

What are
**MISSION
CONVERSATIONS?**

*Six starting
questions*

Mission Conversations

Q1. What is 'mission conversation'?

In this resource, and other associated resources, the term 'mission conversation' needs definition. This is because we are giving attention to a particularly important and intentional conversation in the life of every gathered community across the Church.

Mission conversation is '... a structured, or focused, conversation about what a group of people believe God calls them to be or to do'. Such conversations seek to be sufficient to discern agreement and enthusiasm to actively pursue the call of God in Christ together. They include ways to talk authentically as God's people about our identity, our purpose, our witness and service - for the present and in the near future.

Mission conversations are holy conversations energised and guided by God's Holy Spirit. The Basis of Union reminds us that the Church is 'the fellowship of the Holy Spirit' and that 'it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way'². Mission conversations ask: 'What is the Spirit saying to us?' This is a challenging question that asks us to faithfully wrestle with the things of God in the particular space where God has placed us. With the Spirit's help, mission conversations can be understood as discovering together what God is up to and asking how, by grace, God calls us to join as participants and co-workers in Christ.

'The Spirit of God is among the people of God and therefore the answer to the questions of the church's mission life in particular places is among the people. ... Leadership is about cultivating the kind of environment that frees God's people to feel again the winds of the Spirit and to sail the holy gusts of the Spirit's directions in waters where we no longer have good, clear, definitive maps'³.

Q2. Why encourage mission conversation in your gathered community?

Mission conversation is a way of intentionally nurturing our community life within the story of God's mission. The Church is formed by, and shaped for, God's mission. As a 'sent' people of God, we seek fullness in our participation in the unfolding narrative of God's love and grace for all creation. When we engage in mission conversation, we move away from being a collection of individuals with our own opinion about what the church should be doing. We are variously shaped as a community, a body of Christ, who have prayerfully discerned God's call.

Mission conversations get communities talking and thinking about life together. They help everyone recall their central calling as a People of God and how we choose to live that. Mission conversations help communities negotiate differences and discern ways forward. They offer a space for exploring new perspectives, changing contexts and new challenges. They assist in clarifying and guiding decisions that impact a community's leadership, ministry and resourcing requirements for mission. Mission conversations intentionally focus each gathered community upon their high calling in Jesus Christ.

Mission conversations help 'name' the ongoing story of each gathered community. They create a record of what has been discerned, describe what the community presently values in its life and witness, and anticipate the next steps of the community's mission journey with God. The conversation, and the story it tells, may be simple or complex. It may be 'named' quickly or it may require more time and a variety of processes. Since the story is ongoing, there is always more to say.

Each such story is a work-in-progress that describes the ever-changing journey of a particular community of disciples. Our mission conversations reflect an intention of our gathered community to 'order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission' (Basis of Union, Para.13).



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walking together
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seeking community, compassion
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'There is no power equal to a community discovering what it cares about. ... Somewhere in the description of how [a new great humanitarian effort] all began is the phrase: "Some friends and I started talking...". It is always like this. Real change begins with the simple action of people talking about what they care about'.

Q3. What is the best time for mission conversations?

Gathered communities are encouraged to view mission conversations in a 'proactive' way. In this sense, mission conversations are a way of life that involves regular times of intentional discernment together. 'Reactive' mission conversations arise at times of acute need - situations such as a placement vacancy typically precipitate the need to think about the church community's mission commitments. To relieve confusions, these sorts of conversations need environments that nurture respectful listening, honesty and readiness to be vulnerable. This may typically include acknowledging tight timeframes and feelings of loss and uncertainty that may challenge engaging and creative conversations. Such 'reactive' moments will continue to arise, however communities are better placed to respond to such moments when they are supported by a more 'proactive' foundation of regular mission conversation.

Mission conversation takes time and resources. The efforts made by gathered communities will rely upon the gifts God has given: time, faith, love, grace, forgiveness, humility and respect. A wealth of Christian resources will help along the way: prayer, scripture, theological reflection, Christian counsel, learned scholarship, retreat and worship. Any given mission conversation is simply one part of larger ongoing conversation. Our attempts at these conversations

are simply our best faithful efforts to authentically share. There are no quick fixes to the challenges that may arise. We are a human community and therefore our brokenness will hamper our communications and necessitate lament, confession and forgiveness. But we are also a Spirit-gifted community that God is shaping to be a sign and instrument of mission.

Q4. Who should be involved in our mission conversations?

Wherever possible, mission conversations involve the participation of all members of the church community, including diverse voices that typically may be unspoken and unheard, especially those from minority or marginalised groups. One of the first decisions will be to decide how all members of the church community can participate. Mission conversations are diminished when left to a select group, but are enriched by the participation of a full diversity of communal voices.

The details are best developed, organised, and evaluated by a 'planning group'. Such a group will give attention to: engagement processes, participation, communication, recording inputs, drafting and articulating outcomes, seeking feedback, and dealing with practicalities. In the Uniting Church, the Church Council is likely to be best placed to make sure those who are asked to oversee mission conversations are representative of the diversity of the church community and sufficiently skilled to undertake the task. In smaller church communities, it may be the members of the Church Council, or even the whole community, who take on this task.

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Q5. Do we need someone to help guide our mission conversations?

A skilled facilitator from beyond your own community is recommended. A facilitator helps the community have purposeful and meaningful conversations. A facilitator is:

- one who pays full attention to the 'process', and looks to adapt the process in response to group dynamics;
- someone with an objective voice beyond your context that speaks with a degree of independence; and
- an observer/listener who will reflect back to the community what is said and what they believe is not being said or is a truth that the group is avoiding.

It is preferred that the facilitator is not the minister in placement. The appointment of a facilitator from beyond your immediate community sets everyone (especially local leaders) 'free' from responsibilities so they can bring their gifts as contributing members. They can focus on their contribution, listening, discerning the Spirit's lead, rather than being overly concerned about process dynamics.

While facilitators may take a lead role, conversation processes are strengthened by including the leadership of ministers in placement and local leaders. These leaders can offer critical support to ongoing actions and initiatives arising from any mission conversation.



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A facilitator will work with your community to guide the process. The facilitator is someone who joins with you to nurture trust, respectfully listening and making sure everyone's voice is included. There are many pathways for effective mission conversation, with numerous choices of frameworks and resources⁵. A facilitator brings their experience in shaping the most helpful pathway. It is therefore important that the facilitator is identified, and meets with the planning group as early as possible to begin shaping the way forward.

Your Presbytery and the Synod is there to assist. In situations like the filling of a placement vacancy, Presbytery has a formal role that oversees the process and helps facilitate necessary mission conversations, e.g. conversations for the pre-profile Mission Plan. But if a gathered community seeks to be more proactive and intentional, the Presbytery can help to find an appropriate facilitator who can journey with your community over longer periods of time. The Synod's 'equipping Leadership for Mission' (eLM) unit is an important additional source of assistance and partnership. Facilitation support and training is one way both the Presbyteries and the Synod can strengthen mission conversations across the Church.



Q6. How do we hold our own mission conversations?

Each mission conversation is a unique, dynamic event that is energised by the particularities of the community involved. The emphases and characters of each conversation will vary. A one-size-fits-all approach is clearly inappropriate and can be counter-productive. A skilled facilitator helps you plan and hold your own mission conversations.

Additional 'Mission Conversations' resources have been produced to help lay important foundations for healthy conversations. These resources include:

- **Background to MISSION CONVERSATIONS**
- **Vital threads for MISSION CONVERSATIONS**
- **MISSION CONVERSATIONS and the Synod's Strategic Framework**
- **A resource toolbox for MISSION CONVERSATIONS**

As you develop your own mission conversations, these resources provide a helpful starting place to understand the purpose and key components of fruitful conversation. Further resources may periodically be added, including for example:

- i. updates of these initial resources (as needed);
- ii. the identification and creation of new resources as required; and
- iii. example processes for conversations used by gathered communities in various contexts.

¹ Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic planning as a spiritual practice for*

congregations (Alban Institute, 2003), p. 3.

² Uniting Church in Australia, *Basis of Union* (1992), paragraph 3.

³ Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 204.

⁴ Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another: simple conversations to restore hope to the future* (2nd ed.) (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2008), p. 26.

⁵ The companion resource 'A resource toolbox for MISSION CONVERSATIONS' includes a number of frameworks, and other resources, that are helpful for shaping a pathway for your mission conversations.

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