



Uniting Connections

National Schools Conference 2026

Conference Reflections



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA



equipping Leadership for Mission

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Introduction

On 18–19 June 2026, the Uniting Church in Australia brought together schools, colleges, principals, board members and chaplains from 17 entities across four Synods for the Uniting Connections Conference, hosted at The Lakes College in Brisbane. It was the first national conversation on Uniting Church school based education in 17 years - an opportunity to discern together about what it means to be a school within the Uniting Church.

In the front pages of this booklet lie the summaries of each address given to the conference, as captured by Synod Director of Chaplaincy and Connections: Adrian Pyle. At the end of the resource are two reflections about the conference from two representatives from schools within the Synod who were present at the conference.

Opening and Keynote

Beyond seeking sameness — Rev Andrew Syme

Last night at the Uniting Connections Conference (the national UCA schools conference), Rev [Andrew Syme](#) offered what felt like an unusually honest reflection on the conversations that occur between different expressions of the Uniting Church.

One of the gifts of the address was his refusal to pretend that congregational, presbytery, synod and educational settings all carry the same assumptions.

- Different symbolic centres.
- Different age profiles.
- Different growth trajectories.
- Different employment and governance cultures.
- Different organisational structures.
- Different memories and experiences of growth and change.
- Different patterns of participation.

These things, Andrew suggested, all walk into the room with us, usually unnamed, and they shape the conversations we have.

Yet his emphasis wasn't on overcoming difference, but on recognising deeper commitments that many of us share.

Drawing on John O'Donohue, the Irish poet and spiritual writer, he spoke of three beautiful ideas.

Substantial becoming.

...whether in schools, congregations or other ministries, there is something profoundly hopeful about watching lives unfold and people grow into who they are becoming.....

Emerging fullness.

...helping inner and outer life speak to one another may be among the deepest tasks we are given, whether with children, young people, adults or ourselves.....

Grace and elegance.

...not the denial of hard questions, but a commitment to conduct ourselves with generosity, humility and a shared openness to the mission of God.

Listening to Andrew, I found myself wondering:

- What assumptions walk into the room when different expressions of the Church meet?
- Which differences need to be resolved, and which simply need to be understood?
- Have we sometimes spent too much energy seeking sameness, when perhaps the Spirit delights in diversity held together in relationship?
- What might our conversations look like if grace and elegance were not occasional virtues, but habitual practices?

Perhaps, as Andrew suggested, those places of substantial becoming, emerging fullness and graceful relationship are not simply signs of beauty. Perhaps they are traces of the Spirit already at work among us.



Formation, belonging and dignity — Rev Charissa Suli (keynote)

Five compelling things I heard in the address from Rev Charissa Suli, President of the Uniting Church in Australia, to the Uniting Connections National Schools Conference.



1. The deepest question is not what young people know, but who they are becoming.

In an age where machines can increasingly provide information and answers, wisdom, character, belonging, purpose and hope become even more precious. Education has always been about formation, not simply information.

2. Every educator is holding threads they may never fully see.

... a word of encouragement ... a second chance ... a moment when a student is noticed rather than overlooked. Years later, that thread may still be helping to hold a life together. Charissa's own story was testimony to that.

3. Belonging is not a slogan. It is a necessity.

In one of the loneliest generations on record, schools are engaged in sacred work. Every child matters, not because of what they achieve, but because the Spirit of God is already at work in every life long before we recognise it.

4. Protecting dignity is not simply compliance, but Gospel work.

Child safety, inclusion and the protection of vulnerable people are not distractions from the participation in mission. They are indeed part of it.

5. Schools are not on the edge of the Church's life.

Charissa challenged us to move beyond nostalgia and beyond simply rehearsing differences.

Schools, congregations, agencies and the wider Church each bring something important to the shared work of forming young people for lives of wisdom, belonging and hope. A compelling line for me from the whole address was: "The machine will make the answers, but you form the human beings."

Session reflections

Faith, identity and heritage — Knox Grammar

Five reflections on faith, identity and heritage:

Here's what stood out to me from an address by [Scott James](#), Headmaster, and Rev. Dr [Rosalie Clarke MacLarty](#), Senior Chaplain – of Knox Grammar School in Sydney - at the Uniting Connections (National Schools) Conference.



1. Reclaiming heritage is an evolution, not a revolution.

Continuously, Scott and Rosalie spoke about journey, partnership and patience. Their story was not one of imposing something artificial, but rediscovering and reclaiming threads already present within the life of the school.

2. The question “why?” matters deeply for school leaders.

Scott spoke with refreshing vulnerability about how easily school leaders can become consumed by data, rankings and outcomes, and how important it was for him personally to rediscover the deeper purpose behind the work.

3. Identity is expressed in decisions and routines, not just statements.

One of the questions shaping their work was how being a Uniting Church connected school becomes visible and understood in everyday life. It is not simply a matter of slogans or heritage documents, but exists in relationships, priorities and the ordinary rhythms of school life.

4. Formation of character is too important to leave to educational language alone.

I was energised by what I think was their attempt to bring together contemporary language around wellbeing and character formation with the much older wisdom of Christian formation. They were not replacing one with the other, but allowing each to enrich the other.

5. Drift is something worth asking questions about, not a failure to be lamented.

Perhaps the most wonderfully provocative moment for me came when Scott reflected on the life of a 102-year-old school and simply asked: “When does drift (away from the founding orientation) happen?” It was certainly not asked as an accusation, nor with nostalgia. It just seemed like an honest question about how institutions reconnect with their founding purposes and spiritual gifts.

There was a line I deeply appreciated which went something like this: “Our Christian heritage remains central, not only through what we plan and prioritise, but through the way it is owned and lived by staff across the school.”

Safeguarding and culture — Sarah Lim

Five questions on safeguarding, culture and trauma-informed practice from Sarah Lim's session:

Another thought-provoking session at the Uniting Connections (National Schools) Conference came from [Sarah Lim](#), National Director of UCA Redress and Co-founder of [BBSafe Au](#).

Sarah explored the relationship between compliance, culture, trauma-informed practice and safeguarding. Her challenge was simple but confronting: policies are important, but culture and practice ultimately determine whether children and vulnerable people are safe.

It was an important reminder of something that may sometimes seem obvious, but might not always be: safeguarding is not simply about responding to harm after the fact. It is about creating communities where harmful behaviour struggles to take root in the first place.

I found myself asking five questions in the hours and days after her session:

- What messages do our cultures send, not only to those we seek to protect, but also to those who might seek opportunities to harm?
- What exceptions or “small departures” from good practice have gradually become normal?
- Are we relying on policies and procedures where what is also required is a culture of accountability and care?
- Have people stopped raising concerns because they suspect nobody really wants to hear them?
- Isn't protecting dignity and creating safe communities inherently missional work, and therefore shouldn't it be core to the identity of organisations that are connected into the Uniting Church?

There was a line something like this in Sarah's presentation: “We can interrupt grooming before it escalates to abuse.” When I heard that I felt both sober and intentional at the same time.

Joy, presence and chaplaincy — Peter Morton

Five things I think I heard from Peter Morton, Chaplain and Counsellor at Annesley Junior School in Adelaide:

[Peter Morton](#) attended the conference alongside Annesley Principal [Jo Rossiter](#), and what struck me about his presentation was its joyfulness and – in the very best sense of the word - its ordinariness. He wasn't trying to present a grand theory of chaplaincy, but was simply describing a life explored alongside children, staff and families.

1. Children need more than education - they need identity.

Peter spoke about Annesley's desire that children leave with much more than academic achievement.



The hope is that they leave with an understanding of themselves and a foundation for a lifetime of learning and becoming.

2. Curiosity may matter as much as certainty.

Like most UCA related school contexts, the school has a religious foundation but students may have little religious literacy and/or come from a variety of faith backgrounds. So the aim of the work is not coercion but curiosity: Curiosity both about spirituality, Christianity's place within that and about the possibility that they are known and loved.

3. Joy and playfulness are spiritual practices too.

Costumes, music, humour, hip-hop Christmas musicals, and children enthusiastically and innocently shouting, "I've found Jesus!" during a word search. There was something wonderfully unembarrassed about the joy that Pete described.

4. Chaplaincy is as much about being alongside as being up the front.

Camps, excursions, lunches, counselling, classroom programs, supporting wellbeing teams, conversations with parents: Peter's description reinforced for me that chaplaincy is very often less about performance and more about presence.

5. Belonging is built around ordinary rituals.

A shared meal might always start with a simple prayer. That may lead to a child reminding their family to pause in some way, for a moment of thanks before dinner. Small practices repeated over time may quietly shape communities and lives more than we realise.

Peter expressed a hope that students would come to chapel with "anticipation, not necessarily knowing what to expect". Perhaps that is a beautiful description of faith itself?

Thank you to Peter for offering a glimpse into one expression of chaplaincy and formation within a Uniting Church school.

Worldview and character — Nigel Grant

Five things I think I heard from [Nigel Grant](#), Director of Mission at [SCOTS PGC College](#):

1. Words matter, especially the ones we think we already understand. Flourishing.

Character. Wellbeing. Wisdom. Purpose. Nigel's challenge was that these words are widely used in education, but they do not necessarily mean the same thing to everyone who uses them.

2. Schools are shaped by a worldview, whether they name it or not.

One of Nigel's recurring themes was that assumptions about human nature, purpose, meaning and even education itself are never neutral. They emerge from deeper beliefs about what it means to be human and what constitutes a good life.

3. The question is not whether schools form character, but what kind of character they are forming.

Nigel seemed to be observing that many schools speak about character formation, but fewer seem to have a clear picture of the particular virtues, habits and dispositions they are intentionally seeking to nurture – a usefully provocative reflection.



4. A holistic education must attend to matters of the soul.

Nigel posed another provocative question here – something like: if faith-based schools do mind and body reasonably well, how intentionally are they attending to spiritual formation? And is spiritual development woven through school life, or treated as an optional extra?

5. Purpose may be the most important educational question of all.

Beyond achievement, beyond wellbeing, beyond even character, Nigel kept returning to questions of meaning and purpose.

Who am I?

What is a good life?

What am I here for?

These are certainly not distractions from education and may be among its most important questions.

My sense was that Nigel's presentation was a recurring invitation to look beneath the language we use every day and ask whether we have examined the assumptions that sit underneath it.

Belonging and partnership — Darren Twist, Margaret Jurd College

Five lessons on belonging, trauma-informed practice and partnership from Darren's panel session on Margaret Jurd College:

Here's what stood out to me from [Darren Twist](#), Principal of [Margaret Jurd College](#).



Darren spoke as part of a panel at the conference. Margaret Jurd College sits in a very different part of the educational landscape from most Uniting Church schools. Listening to Darren reminded me that diversity (in the type of schools connected to the UCA) is a strength, because it forces us to keep asking what really matters.

1. Belonging isn't the reward for getting things right.

It's often the place where healing begins: Darren reused the phrase "a place to belong" several times. At Margaret Jurd College, belonging isn't an aspiration once behaviour improves. It is the starting point for students whose experience of education has often been exclusion, instability and trauma.

2. Relationships are not an extra program - they are the work.

There was a refreshing simplicity in Darren's description of trauma-informed education. Strip away the terminology, he suggested, and much of it comes back to meeting young people where they are, building trust and refusing to give up on them. That may sound obvious, but it is remarkably demanding in practice.

3. The Uniting Church's values become most visible where they cost something.

Social justice, care for First Peoples, inclusion and compassion were not presented as aspirations or slogans. They were described as daily realities in a school where almost

every student has experienced significant disadvantage. It was a reminder that values often become clearest when they are tested.

4. Every school has something to learn from the margins.

One of the things I appreciated was Darren's refusal to present Margaret Jurd College as a specialist exception. Instead, he suggested that every school is educating young people carrying unseen struggles, even if those struggles look different. The principles of relationship, dignity and hope may simply become more obvious in his setting.

5. Partnership should never flow only in one direction.

When asked how larger schools might support Margaret Jurd College, Darren gently turned the question around. Rather than asking what others could do for his school, he wondered what Margaret Jurd might offer others through its experience of trauma-informed, relationship-centred education. That struck me as a wonderfully Uniting Church instinct: every part of the body has gifts to share.

Of course Darren didn't suggest that every Uniting Church school should look like Margaret Jurd College. Rather, he invited us to ask whether every school, whatever its context, can become more intentional about being a place where young people know they belong, where relationships matter, and where hope is never written off.

Embedding mission in strategy — The Lakes College Panel

Five reflections on embedding mission in strategy, leadership and service from The Lakes College panel.

Here's what stood out to me from [Nicole Gregory](#), [Tim McMenamin](#) and [Luke Stanley](#):

The Lakes College representatives spoke as part of the afternoon panel inviting the delegates to explore what happens when faith becomes part of the school's overall strategy rather than sitting alongside it.

Here are five things that resonated with me:

1. Participation in mission works best when it is part of the leadership of the school, not simply another department:

Nicole Gregory described moving beyond a traditional chaplaincy model to create a Director of Mission role embedded within the executive leadership team. Rather than treating faith as something that happens around the edges of school life, they have intentionally built it into strategic planning, budgeting and day-to-day decision making.

2. Strategy matters, but culture only changes when someone keeps joining the dots:

Nicole was insistent that strategy development alone isn't enough. Vision has to be translated into operational practice, regular conversations and shared accountability. Otherwise, even the best intentions remain words on a page.

3. Young people don't need every answer before they can begin exploring faith:

Tim McMenamin spoke with obvious enthusiasm about students taking ownership of service, leadership and worship. What interested me was his repeated suggestion that



schools can create spaces where students are genuinely invited to explore questions of meaning, purpose and belonging rather than simply receiving information.

4. Service learning becomes something quite different when relationships come first:

Luke Stanley described a deliberate shift away from one-off service projects towards long-term partnerships with Uniting Church agencies. His comment that relationships should grow “quite intentionally and quite slowly” was important I think. There is wisdom in resisting the temptation to scale everything immediately and allowing trust to develop first.

5. The real shift may be moving from helping people to recognising our shared humanity:

Luke described moving students from seeing service as giving something to people who have less, towards recognising the inherent dignity of every person and responding out of relationship rather than charity.

Of course I wouldn't expect every UCA-related school to adopt exactly the same structures or language. Different contexts will naturally find different expressions. But I did think there is something worth reflecting on here. When participation in mission becomes woven into leadership, relationships and learning, rather than existing as a separate program, it probably has a greater chance of becoming part of a school's culture.

Culture and partnership — Calvary Christian College

Five reflections on culture, partnership and purpose from Calvary Christian College's session:

Here's what stood out to me from [Cherylynne Gostelow](#), Principal and CEO of [Calvary Christian College](#), and [Adam Low GAICD](#), Lead Pastor of [Real Life Christian Church \(QLD\)](#), at the Uniting Connections Conference.



1. Culture grows through repetition, not just aspiration.

One small practice made me take notice, Every presentation in the school begins with the same opening slide: the College identity, a verse for the year, and a reminder of “what matters most”. It was a simple example of how culture is formed through consistent habits rather than occasional slogans.

2. Partnership works best when roles are clear.

I appreciated Adam's careful distinction that, while the congregation and college share history, purpose and relationship, the congregation does not control the school. Instead, each contributes its own strengths within a long-term partnership.

3. Formation happens in communities, not just classrooms.

Whether describing staff reflections, chaplaincy, pastoral care, parent groups or everyday conversations, both speakers kept returning to the idea that education is about shaping whole communities as well as individual students.

4. Questions deserve safe places.

Cherylynne spoke about wanting students to wrestle with questions of faith while they are still at school, where those questions can be explored honestly and respectfully,

rather than feeling they have to suppress them. That struck me as an important educational principle well beyond matters of faith.

5. Healthy institutions honour their story while continuing to evolve.

Cherylynne reflected on arriving at the college, listening carefully to those who had been there from the beginning, and trying to carry forward the best of that heritage while continuing to build for a new generation. There was a gentle wisdom in that approach to leadership.

I found myself reflecting not so much on how Calvary states its purpose, but how intentionally it works to align culture, leadership, pastoral care and educational practice around a shared sense of purpose. Whether or not another school would express purpose in the same way, there is something worth noticing in the discipline of seeking coherence rather than allowing different parts of an organisation to drift in different directions.

Belonging, joy and flourishing — Dr Daniel Pampuch & Dr Darren Iselin

Five insights on belonging, joy and practices that foster student flourishing from Dr Daniel Pampuch and Dr Darren Iselin's research:

Here's what stood out to me in a presentation about student flourishing research by Dr Daniel Pampuch and Dr Darren Iselin at the Uniting Connections (Nationals Schools) Conference.

1. Flourishing is built through practices, not aspirations.

The research didn't leave the term "flourishing" as a vague promotional term. Instead, it asked which everyday practices actually seem to make a measurable difference in the lives of young people.

2. Belonging may be more important than wellbeing.

The presenters language of "well-belonging" was particularly thought-provoking. It shifts the conversation away from wellbeing as an individual pursuit towards the quality of the relationships and communities in which students live and learn.

3. Joy deserves to be taken seriously.

A provocative finding was the significance of laughter, playfulness and positive relationships with teachers. It was a suggestion that flourishing grows not only through programs but also through the ordinary texture of school life.

4. Schools don't flourish alone.

The research pointed beyond the school gate on a number of fronts. Families, trusted adults, friendship networks and wider communities all contribute to student flourishing. Schools matter enormously, but they are part of a much larger ecosystem.



5. **Young people continue to ask bigger questions than formal education alone can answer.**

This is an argument that questions of meaning, purpose and transcendence remain important contributors to flourishing. Different school communities will approach those questions in different ways, but the questions themselves do not seem to be disappearing.

The research itself raised plenty of further questions: How transferable are these findings across different educational settings? How do flourishing and academic learning interact? And how might schools cultivate these practices in ways that are authentic to their own ethos and communities?

Whatever the answers, it seems that flourishing is less likely to be achieved through a single initiative than through the patient cultivation of cultures where relationships, joy, belonging, purpose and service are intentionally woven together.

Charity to solidarity — Mardi Lumsden

From charity to solidarity: five lessons on global connection from Mardi Lumsden.

Here's what stood out to me from [Mardi Lumsden](#) from UnitingWorld.

Mardi, speaking on the afternoon panel, brought a global perspective to the conference, inviting us to think about how Uniting Church schools connect with communities well beyond Australia. These were some of the ideas in what she said that resonated with me.



1. Service learning is at its best when it grows from relationship, not rescue.

One of Mardi's most helpful distinctions was between charity and solidarity. Rather than seeing ourselves as people who simply help others, she described the importance of walking alongside communities, learning from one another and recognising our shared humanity ... in short, building a richer foundation for service learning.

2. The world is not a classroom case study. It's a community we're invited to know.

Whether talking about climate change, poverty or injustice, Mardi encouraged schools to move beyond abstract global issues and towards real relationships with people across the Pacific, Asia and Africa. Those relationships have the capacity to reshape the way students see both the world and themselves.

3. Faith is often formed through encounter.

Mardi explored the idea that transformative experiences don't end when the activity finishes. The real question is how schools help students reflect on those encounters and discover where they might lead next, whether through service, advocacy, vocation or lifelong curiosity.

4. Every part of the Uniting Church has something to contribute.

Mardi spoke warmly about helping schools connect with the wider ministries of the Uniting Church, not simply as organisations to support, but as communities with stories, experience and opportunities for shared learning. There seems to be enormous potential in those relationships if we are intentional about building them.

5. Young people need to know there are many ways to “be their difference” in community.

We were reminded that service isn't only something people do after hours. It can also become a vocation. Whether through international development, community work, education, advocacy or countless other professions, there are many pathways for people wanting to contribute to a more just and compassionate world.

Mardi shifted the conversation away from “helping others” and towards learning with others. That may sound like a subtle difference, but I suspect it changes the posture of a school, and perhaps the formation of its students, in profound ways.

Wasting time lavishly — Richard La'Brooy

Wasting time lavishly; five reflections on school chaplaincy and ministry from Richard La'Brooy:

Here's what stood out to me from Richard La'Brooy, College Chaplain at [Newington College](#), at the Uniting Connections (National Schools) Conference.

As part of the afternoon panel, Richard La'Brooy brought both practical experience and thoughtful theological reflection. These were five ideas that I noted while listening to him:



1. Schools may be one of the Church's most significant places of ministry, yet we haven't always treated them that way:

Richard challenged us to recognise that while schools have become increasingly important places where the Uniting Church engages with children, young people and families, much of our thinking about ministry may no longer reflect the reality of where ministry is happening.

2. Presence is ministry - not a distraction from it:

One phrase Richard used that I suspect I'll long remember is the idea of “wasting time lavishly”. The point was that some of the most significant moments in chaplaincy happen simply by being present: at sport, in playgrounds, in staffrooms, at concerts, and in the ordinary rhythms of school life. Relationships are rarely built only through formal programs.

3. Schools invite us to think differently about our participation in mission:

Rather than asking how schools might bring people into church life, Richard suggested that schools themselves are places where the Church is already present, living alongside their communities and participating in everyday life with them.

4. School ministry calls for imagination as much as tradition:

The same chaplain may move from preschool to senior students, from classrooms to sporting sidelines, from assemblies to pastoral conversations, all in a single day.

Ministry in schools demands flexibility, creativity and the ability to speak into very different contexts. Perhaps schools have more to teach the wider Church about adaptive ministry than we sometimes realise.

5. Some conversations have been waiting far too long:

Richard gently observed that many of the key national conversations about Christian education and chaplaincy have been revisiting documents that are decades old. His challenge wasn't to discard that work, but to ask whether this generation has done enough thinking for itself about what it means to be a Uniting Church school today.

Richard - of course - didn't present schools as peripheral to the life of the Church. He presented them as places where the Church is continually learning, adapting and discovering new ways to live out its calling. That feels like a conversation worth continuing.

Where Is God at Work? — Rev. Stuart Bollom

Where Is God already at work? Five reflections on mission and identity from Rev Stuart Bollom.

Five things I think I heard from Rev. Stuart Bollom, Director of Mission (Schools) for the [Uniting Church in Australia - Synod of NSW and ACT](#), at the Uniting Connections (National Schools) Conference:



As the conference drew to a close, Stuart Bollom offered a theological reflection based on what he'd heard over the two days. He invited us to pause and ask what the conference might have been suggesting about the work of Uniting Church schools. These were the themes I picked up from his reflection:

1. The most important question may simply be “Where is God already at work?”:

Stuart began with a story of being asked in a job interview, “Where is God in this school?” It's a question that likely sits underneath every conversation we'd had at the conference and will continue having. If God is already at work in our schools and communities, our task is not to manufacture mission, but to recognise it and join in.

2. Mission belongs to God before it belongs to us:

Stuart reminded us of the enduring nature of *missio Dei* – the mission of God. Schools, congregations and agencies don't each invent their own missions. They participate in something much larger. That shifts the emphasis from asking, “What do we want to achieve?” to “Where are we being invited to participate?”

3. Flourishing deserves a richer conversation:

Several presenters had spoken about flourishing, and Stuart reminded us that Christian traditions have been wrestling with questions of abundant life for a very long time. Perhaps the challenge isn't simply to adopt the language of flourishing, but to ask what distinctive wisdom the Christian story brings to that conversation.

4. Chaplaincy matters, but mission is bigger than chaplaincy:

I appreciated Stuart's observation that one of the themes emerging from the conference was that mission cannot rest solely with chaplains. Boards, principals, teachers, executive teams and support staff all shape the culture of a school. Chaplains remain a distinctive presence, but they are not expected to carry the whole story alone.

5. Keep asking “why?” until you discover “who”:

Drawing on Simon Sinek and Parker Palmer, Stuart reflected on the importance of understanding not only why a school exists, but “who” it is at its deepest level. That generated a fitting place to end the conference. Before strategies, programs or structures, there is the ongoing work of discerning identity.

Rather than ending with neat conclusions, Stuart left us with an invitation ... to not move too quickly to the next agenda item but keep asking the questions that matter. Where is God at work, what is the mission of God in this place, and how might our schools become more attentive participants in that work?

Closing reflections

Reflection on schools conference — **Rev Gavin Blakemore**

This was the first national conference for UCA schools in 17 years and it was an insightful time in which about 70 people gathered from across Australia at The Lakes College in North Lakes, Brisbane.

The conference had many speakers including the UCA President, Rev Charissa Suli, Queensland Moderator, Rev Bruce Moore, several principals, chaplains/ Directors of Mission and school support organisations. It was good to be able to meet a diversity of people and hear the stories of similarities and differences in our schools.

I was struck by a number of people who spoke about the process of recovering the historical links of their school to their faith/church foundations and those who have flourishing partnerships with local congregations (some are closely or even co-located).

Bruce and Charissa both made it clear that they understood UCA schools are indeed an important part of the mission of the Church. It is a growing part of the Church which has great scope for impact in the community, when many of the congregations are conversely shrinking. Schools are places that not only educate but actively encourage formation of students and staff to live and be shaped by the faith and ethos of the UCA.

Two issues have stayed with me, the first is how we as schools encourage our students to “flourish”, and the second was this sense of not only working towards wellbeing but the “well-belonging” of all. That is to see that human flourishing isn’t tied only to some autonomous human endeavour but is tied to our sense of belonging and purpose in a community of faith.

It was good to share this conference with my VicTas colleagues Craig Rodgers (Aitken deputy principal), Jamie Breden (Scotch Oakburn chaplain), Leanne Earl (Geelong College chaplain) and Adrian Pyle (VicTas Synod – Chaplaincy and Connections).

God’s Peace,

Rev Gavin Blakemore is Aitken College chaplain

Where flourishing grows — **Jamie Breden**

Last month, I had the privilege of attending the 2026 Uniting Connections Conference with colleagues from Uniting Church schools across Australia.

1) What I most enjoyed or found meaningful about the conference.

What I found most meaningful was the opportunity to listen to and learn from people across the Uniting Church school community who are all grappling with similar questions about identity, belonging, formation and purpose.



As someone who has recently commenced in a newly created Head of Faith and Community role at Scotch Oakburn College, it was encouraging to hear how other schools are seeking to live out their Uniting Church identity in contemporary and increasingly diverse contexts.

I was particularly inspired by the keynote address from our President, Rev Charissa Suli, who said that education is ultimately about who young people are becoming, not simply what they know. Her reminder that schools are engaged in the sacred work of fostering wisdom, belonging, hope, love, dignity and purpose resonated strongly with my own experience during the first six months in this role. God sees possibilities before we do.

I also appreciated the honesty of conversations around chaplaincy, spiritual formation, safeguarding, and how schools can authentically express their Christian heritage through everyday relationships and practices rather than programs alone. The conference reinforced my belief that faith is most powerfully experienced through presence, connection, service and community.

Across the conference, themes of belonging, relationships, purpose, spirituality, formation and service emerged again and again. These themes were reinforced by the 'Student Flourishing in Australian Christian Schools (2026)' research study presented by Dr Daniel Pampuch, CEO, and Dr Darren Iselin, Director of Research and Innovation Christian Schools Australia. The study found that flourishing grows when students experience meaningful social connection, supportive adults, spiritual practices, gratitude, service and opportunities to contribute to their community. These are all areas in which chaplaincy can make a significant contribution.

2) One key takeaway you'd want other school chaplains to hear, particularly those who weren't there.

My key takeaway would be that chaplaincy is as much about presence as it is about programs.

Throughout the conference, a consistent theme emerged across multiple presentations: the most significant work often happens in ordinary moments through conversations, relationships, encouragement, listening, creating belonging, and helping students make sense of themselves and the world around them.

Whether it was Rev Peter Morton describing chaplaincy as "being alongside", or discussions about character, purpose, and spiritual formation, the message was clear: people are formed through relationships and community.

For chaplains working in schools where students come from diverse faith backgrounds, or no faith background at all, this was an encouraging reminder that our role is not simply to deliver religious programs. It is to create spaces where students feel seen, valued, heard and connected. When belonging is established, voice emerges; when voice emerges, meaningful action and growth become possible. That, for me, was one of the most powerful messages of the conference.

Charissa spoke about the important relationship between schools and the Church. The conference prompted important reflection around the future relationship between Uniting Church schools and the wider Church.

How do we build stronger partnerships between schools and congregations? How do we better understand each other's contexts? And how do we share stories of hope, faith and transformation more effectively across the life of the Church? These feel like important opportunities for the years ahead.

Ultimately, my biggest takeaway is that chaplaincy and faith leadership remain vitally important because they work in the spaces where flourishing grows—relationships, belonging, spirituality, purpose and service. In a world increasingly focused on information, achievement and outcomes, schools still carry the profound responsibility of helping form human beings of wisdom, character, compassion, faith and hope.

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