesn't need help from anyone. He gives life, breath, and everything else to all people. From one person God made all nations who live on earth, and he decided when and where every nation would be.

God has done all this, so that we will look for him and reach out and find him. He isn't far from any of us, and he gives us the power to live, to move, and to be who we are. 'We are his children,' just as some of your poets have said. Since we are God's children, we must not think that he is like an idol made out of gold or silver or stone. He isn't like anything that humans have thought up and made. In the past, God forgave all this because people did not know what they were doing. But now he says that everyone everywhere must turn to him. He has set a day when he will judge the world's people with fairness. And he has chosen the man Jesus to do the judging for him. God has given proof of this to all of us by raising Jesus from death. [Acts 17:22-31]

Basis of Union

The Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia, in fellowship with the whole Church Catholic, and seeking to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church, hereby enter into union under the name of the Uniting Church in Australia. They pray that this act may be to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They give praise for God's gifts of grace to each of them in years past; they acknowledge that none of them has responded to God's love with a full obedience; they look for a continuing renewal in which God will use their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people. To this end they declare their readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church; they remain open to constant reform under his Word; and they seek a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this union these Churches commit their members to acknowledge one another in love and joy as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, to hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations, and daily to seek to obey his will. In entering into this union the Churches concerned are mindful that the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died, and that it awaits with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ, who shall reign for ever and ever. [*The Basis of Union* Paragraph 1: The Way into Union]

Reflection

In 1977, Australia witnessed an ecumenical milestone, with the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia. Such an event occurred because the people within the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches recognised that we come together because of what God has done in Jesus Christ and are held together by a call to follow Christ. We find this call set out in *The Basis of Union* and when we gather in our faith communities, we are called to journeying together. Sometimes, however, that call is buried under the tradition and organisation of our lives, and it is important to go looking again for the reasons that we have joined in this journey together.

Paul said that the Athenians were clearly a religious people. He introduces them to God, the Creator of all, who has become known through Jesus Christ. This God, who is beyond our comprehension and cannot be contained by anything that we might envisage or create, came close enough to touch. Paul invited the Athenians to understand God in this way.

As a church we also are invited to understand God as mysterious, but also as one who is known through Jesus the Christ. Our common purpose is based on this invitation to join in the worship and praise of God, to witness to his love and commitment to us, and to serve each other and those around us because of this love.

Questions

How are modern Australians like the Athenians? What kinds of things do we worship?

Paul challenged the theology of the Athenians. How do you think Paul would want to challenge your congregation today?

What clues are given in the readings for today about how we might keep our focus on the essence of our Christian faith?

What significance does the vision of a church uniting have for you? How faithfully has our church lived out this vision of unity?

Optional questions Read John 17:6-11

Jesus talks about the certain knowledge that he had come from the Father. Why is this important for the life and mission of our church?

The John reading is part of Jesus' prayer for his disciples at the Last Supper. If Jesus is no longer in the world but we are, what kind of picture of God do people get from seeing us?

Final question

What else you would want to say to each other about this coming together of the church or the joy and pain of journeying together since 1977?

Prayer

Almighty God, sometimes you remain unknown to us as we fail to comprehend the nature of your being. Because of your great love, you revealed yourself through Jesus the Christ, who prayed that we would be one in him and with you.

In our stumbling efforts we come together in community to worship you, to witness to you and to act in service in response to your love.

Almighty God, grant us the wisdom and patience to make this journey of unity together. Through Christ. Amen.

Blessing

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself,
and God the Father
comfort your hearts and establish them
in every good work and word;
and may almighty God bless you,
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.
Amen.

Week two – Worship

Opening

Almighty God,
you have been the dwelling place of your people
in all generations;

**your mercies are more than we can number,
and your compassion is without end.**

Grant us now the help of the Holy Spirit,

that we may praise you for your goodness and mercy,

receive your word with joy and thanksgiving,

**and give ourselves again to you in love and service;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Amen

Scripture

When the time came for Jesus and the apostles to eat, he said to them, 'I have very much wanted to eat this Passover meal with you before I suffer. I tell you that I will not eat another Passover meal until it is finally eaten in God's kingdom.' Jesus took a cup of wine in his hands and gave thanks to God. Then he told the apostles, 'Take this wine and share it with each other. I tell you that I will not drink any more wine until God's kingdom comes.'

Jesus took some bread in his hands and gave thanks for it. He broke the bread and handed it to his apostles. Then he said, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Eat this as a way of remembering me!' After the meal he took another cup of wine in his hands. Then he said, 'This is my blood. It is poured out for you, and with it God makes his new agreement. The one who will betray me is here at the table with me! The Son of Man will die in the way that has been decided for him, but it will be terrible for the one who betrays him!' Then the apostles started arguing about who would ever do such a thing.

The apostles got into an argument about which one of them was the greatest. So Jesus told them: Foreign kings order their people around, and powerful rulers call themselves everyone's friends. But don't be like them. The most important one of you should be like the least important, and your leader should be like a servant. Who do people think is the greatest, a person who is served or one who serves? Isn't it the one who is served? But I have been with you as a servant. You have stayed with me in all my troubles. So I will give you the right to rule as kings, just as my Father has given me the right to rule as a king. You will eat and drink with me in my kingdom, and you will each sit on a throne to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. [Luke 22:14-30]

Basis of Union

The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christ himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted. [*The Basis of Union* Paragraph 6: Sacraments]

Reflection

The ritual of our service of Holy Communion was instituted by Jesus as he met with his friends at Passover, prior to his crucifixion. They met in the midst of uncertainty and upheaval – political unrest, Jesus' impending suffering and the fissure within the disciples due to the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. But they also met together as friends, joined together in a common bond of love and shared experiences. They shared bread and wine

together, offered to them by Jesus their friend, but who they would come to know as the Christ. While in this first instance, it offered comfort and reassurance, the ritual of the last supper was established among Jesus' followers as a central element for their continued being as the early Christian Church. From this moment on, their journey together would involve pain, loss, insecurity, and new beginnings. They would often meet together, share the meal, remember, and be assured of Jesus' presence with them.

Today, Holy Communion, remains central to our worship – a sacrament that reminds us that 'Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel', and of God's continual presence with us in the world. We participate in this ritual as a community of faith, participating in each other's and the world's brokenness and living. We have communion with our Saviour, make our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the death of the Christ, grow together in Christ, and are strengthened for our participation in the mission of Christ in the world.

This central act of worship helps us to be who we are as the church of Christ, through ritual action and corporate remembering. It enables us to find comfort and reassurance, and strength for our continued journey together.

Questions

When Jesus met with his friends together for the Last Supper, what were the elements of worship which were part of that meeting?

What is your favourite part of worship and why?

Talk about your earliest memories of Holy Communion. Tell about your most vivid memory of participating in Holy Communion. What is the significance of Holy Communion for you? How has this changed throughout your life journey?

When we gather together to participate in worship and share the sacraments, what is our role in that process? What is God's role?

This reading from Luke suggests that there are present and future dimensions to what is happening. What do you think he was getting at?

Optional questions Read Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-4

Many have experienced worship of God as a solo activity; what is the significance of the church coming together for worship and sacrament?

What is the significance of worship for the life and work of your congregation?

Final question

What else you would want to say to each other about worship and the worship life of your congregation?

Prayer

God of all time, you journey with us.

Remind us of your presence and your faithful promise of new life.

Awaken us to new possibilities as we grow together into Christ, strengthened for your work and empowered for mission in our community. Amen.

Blessing

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself,
and God the Father
comfort your hearts and establish them
in every good work and word;
and may almighty God bless you,
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.
Amen.

Week three – Discipleship and evangelism

Opening

Almighty God,
you have been the dwelling place of your people
in all generations;

**your mercies are more than we can number,
and your compassion is without end.**

Grant us now the help of the Holy Spirit,

that we may praise you for your goodness and mercy,

receive your word with joy and thanksgiving,

**and give ourselves again to you in love and service;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Amen

Scripture

The apostles came back and told Jesus everything they had done. He then took them with him to the village of Bethsaida, where they could be alone. But a lot of people found out about this and followed him. Jesus welcomed them. He spoke to them about God's kingdom and healed everyone who was sick. Late in the afternoon the twelve apostles came to Jesus and said, 'Send the crowd to the villages and farms around here. They need to find a place to stay and something to eat. There is nothing in this place. It is like a desert!'

Jesus answered, 'You give them something to eat.' But they replied, 'We have only five small loaves of bread and two fish. If we are going to feed all these people, we will have to go and buy food.' There were about five thousand men in the crowd. Jesus said to his disciples, 'Have the people sit in groups of fifty.' They did this, and all the people sat down. Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish. He looked up toward heaven and blessed the food. Then he broke the bread and fish and handed them to his disciples to give to the people. Everyone ate all they wanted. What was left over filled twelve baskets. [Luke 9:10-17]

Basis of Union

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work. Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of the God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist. **Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.** [*The Basis of Union* Paragraph 4: Christ Rules and Renews the Church]

Reflection

Discipleship and evangelism could easily be read as religious words for religious people. Let's try to use them as everyday words for everyday people. The word 'Discipleship' refers to following a leader, being coached and mentored. The highest profile example of that in Australia would be sports teams 'discipled' by their coaches. The most common example would be that of children coached and mentored by their parents. The word 'Evangelism' literally refers to 'being, enacting or carrying good news'.

So what has feeding a huge crowd got to do with discipleship and evangelism? In the Luke reading we're presented with a model of discipleship that goes beyond an individual spiritual relationship with God practised in private. Discipleship here is something practical. Jesus' team suggests to Jesus he might look to the physical needs of the hungry crowd. And Jesus' answer: 'You feed them'.

The first question some people have when reading this part of the Bible is 'How did Jesus do that?'. Was it some mysterious supernatural multiplication of loaves? Was it the miraculous faith in the ability of a crowd of individuals to become a community who share resources? Was it both? Does it matter? Discipleship here is

practised in community. The team are encouraged to work with the resources they have between them. They're to gather the crowd into small communities who can work together. They're discipling others in the process.

And what of evangelism? At first Jesus' disciples are keen to enjoy a quiet private meal with Jesus while the crowds go home and look after themselves. Jesus challenges this attitude with the reminder that they can provide a meal for everyone – on the spot. These disciples are being reminded that they're to be good news in the way they share together. Are they showing good news in their actions on behalf of the wider community? Are they communicating good news about Jesus in what they say?

Jesus interacts with individuals and with groups of people. When he later calls people to take up their cross and follow him, he calls them, each one alone, and as a team together, to give away what they have. As we read this story we are reminded that we also are a people called together to embody Jesus' life, death, resurrection; a people called to give away good news rather than keep it protected within our own circle of comfort. As Jesus reminds us again and again, this is only possible as we listen carefully to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Questions

What's the largest group of people you've had to feed, either by yourself or as part of a team? What did you learn through the experience?

How do you think the disciples managed to feed such a large crowd when all they had to start with was a small meal? Was it through 'human witness in word and action', or 'through the power of the Holy Spirit', or both? What difference does it make to you?

The Basis of Union passage includes the phrase, 'Command people's attention and awaken faith'. Jesus did that as he worked with the disciples to feed the large crowd. What kinds of word and action could Jesus help you and others use to command people's attention and awaken faith today?

The Basis of Union passage indicates that discipleship is expressed as we join the 'fellowship of Jesus' sufferings.' Sending people home was the easy option for the disciples. What did it cost the disciples to feed the crowd instead? What is the cost of sharing Jesus' life with the people in our communities? What do we have to give up in order to 'be, show and share' good news for and to our community?

Optional questions Read Acts 4:32-35

The early Church in Jerusalem initially had a reputation for radical discipleship and evangelism. These people would not have found it easy to share their resources and live in such a public way. What is different for us now? What barriers do we face that make it hard to be followers of Jesus and share good news as a community of believers? What resources do we share that could be used for good news in our wider community?

Final question

What else you would want to say to each other about discipleship and evangelism?

Prayer

Jesus, we thank you for the call to follow you as disciples and people of good news, and yet we recognise the cost of taking up that call.

Jesus, it is easy to stay in the comfort zone of people just like us, to push away the challenge of relating to a wider community. In your own extraordinary way, we invite you to lead us as a group of followers. Remind us again to begin with the resources we have. Help us see the crowds as communities, families, neighbourhoods, and as individuals, relatives, and neighbours.

Renew us as we recognise and respond to the nudges of your Holy Spirit and continue forming us as a good news people. Amen.

Blessing

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself,
and God the Father
comfort your hearts and establish them
in every good work and word;
and may almighty God bless you,
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.
Amen.

Week four –Justice and service

Opening

Almighty God,
you have been the dwelling place of your people
in all generations;

**your mercies are more than we can number,
and your compassion is without end.**

Grant us now the help of the Holy Spirit,
that we may praise you for your goodness and mercy,

receive your word with joy and thanksgiving,

**and give ourselves again to you in love and service;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Amen

Scripture

Jesus went back to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and as usual he went to the meeting place on the Sabbath. When he stood up to read from the Scriptures, he was given the book of Isaiah the prophet.

He opened it and read, 'The Lord's Spirit has come to me, because he has chosen me to tell the good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to announce freedom for prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to free everyone who suffers, and to say, 'This is the year the Lord has chosen.' ' [Luke 4:16-19]

Basis of Union

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work. Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of the God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist. Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church. [*The Basis of Union* Paragraph 4: Christ Rules and Renews the Church]

Reflection

The quest for an ideal society is essentially the agenda for every generation. One can identify particular periods in time when slavery, racism, workers' rights, equity, indigenous land rights were essential issues to be addressed. At every point in history the church is challenged to face social issues and the year 2004 is no different.

The quotation from *The Basis of Union* includes two important statements 'the church is able to live and endure through changes of history.' and 'in his own strange way he (Christ) constitutes, rules and renews them (humanity) as his Church'. Jesus Christ continues to influence and change not just the church, but the world (environment) and the whole of humanity.

Right from the beginning Jesus was on about creating change in the people with whom he ministered. He challenged the people of Nazareth to find a new understanding from the scriptures. For Peter, change happens when he is challenged to a different perspective through a vision (see the second reading, Acts 11: 1-18). These were not just organisational issues, but were equally matters of justice.

Questions

The challenge for the emerging people called the Church was how to distinguish between the strengths of the past historical faith and the new freedom (liberty) which was found in Jesus Christ. What are some examples of how Jesus dealt with people in an inclusive way? What are some ways our contemporary church does or does not demonstrate this kind of inclusiveness?

A tension between social action and spiritual truth has often been misunderstood as confusion between worldly affairs and spiritual values. When the Christian Church offers a courageous stand on social issues, how does such action provide witness rather than incite criticism against the Gospel and the organisation of the Church?

When the church speaks out on social issues it is often criticised. How should we react to this criticism? When is it appropriate to hold back on the things we might want to say?

What is our role in bringing about the kind of world Jesus described and what needs to be left to God's direct work?

Optional questions Read Acts 11: 1-18

Peter was a Jew staying in a Gentile town. How might this vision have confronted him? What kinds of issues might have been addressed by this vision?

The Bible readings and the paragraph from *The Basis of Union* infer that the ministry of Jesus Christ is about offering change and renewal. How would your congregation or faith community need to change in order to be able to speak with more authority and integrity on issues of justice?

Final question

What else you would want to say to each other about the church and justice or service?

Prayer

Almighty God, the privilege of life is the experience of daily living.
Sadly, and shamefully, not all experiences are full of hope.
We do not have to venture far before we are confronted with the realities of human injustice.

We are repulsed by the image of hungry, despised and suffering people.
We are angered when power exploits and corrupts.
We sense our own hopelessness and vulnerability when we become victims in our own right.

Grant us the gift of faith to trust you completely.
Empower us with the gift of courage to defend the defenceless.
Recreate our lives in the Spirit of Christ so we can become instruments of hope and peace.

Amen

Blessing

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself,
and God the Father
comfort your hearts and establish them
in every good work and word;
and may almighty God bless you,
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.
Amen.

Week five – Moving on

Opening

Almighty God,
you have been the dwelling place of your people
in all generations;

**your mercies are more than we can number,
and your compassion is without end.**

Grant us now the help of the Holy Spirit,

that we may praise you for your goodness and mercy,

receive your word with joy and thanksgiving,

**and give ourselves again to you in love and service;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Amen

Scripture

Father, I don't ask you to take my followers out of the world, but keep them safe from the evil one. They don't belong to this world, and neither do I. Your word is the truth. So let this truth make them completely yours. I am sending them into the world, just as you sent me. I have given myself completely for their sake, so that they may belong completely to the truth. I am not praying just for these followers. I am also praying for everyone else who will have faith because of what my followers will say about me. I want all of them to be one with each other, just as I am one with you and you are one with me. I also want them to be one with us. Then the people of this world will believe that you sent me. I have honored my followers in the same way that you honored me, in order that they may be one with each other, just as we are one. I am one with them, and you are one with me, so that they may become completely one. Then this world's people will know that you sent me. They will know that you love my followers as much as you love me. [John 17:15-23]

Basis of Union

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also 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, 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. The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way. [*The Basis of Union* 1992 Paragraph 3(c): Built Upon the One Lord Jesus Christ]

Reflection

This passage from John's gospel is about all-or-nothing commitment to love one another, and how we live together as a church. Jesus prays that God might protect his followers from the evil one.

John Calvin suggested that the Devil's main strategy was to create disunion and division within the church. He said, 'Among Christians there ought to be so great a dislike of schism, as that they may always avoid it so far as lies in their power'. Jesus prays against disunity. Reconciling and being reconciled has been described as the 'mark' of the Christian church. The kind of 'complete' belonging that Jesus prays for is beyond something that we can achieve in our own strength. It comes to us through the power of God who has loved Jesus, loved us and goes on to love those who will believe because of us.

God has given us diverse gifts which, put together in unity, become signposts to God for all to see. The Basis of Union suggests that this work is a never finished task and that we are unlikely to see the results of our actions. This could explain why many of us feel frustrated at times in the church. So rather than looking for instant success we are to look towards the sustaining presence of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit for our encouragement and strength to continue the journey.

Questions

Somebody once said, 'I love the church, it's the people I can't stand!' What is the significance of 'oneness' in the church? Why are relationships within the church important? What do we need to do to maintain healthy relationships in our church? What is the end effect of Christian unity?

In what way did Jesus give himself 'completely' for the sake of his disciples? What result is he praying that this will achieve in their lives? What result is Jesus praying will be achieved in the world?

To what extent is the work and witness of the church essential to God's plan for the world?

What do you personally need to do in order to work toward the 'oneness' Jesus prayed for? What does your congregation or faith community need to do? What is the significance of being a 'pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal'? Does it matter if we don't ever get there?

Optional questions Read Acts 2:43-47-

The supplementary reading from the book of Acts gives us a picture of what this kind of church might look like and how it might impact on the surrounding community. While we know we're not exactly like this, it gives us some principles to work with. How is your church or faith community like and unlike the church described here? How do you feel about this?

Over the course of this study series we have looked at Worship, Witness and Service. Where do you see the strengths of your congregation or faith community? Which do you need to develop more? What do you need to do next?

Final question

What else you would want to say to each other about unity in the church or the goals that our church is journeying towards?

Prayer

O God, holy and eternal Trinity, we pray for your church in the world.

Sanctify its life; renew its worship; empower its witness; heal its divisions; make visible its unity.

Lead us, with all our brothers and sisters, towards communion in faith, life and witness so that, united in one body by the one Spirit, we may together witness to the perfect unity of your love. Amen. [*Prayer of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*]

Blessing

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself,
and God the Father
comfort your hearts and establish them
in every good work and word;
and may almighty God bless you,
Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.
Amen.