

FORMATION FOR LAY MINISTRY A RESOURCE FOR LAY PREACHERS

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SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

Formation: Intentional and Incidental

Many things shape who we are as Christian people and as people involved in ministry. Much of our formation is incidental, yet often when we talk about formation, we mean the ways that we continue to be shaped in an intentional way for Christian life and ministry.

Formation is a journey of many stages and continues all through our life. We could say that the end of the journey is 'to be like Christ': there is a reality to that, an objective end point. Yet our understanding of what it means to be 'like Christ' is mediated by our own interpretation of the Jesus story. How we understand Christ is affected by how we read Scripture, which in turn has been shaped by our family, culture, experience, those who have shaped our Christian journey and more: that is, our reading is subjective. The presuppositions that we bring to our reading mean what we understand one way, someone else with a different background will read as meaning something quite different. Our faith tradition will impact on the way that we read and understand faith: within the Uniting Church the breadth of theology, our commitment to social justice and our emphasis on being and becoming an intercultural community are all aspects of understanding that bring a particular flavour to our formation in faith.

Over the years, the ways that we think, develop relationships, make and carry out ethical decisions, and grow in faith are aspects of increasingly complex development. Where we are at any one time in all of these aspects of development also impacts on our formation: for instance, the confidence we might have to reach out to a stranger in love may change as we interact in more mature ways; or how we are able to

articulate how our faith affects our response to current affairs may change as our thinking becomes more complex over time. Our development mediates our formation.

These different formational experiences and our developmental journey, mean that no one person's journey of formation is like another's. God takes us as we are, and for different ones of us it seems the Spirit is at work in different ways in our lives: we may focus on one area of growth for a long time and be oblivious to other aspects of our lives that may be less than Christ-like! Sometimes we may change easily and at other times we may wrestle with God as urgently and strongly as Jacob.

In this booklet, we will look at five different aspects or areas of our life that interact in our journey of formation.

Vibrant Spirituality: our ongoing journey of spiritual discovery with God, including our individual and corporate faith practices.

Thinking Theologically: the studies that shape our developing understanding of faith and how our theological thinking becomes more mature in the ways we think about our faith and our world.

Ministry Identity: developing skills to preach or lead worship, growing in our passion to communicate the gospel in word and deed to the context in which we find ourselves, and our understanding of ourselves as one who is involved in ministry.

Relational Maturity: learning to respond in more mature ways to the joys and pain we find in human relationships.

Self-awareness: our own self-knowledge, how aware we are of the things that shape us, our hot buttons, and the ability to stop and reflect in the formation journey.

As we consider formation it is good to remember that even as we develop ministry skills, and put in place spiritual practices, as we think and study and pray, and are subject

to the myriad influences on us in our lives, it is the work of the Spirit of God that shapes us and makes us who we are.

For Reflection:

- How have the influences in your life shaped you in your lay ministry?
- Your family?
- Your cultural identity?
- Your church experience?
- A minister or youth leader when you were young?
- Your work or professional experience?
- Maybe even your lay ministry training?

Vibrant Spirituality: Our Ongoing Journey of Spiritual Discovery with God

Part of being human is longing for something beyond ourselves, connection to the 'transcendent other'. One aspect of our ongoing formation focusses on our ongoing journey of spiritual discovery with this God, through Jesus Christ who reveals God, who lives and loves and dies and lives again: an amazing, exciting and transforming journey.

Our ability to grow in the ways we respond to God in this ongoing journey is affected by aspects of our faith development. Faith development speaks of how we learn to accept, question and believe in different

ways as we grow from infancy to adulthood. Adult faith asks questions of belief and tradition and practice that might have been accepted in childhood or adolescence. Often those who drift from faith are those who are attempting to respond to God in the ways of their childhood or adolescence when the rest of their lives are full of responding and thinking and feeling in adult ways. Part of our challenge is to appropriately come to a place of forming a faith stance of our own, having tried out faith for ourselves in our own lives, with our own questions; not simply an inherited or accepted faith of our family or tradition but one that we have come to own through our questioning and doubting and exploring. We come to a faith that makes sense to us in its theology and practice, or at least one where we can live with the questions we have.

Along with this developmental aspect, formation that takes in this spiritual journey encompasses individual and corporate worship, and engagement in spiritual disciplines but also involvement in community acts of care, commitment to social justice, and enjoyment and care for God's creation as places of meeting with God.

Through Jesus Christ we are awed in worship; through Jesus Christ we come to know God and to love God. Passionate faith and questioning faith go hand in hand. Sometimes, as a legacy of modernist culture, we think of theology as knowing about God, and unrelated to 'spirituality' or knowing and loving God. Those from non-Western cultures often hold these two together in a more healthy and holistic way. Hopefully, lay preacher studies help you to 'know about' God and lead you to worship and to passionate embrace of God.

Finding spiritual disciplines that are life-giving and which structure personal spiritual growth in helpful ways are an important part of this kind of spiritual journeying.

Two millennia of Christian spirituality means there is no shortage of possible paradigms. Alongside individual practices of prayer and Bible reading are corporate practices of worship which move us in ways of sharing mystery, of sacramental celebration, and of praise and prayer with others as an expression of a shared faith. Individual and corporate spiritual practices are an important way of learning and reflecting on a deepening relationship with God.

But personal spiritual disciplines and corporate worship do not encompass all the avenues of spiritual discovery. A love for God does not exist without a concomitant love for neighbour: that is, spirituality must engage people. As we tend to the poor, the marginalised, and the needy in our communities then we find Jesus in the midst. Similarly, it is a spiritual discipline to give concerned voice to systemic injustices in society as we use a prophetic voice stand up for justice and social issues.

Our attending to and care for creation is another aspect of how our spirituality is expressed and nurtured. Recently someone told me that when they had attended lectures on eco-theology suddenly all their church attendance and relationship with God made sense.

I suspect that we attend to that aspect of spirituality that is easiest for us, most akin to our natural leanings. Very often people focus on spiritual disciplines, or their prayer life, and neglect other ways of deepening their relationship with God. Others might find themselves happiest finding God in nature, or getting involved in social projects. An action oriented spirituality may 'fit' in a way that contemplative spirituality doesn't. One way we can nurture our own formation is to look at ways to pay attention to those aspects that maybe we have neglected, to move toward some balance in our ways of discovering God. As we do so, may we find ourselves surprised by grace in unexpected ways.

For Reflection:

- What have been your 'spiritual mountain top' experiences?
- How has your spirituality been principally nurtured (through spiritual practice or acts of love or speaking out for justice or embedded in creation or ...)?
- And how can you seek to balance that?
- Reflect on a time when you have discovered God's presence as you have engaged in acts of care, or stood up for justice.
- How is your discovery of God affected by your engagement with God's good creation?

Thinking Theologically

What is the study of theology about? Why engage in training and continuing education? In a lay preachers program you may be studying theology in order to be further equipped for your lay ministry; or you may be studying theology simply for the love of it, to know the Bible more deeply and add certainty or complexity to your theological understanding.

These are terrific reasons and having a passion for ministry and a passion for understanding God's word are great. I would argue that ongoing theological study should form (and reform) patterns of thinking that would predispose us to have a more grounded and theological response to the ideas problems and events we encounter in our lives, patterns that continue to develop in continuing education and ongoing theological reflection. Such theological wisdom and the ability to make theological judgements are what we might call 'thinking theologically', the second aspect of formation in this series.

In order to think theologically, we need broad Biblical and theological knowledge and ways of thinking that can reason with contested truth, or grapple with diversity.

Studying theology will help us understand how to interpret Scripture and how to arrive at a range of theological positions, what arguments and understandings lie behind various positions. We might gain an historical view of how the church, theology and biblical interpretation have arrived where they are, or how contextual understandings help us see things in different ways. Practical and pastoral theology might help us to understand ourselves and others and how ministry is best exercised. Reflection on this study in relation to our society and our lives will help us to connect our theological thinking to our everyday realities. This is a good theological foundation.

Sometimes as people engage in theological study they find faith foundations challenged. Long held biblical interpretations or theological understandings might be questioned. Fellow students may hold very different points of view on matters of belief, theology, and practice: it might come as a surprise to some that people who seem so different share a vibrant faith. Encountering differences in this way may encourage or even force someone to rethink their faith, their image of God, or the way they do ministry.

Encountering diversity of understanding and belief challenges our ability to deal with contested truth claims. Our ability to think theologically is also shaped by how we reason and construct positions of understanding about our faith in the midst of varying claims, in a developmental spectrum.

Typically, adults move through levels of increasingly complex ways that we deal with knowledge and truth claims. At the simplest level, knowledge is certain, external, and acceptable depending on the source of the knowledge (typically our own

observation or an 'expert'). As understanding of knowledge becomes more complex and realising that there are gaps in knowledge, choosing between truth claims can become more idiosyncratic. Realising not all agree means having to make a choice between possibilities. At this level, personal factors tend to make the choices subjective, choosing evidence to fit preferences rather than evaluating all the options objectively. At an even more complex level comes an understanding that knowledge is constructed and so choices about truth or agreement with a position are made on the basis of well-constructed rational arguments.

Formation in our theological understanding occurs at all these levels of cognitive complexity and we exercise faithful theological thinking throughout this developmental spectrum. At the same time, when we are in an environment where we can safely deal with the challenge that difference brings, our theological frontiers might widen.

So engaging in theology is more than increasing the fund of our theological knowledge, or being more equipped for ministry. Learning that is transformational will also bring about a change in how we think, and help us to continue to grow in a theological response (cognitive, emotional and practical) of our own place and time to the world in which we live.

For Reflection:

- What is your response to theological positions at variance with your own?
- When was the last time you 'changed your mind' on a theological issue?

Formation as Ministry Identity

As you began attending courses and workshops in your ministry as a lay preacher what did you think the courses would mainly be about? At least in part it was about 'how', knowing how to preach and lead worship; and partly gaining some information about the 'what' or content of your preaching. Along with the knowledge and skills to preach or lead worship, formation includes growing in our passion to communicate the gospel in word and deed, continuing to adapt and nuance our preaching to the context in which we find ourselves and growing our ministry identity.

Lay preacher training courses devote large amounts of time to the 'how and what' skills and content of preaching and worship leading. Ongoing formation helps hone our communication skills and theological understanding. We are also called to interpret our preaching into the context: the general 21st century context of church and society in Australia, and the more particular context of that congregation, that group of people in their own journey of life and witness to whom you bring the gospel proclamation. Lifelong formation also means that we stay aware of how our own context and culture is changing: what are the influences that are shaping our thinking, values and attitudes in our current situation? This might be current affairs, popular culture, sport, social media or a range of our own personal interests.

Formation as lay preachers is about skills but it is also about passion and identity. I am frequently impressed when I hear of the dedication and hard work of lay preachers, some who have been involved in this ministry for decades, spending much time in preparation, delivery, and travel over a broad

area. In the midst of demanding ministry sits the need to be aware of what drives our ministry, and what keeps our passion for ministry fresh. At times those involved in ministry burn out; they are caught in a vortex of their own "success" or "failure" in ministry. Part of our formation is knowing why we are doing what we do so that we serve wholeheartedly: linking our ongoing journey of knowing God with how we share that journey with others. Keeping our vision clear and our passion fresh is an essential part of our regular personal and joint formation for ministry.

Basic to formation is finding ways to lead worship and preach in a style that is comfortable with who you are, so you are not trying to be someone else. Yet we are not doing 'our own thing' but God's: our identity in carrying out ministry is forged in us as undertaking ministry in the presence of God and in the name of God. Further yet, we are carrying out our ministry of lay preaching, worship leading or other roles, in a context of the church and the world: we are linked with God's people in our identity, and in our case with the Uniting Church identity, not an individual with no roots or context. So our ministry identity is both our own personally as developed through the particularity of our own social, cultural and personal lives; and ours as servants of God within the Uniting Church.



For Reflection:

- As you continue to be involved in helping others to understand and respond to the word and work of God in the church and the world: Can you articulate in a couple of sentences why you are involved in lay preaching?
- How do you keep your passion for ministry fresh?
- What do you do when you find yourself flagging at times?
- Along with your multiple identities as parent/ child/ sibling/ work colleague etc., how would you describe your identity as a lay preacher?

Relational Maturity

Relationships! They are wonderful, loving, fun, comforting, growing... and they are the cause of so much of our pain, hurt, anger and confusion. Relationships are messy. Our growing relational and emotional maturity and our ability to deal with the messiness of relationships, is another aspect of our formation as Christian disciples and faithful leaders. We can always learn deeper, richer ways to love and forgiving, so as to have more integrity and grace in the ways we hold on to our values in the midst of contested and conflicting relational space. Dealing with our own emotions and relating to others is influenced by many things, including familial patterns, by our culture, by our own development and personality and by the mores of the different groups we interact with.

The relational patterns in our families shape so much of what we call 'normal' relating, in simple greetings, celebrations and dealing with conflict. Developmentalists argue that the environment we grow up in as children

affects the orientation we have to others. Are we generally trusting? Are we curious or suspicious? Are we confident, can we take initiative in developing relationships or are we self-conscious or filled with doubt? The patterns we unconsciously learn as children are not the final word, but recognising what is foundational in our ways of relating might help us to identify what we do and why, and when we might need to change some patterns.

Cultural norms of expressing emotion and ways of relating may often bring us to confusion or even conflict when we interact with those from other cultures. Attitudes to time and relationality, for instance, may mean at times being present to the other and finishing the relational work when to another this might be seen as not 'being punctual' or 'running over time'. Similarly, our ways of dealing with a difference of opinion, conflict, finance, confidentiality, accountability and so many aspects of life may be viewed quite otherwise by friends and colleagues with different cultural backgrounds. Our flexibility and understanding in dealing with the resulting confusion and more is vital, forming effective relationships in an intercultural Uniting Church.



In your work as a Lay Preacher you will have come face to face with difficult relationships and with your own internal response to tricky situations. Our ways of relating change with our increasing understanding of ourselves and others in relationship. When we are young we think that the world – and so our relationships – revolve around us. We grow through cycles of being dependent (inordinately responsive to the other) and being independent (as we develop our own person) and in maturity hopefully reach a place of working and collaborating in interdependent ways. Part of our formation in this relational aspect is about becoming aware of what drives us as we relate to others. On top of this personal factors, such as a sense of well-being and contentment can affect our ‘relating in the moment’ as can being tired and stressed. Our ability to control our emotional response in one situation regardless of what is going on for us emotionally elsewhere, or despite how tired or stressed we are, is also part of how we express our growing maturity.

In the Uniting Church there is yet another ‘culture’ of relational maturity using consensus decision-making. When we meet as councils our individual and collective maturity helps us listen and speak, agree or dissent, relate well or poorly, and attend to challenging voices from the margins as well as the centre.

You may be involved with others one to one, in small groups, in worship and in the various councils you are part of, as well as the groups and congregations among whom you regularly preach. Developing your relational maturity might mean going beyond the ways you usually relate into what initially feels uncomfortable or even scary, but it will also mean respecting others, developing teamwork, sharing responsibility, and aiming for balance and justice when things go wrong. The world may ‘know we are Christians by our love’: this is our life-long task of growing in relational maturity.

For Reflection:

- How do you think you are doing as you respond to conflict?
- How driven are you to have everyone ‘like you’ or to please everyone, to the extent that you do things you don’t really want to do?
- Or at the other extreme do you just do your own thing, oblivious to how others respond, not caring what others might need or expect from you?
- Take some time to consider the ‘message that you preach’ in the various ways that you relate to others, this can have far more impact that crafting a sermon or leading worship.
- How do you deal with situations where you feel uncomfortable or ill at ease?

Self-Awareness and Self-Reflectivity

Sometimes we use the image of “holding a mirror up to someone”, meaning we want them to see how their actions are impacting on us or others. Self-reflection and self-awareness, that is, seriously looking in the mirror at ourselves, is another aspect of formation. There has been some kick back against self-reflection (in which case it is termed navelgazing). Yet there are very good reasons for taking time to look at ourselves: it is linked with growth in our relationship with God, with our service to others and to our own ongoing behaviour.

Self-awareness and Our Relationship With God:

Through the ages, wise men and women of the church have noted the effect of self-knowledge in our spiritual life.

Augustine: How can you draw close to God when you are far from your own self? Grant Lord, that I may know myself that I may know thee.

Meister Eckhart: No one can know God who does not first know himself.

Teresa of Avila: Almost all problems in the spiritual life stem from a lack of self-knowledge.

Calvin: Our wisdom ... consists almost entirely of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.

As you nurture your spiritual discovery with God, you should also be finding you know yourself better.

Self-awareness and Our Service to Others:

Knowing ourselves also impacts on our ministry to others. As those involved in ministries of leading worship, preaching, caring and teaching, it is important to know what nurtures us, what we need to be paying attention to as we enter our spheres of ministry. If I am tired, stressed, frustrated or otherwise out of sorts, I will need to recognise that and deal with it for myself so it does not interfere as I am involved with others. If we don't pay attention to such self-awareness, our service to others is diminished by our own interfering stuff and we may also disregard or misinterpret what others bring: their context, needs, approaches and perspectives.

Self-awareness and Our Ongoing Behaviour:

If we are unaware of the influences of our past on our life and behaviours, we will continue to respond to them in ways that are both positive and negative. Taking the time to be aware of what has shaped us, of what our 'hot buttons' might be, gives us the opportunity to think about whether or not we agree with the very way we act and respond and if we need to rethink some fundamental positions we take or responses we make. For instance, our families shape attitudes to faith and religion as well as to finance, to politics, to race and gender. We might continue to live out what was modelled for us as children, either through intentional engagement or just have never thought through what a different position or response might be. Or we might respond and react in new ways, through either thoughtful engagement or reactive distancing.

Sometimes we are so busy that we don't take the time to stop and reflect on our experience, our ideas and responses, or our emotional life. Finding time to be still, quiet, alone is the time that we are faced with ourselves. In this still space, you might like to journal or write reflectively, pray, or read Scripture with an openness to hear (more than 'what can I preach about from this passage?'). There are a number of ways that we can thoughtfully re-engage in self-awareness, in intentional ways that also correspond to our preferences for doing and being. If you are happy to do that alone, take time for contemplation. If you prefer to do it with others, find people who help you reflect, 'holy friends,' who are honest and supportive and listen as you explore your inner self; spiritual companions or directors or supervisors are all people who can help us. But it is not all hard work, taking time for self-care, to rest and play can also be the very time when we see ourselves afresh.

For Reflection:

- How long is it since you looked in the mirror of self-awareness?
- How does that self-awareness impact on your relationship with God, with your service to others and to your own ongoing behaviour?

Conclusion

Formation is both incidental, we are shaped by all that happens to us and intentional, we can choose to consider how we have been shaped and how we want to respond to those formative influences in our lives. This might be an opportune time to reconsider your own growth and discipleship and maybe to think ahead to where you may be able to grow further, in the five areas of formation: spiritual discovery, thinking theologically, ministry skills and identity, relational maturity and self-awareness.

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