



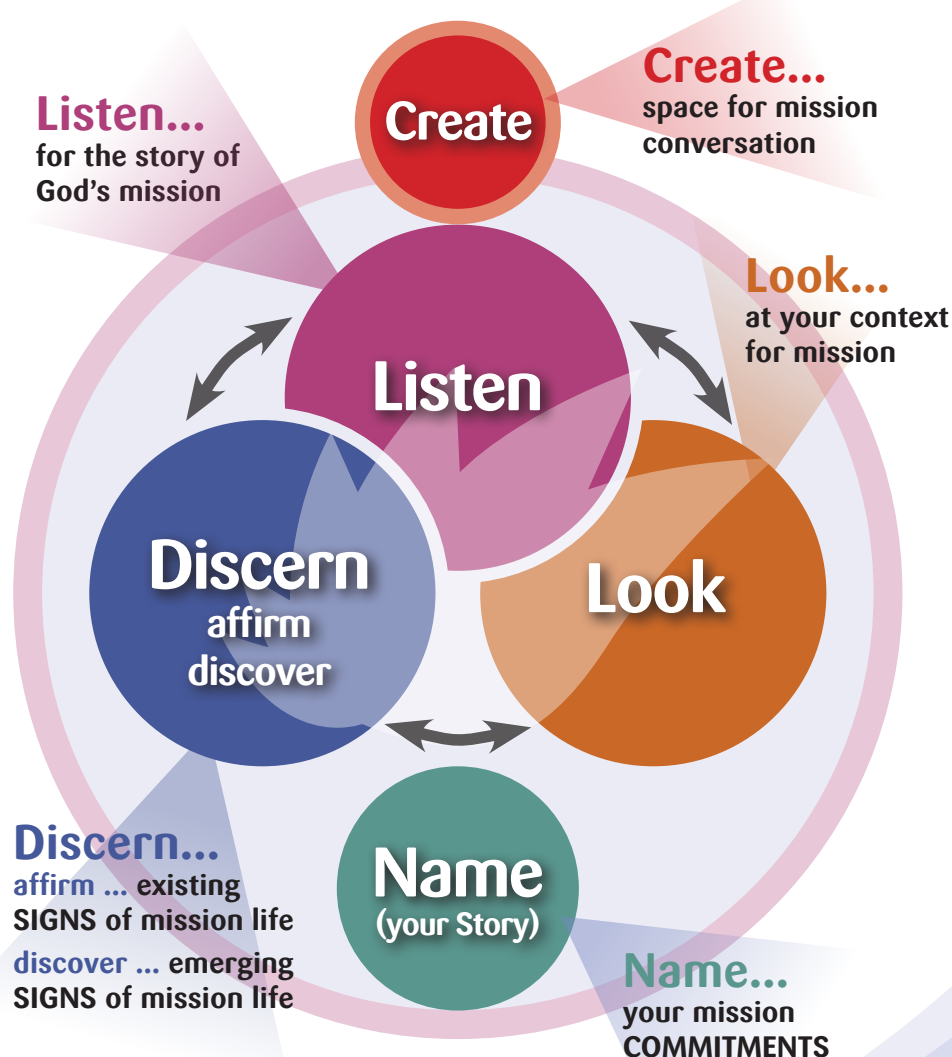
Vital threads for MISSION CONVERSATIONS

Mission Conversations

Considering process: *Wearing a Mission Conversation*

A process for healthy mission conversation involves 'weaving' together some vital threads that help focus the conversation to achieve its intended purpose.¹ Since mission conversation is a dynamic process encompassing the whole life of a particular gathered community, these vital threads will be woven into the fabric of the conversation in a rich variety of ways. A facilitator seeks to make sure these vital threads are attended to. This resource honours these realities by not prescribing a one-size-fits-all process.

This resource proposes that effective mission conversation should give attention to five vital threads. These are not necessarily to be followed in a set sequence. Conversations are *holy events* borne of a community that hears the call of God in Jesus Christ to be a *fellowship of the Holy Spirit*. Mission conversation asks: 'What is the Spirit saying to us?' The resultant process of mission conversation may involve unpredictable movements from one vital thread to another and back again. It is the engagement with each of the five threads that matters, not the order, duration or frequency of how these threads are woven. **The five vital threads are depicted in the adjacent diagram.**



These five vital threads
CREATE, LISTEN, LOOK, DISCERN and **NAME**
are described in the following pages.



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Create

Create... space for mission conversation

'Our task is to help people concentrate on the real but often hidden event of God's active presence in their lives. Hence, the question that must guide all organising activity in a parish is not how to keep people busy, but how to keep them from being so busy that they can no longer hear the voice of God who speaks in silence'.²

Mission conversation requires us to take time-out from our normal routines and purposefully nurture a holy space for community, sharing, reflection, assessment and evaluation. This is a retreat space to re-engage and renew our missional imaginations as a community of God's people. It is a space to stop - to listen for the heartbeat of God, to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and to feel the wind of the Spirit.

This vital thread, CREATE, requires the deliberate attention of those who organise and lead mission conversations. Do not rush into conversation until due effort is made in regard to purpose, process and safe practice. A skilled facilitator is invaluable in nurturing a shared, respectful and open process. They will help negotiate with participants agreed guidelines for expected group behaviour, and share information to make the processes and objectives clear for each conversation.

Mission conversation requires a 'safe' space in which to faithfully name our story as a community of God's people. For all participants, it needs to be a 'safe space' to:

- seek God's voice in prayer, reflection and silence;
- listen respectfully to the voices offered;
- share honestly your thoughts and feelings;
- acknowledge our diversity and give safe space for difference of opinion;
- affirm and critically reflect;
- listen to scripture, and hear again a Gospel word;
- be open to questions, and able to sit with uncertainties.

We acknowledge 'safe space' is important because mission conversations may be difficult for many individuals and communities, particularly in times of change. Questions and uncertainties may arise. Feelings and anxieties may need to be sensitively heard and held by the community. Participants should be reassured that their contribution is voluntary and, if anxieties are felt, they are supported and free to withdraw at any time.

'Until people can put their feelings into words and be heard, they are held captive by unarticulated anxiety. ... create a listening place to allow people to become aware of what is happening within and among them. ... an environment in which people discover the language for talking about what they are experiencing'.³

The created space seeks to affirm that the Spirit is at work shaping and guiding us for God's mission. We seek a space where the unique imagination of God's people can find collective voice as the Spirit enables. It will require time, respect, love, patience, humility before one another, and openness to the Spirit's unpredictable leading. It will be enriched by drawing on the rich disciplines and practices of the Christian tradition

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including: prayer, worship, study of scripture, proclamation and community.

This vital thread, CREATE, requires intentional effort as we declare together *"We need this space"*. We will take time to affirm our sense of community by gathering in worship, hearing stories of faith, and by eating together and sharing our personal stories. As we anticipate future mission conversations, we might begin by building our sense of community with questions like:

- When are you happiest? Personally? In your life experiences of faith and church?
- Describe a time when God surprised you in your journey of faith?
- What are you most fearful of? What makes you nervous for the future of your community?
- When are you full of hope? What makes you hopeful for the future of your community?
- How would you describe what is good about your gathered community to a visitor?
- What do you feel is the biggest challenge presently facing your community?



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Listen

Listen... for the story of God's mission

'Mission is God's and what we need is not action but a fundamental orientation, a way of being, that will enable us to join in that mission. It is a matter of love, of humility, of vulnerability and of openness'.⁴

The LISTEN thread of mission conversation engages the gathered community with the Mission of God.

It gives attention to hearing again the grand narrative of God's work of saving grace and the mission heart of God that looks to 'that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation' (BOU, #3).

This vital thread invites us to ask:

WHO are we? WHY are we? It is a conversation about our understanding of God's mission, and how and why the Church is brought into being. It is to remind us of our 'high calling in Jesus Christ' (BOU, # 5c). This is a conversation which sharpens our sense of God's call to be a missional people. Drawing on the suggested resources list below may help focus this vital thread of conversation.



Such a conversation may take time.

As is the necessary regular practice of God's people, it is vital that we turn again and again to hear the call of the Gospel. You may, if practical, continue to weave the LISTEN thread throughout your mission conversation. Aspects of this conversation may include:

- Understanding God's Mission – God's purposes for us and all creation
- The Church – a community formed by God's Mission (a sign)
- The Church – a community sharing as co-workers in God's Mission (an instrument)
- UCA identity – Basis of Union (a 'Manifesto for Renewal' ⁵)
- UCA identity – the discerning work of Councils of the Church
- The work of the Holy Spirit, and the church as a fellowship of the Spirit
- Engaging scripture – narratives for missional learning

SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

- **Introducing the Vision and Mission Principles: Information and exercises to help focus on God's Mission.** Synod of Vic/Tas (March 2017)
- **Theological reflections on the Vision and Mission Principles.** Synod of Vic/Tas (2016)
- **Exploring the Vision: A study series for small groups.** (March 2018)

The above three resources are available at <https://ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources/>

- **Leaders in God's Mission: six studies for elders, church councils and others.** Rob Bos (MediaCom Education, 2015)
- **Jesus Christ according to the Basis of Union: four studies for groups.** Geoff Thompson (MediaCom Education, 2014)

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Look

Look... at your context for mission

'A church can lose touch with its community. It can cease listening to what is happening outside its meetings, the inner group, and the four walls of the building. [Yet] the Spirit has been poured out in the church for the sake of the world and the kingdom. We can do no less than lead our people incarnationally into their community and neighbourhood'.⁶

Our participation in God's mission is grounded in a context. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Just as God's missional heart found embodied expression in Jesus Christ, so the call of Christ gathers a people of God to be a visible 'embodied' community. As a fellowship of the Holy Spirit, that visible community is to be a sign and instrument of the mission of God in and for the world. The Basis of Union (# 15a) declares: "The congregation is the embodiment **in one place** of the one holy catholic and apostolic church".



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God's Spirit is continually shaping your community to be God's people in and for that 'one place'. It is therefore incumbent upon each community to be a people of God **for that place** by: discovering that place, learning about that place, experiencing and engaging in that place. This is specific and particular. There is no other community like yours; no other context for the God's mission like yours.

This vital LOOK thread invites us to ask: WHERE are we? WHEN are we?

Context is not simply about statistics; not simply about geography and demographics. It is primarily about people, communities, and how they experience life together. It is about changes and events that shape a community life. This will be different compared with experiences of past generations.

'The Stats have Faces resource has been produced to help your congregation build a better understanding of your local community. Along the way you may discover that familiar people and places have changed, and that there are new challenges and possibilities where you live and worship'.⁷

And so this LOOK thread wrestles with questions arising from our engagement with the world around us. They plumb the experiences of our own gathered community and the wider community. Some example questions might be:

- Where are the points of connection between your church community and the wider community? What do these connections say about the needs in the wider community?
- What are the forces shaping lives (yours and your neighbours) today? How have these changed from 10, 20, 30 years ago? What changes are likely in the coming years?
- Where and how do people in your gathered community experience friendship, hope and meaning?

- If Jesus is to be found on the margins, in places of need, where in your wider community are you most likely to find him?
- What are the greatest needs around you? Don't consider just 'in theory' needs, but look at insights from personal experiences and encounters.
- How would you describe the 'heartbeat' of your context? What are the images or stories that capture that heartbeat?
- What diversity do you notice in your community? Do needs vary with age or culture?
- What are the pains, needs and anxieties that people carry in their life?
- Where do you feel that God needs you to be at work in your community?
- What sort of responses by your gathered community could make a real local difference?
- Who could you interview in your community to gather fuller responses to these questions?
- What do people from the wider community say about your gathered community?

A SHORT STORY: Members of a small congregation on the outskirts of Melbourne arranged to meet with school captains at their local secondary school. The students talked about going home to an empty house (both parents typically work) and the need in the student-body for a 'safe' afterschool homework club. The congregation are working out how to help.

As we engage our context, we discover more fully who we are.

There is a life-giving relationship between LISTEN and LOOK, between God's mission of love and the particularity of our local participation in mission. Encountering and serving our context, we learn more about who God calls us to be. Indeed, as we step out in faith to actively and practically love the world, we are shaped and formed

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as Church. As we follow Christ and the lead of God's Spirit, we are compelled to encounter our world - discovering ourselves in places of need, on the margins of life, serving with love and grace. And that is where we will draw alongside Christ who has gone ahead us.

SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

- ***Engaging the Areas of Focus: Informing a Whole of Church conversation.*** (November 2017). This resource helps initiate discussion about 'when we are'. It considers the changing realities of our contemporary Australian context. There is lots to inform us and lots to discern. Available for download from <https://ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources/>
- ***Stats have Faces: Congregation local area exploration process - Leaders Guide*** together with ***Stats have Faces - series handouts.*** Produced by the Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod ©2014. The Stats have Faces resource offers an accessible and engaging process for exploring local community context. Outcomes provide valuable information and reflections that precede and inform any planned mission conversation. This resource is available for download from the Queensland Synod at <https://ucaqld.com.au/faiht/leadership/stats-have-faces-helping-your-congregation-engage-its-community/>.



Mission Conversations



Discern... the SIGNS of mission life

Where is God's mission most alive among us? Where has the Spirit fruitfully led us in recent times, and what new ground for mission is the Spirit revealing?

What existing signs would we seek to **AFFIRM**? What new and emerging signs can we **DISCOVER**?

In seeking to DISCERN the signs of mission life, our mission conversation attempts to identify where God's mission is finding healthy expression.

Various processes can be employed to help focus our conversation on what our community discerns as the most life-giving signs of the Spirit's work among us.

Such a conversation is intentionally focused upon the positive signs rather than the negative struggles. All gathered communities will struggle to discern. Focusing on the positive signs generates energy rather than depletes it. People will inevitably disagree. Some will treasure certain aspects of community life, while others will be passionate about what they consider is important. And so, a discerning conversation may require time and should not be rushed. It will be invaluable to provide space (note the CREATE thread): to share, to listen, to pray, to hear diverse opinions, to encounter God's Word in scripture together, to find consensus in the Spirit's guidance.

This conversation acknowledges that our gathered community life is dynamic and always changing! The root word for organisation is the same as 'organic' and 'organism'. Paul directs our attention this way in 1 Corinthians 12:27 by saying: 'Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part

of it'. Each gathered community is an organism – a living, breathing, dynamic organism that changes and grows. And just like our own bodies, some aspects are healthy and some struggle. Some habits need to be challenged because they have become (for whatever reason) no longer good for us. Some new life-giving opportunities are starting to find expression that needs to be pursued and nurtured. Such dynamism is a SIGN of the Spirit's power and of the presence of Jesus Christ – the Head of the body.

The outcome of the DISCERN thread is an agreed sense of mission commitments that reflect your gathered community's current and emerging life and witness. It may require repeated revisiting of other threads in the mission conversation – notably the LOOK and LISTEN vital threads – that affirm and challenge current practice.

affirm...
existing SIGNS of mission life
Where is God's mission most alive in our life today?

The AFFIRM thread seeks to 'read' your existing worship, witness and service as a gathered community in the light of God's mission purposes and the particularities of your mission context. In all that we are and in all that we do, where do we discern that we are most fruitfully participating within the flow of God's mission? Where are we involved with our local context so that we make a real difference to people's lives, and our part of creation, with the love of God? In this vital thread of mission conversation, you will be helped by drawing on your learnings from the LOOK and LISTEN threads.

An 'Affirmative Inquiry' (AI) process may be helpful to lead your mission conversation for this vital thread. Such an approach focuses upon the strength, faithfulness and vitality of your community's life and witness. A key to a successful AI process is the sort of questions we ask ourselves. Generally we seek to identify and propose questions that open up discussion and focus on the positives. Where are we at our best? Where is God's mission expressed in the most vital and life-

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giving ways? These questions have a good chance of generating excitement and energy for engagement.

We explore our present realities and identify:

- What is most valuable to us; what is most crucially important? Why?
- What most 'energises' us about our existing life and witness?
- In our life together, when are we reminded about and nurtured by the story of God's love for the world?
- How are we sustained as followers of Christ for the journey of mission participation?
- What are the stories we share that speak of our identity and our faithfulness?
- What is distinctive about us – in our history, in our declared convictions?
- What aspects of life together most frustrate us or raise anxiety? What do these things tell us about what is important to us?
- What words, symbols, pictures affirm what is important in our life together?
- When are we at our best?
- Where do we see God's grace most evident among us and through us?
- Where do I see faith most alive in our community?
- What does the wider community say about our church community?
- What do we need to stop doing so that we are more focused on what matters?



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Identify an agreed list of the most vital 3-5 signs of existing mission life.

Through an inclusive process of sharing, listening and prioritisation, challenge your gathered community to identify the signs that are vital expressions of your participation in God's mission. Keeping the list short focuses the community on what is most important. Later, the listed items can be explored in greater detail so that you can intentionally support and nurture these existing signs of mission life.

Discover...

new and emerging SIGNS of mission life

What new sparks of mission life is the Spirit seeking to light?

'God is eternal newness. God impels us constantly to set out anew, to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond. ... we will find Jesus there; indeed, he is already there; ... Let us ask the Lord for the grace not to hesitate when the Spirit calls us to take a step forward In this way, the Church will not stand still, but constantly welcome the Lord's surprises'.⁸

God's Holy Spirit is forever breathing new life into the Church – like fresh breathe into an oxygen starved body. 'On the [pilgrim] way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacrament, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way' (Basis of Union, Para 3). As the body of Christ, each gathered community constantly strikes out in new and renewing ways in response to Christ's call and the Spirit's prompting. We pray that the words of the Basis of Union (Para 4) faithfully ring true: 'In his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews [his called people] as his Church'.

To DISCOVER such signs, we will need to be intentional in our vulnerability and listening.

We need to be vulnerable because we may need to be brave in speaking up. The voice of 'the one' may be the voice through whom the Spirit speaks. The voice of a small minority may stand alone expressing a Spirit-led conviction that the majority has never considered yet needs to hear. For example, the recent experience of a younger person may trigger a new initiative of compassionate service; the feelings of a newcomer may shed light on an ingrained culture in the life of the community that needs to change.

Respectful listening will support vulnerability. Let us be slow to speak and quick to listen. Remember how crucial it is for mission conversation to unfold in a space that is safe for everyone. It always requires effort to listen well – particularly when new sparks of mission are at odds with your own experience and perspective. The Synod's booklet 'Understanding the Strategic Priorities (2016-2022)' may help you understand and reflect on this DISCOVER vital thread of mission conversation.

The DISCOVER vital thread may be a surprising part of your mission conversation. Where is the Spirit of God trying to get your attention? Is the Spirit pointing your gathered community in a direction you have never contemplated?

'In the incarnation we discern that God is always found in what appears to be the most godforsaken of places – the most inauspicious of locations, people, and situations. God seems to be present where there is little or no expectations'.⁹

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We explore new and emerging mission life by asking questions like:

- Where do I notice the new sparks of life? Who is involved? Why did it spark my attention?
- What are the "what if..." dreams that people in your community share over coffee?
- What new voice is trying to be heard in our community? Who might offer a different perspective on God's mission?
- Who might have something to say, but they have not been given the chance?
- What is happening in our wider community that is trying to get our attention; what are people asking us to consider? What new need have you seen?
- Share one idea where you think God is trying to get our attention.
- Recall any recent conversation or encounter that triggered a compassionate or heartfelt response in you.
- Is there something that someone often talks about but you seldom pay attention to?
- Have new partnerships emerged between your gathered community and the wider community? What possibilities do these partnerships point to?
- On reflection, have there been any 'triggering' experiences or events that have stayed with you. Are there any Spirit-led 'promptings' in these recollections?



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Identify an agreed list of the most vital 3-5 signs of new and emerging mission life. Follow a process similar to that adopted for AFFIRM, keeping the list short to focus the community on the most important signs. Later, the listed items can be explored in detail so that you can intentionally support and nurture these new and emerging signs of mission life.

SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

- **LISTEN and LOOK** - outcomes from what you've learnt in these vital threads of your mission conversation.
- **Affirmative Inquiry** - some suggested resources are offered in 'A resource toolbox for MISSION CONVERSATIONS'. Your facilitator may also have helpful resources in guiding AI processes
- **Introducing the Vision and Mission Principles: Information and exercises to help focus on God's Mission.** (March 2017)

Exploring the Vision: A study series for small groups. (March 2018)

These resources can be used to help your community evaluate your existing life through the lens of the Synod's Vision and Mission Principles. For instance, where can we discern the effective presence of 'compassion' in our life as a gathered community? Various aspects of life may reflect a number of the mission principles simultaneously. Available for download from

<https://ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources/>

- **Understanding the Strategic Priorities (2016-2022).** Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (November 2017).

This resource can help initiate exploration of the new and emerging aspect of mission life. It considers what is involved in hearing, engaging and being challenged by diverse voices in our mission conversation. Available for download from <https://ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources/>



NAME...

your mission COMMITMENTS

Key question: At this time, what are our agreed mission commitments and what are our NEXT STEPS in living out those commitments?

Your mission conversation is 'captured' in this NAME vital thread.

It articulates what you've learnt and your outcomes. It records the ongoing mission story of your gathered community. This story is not static. Rather, it is a dynamic storytelling. And so, as we NAME our mission commitments, we acknowledge that we remain open to change. For the Spirit continues to shape and direct our life as a sign and instrument of God's mission. Our efforts will need adjusting as circumstances change, new possibilities are encountered, and as we listen for the Spirit's voice.

Finalise the list of mission commitments

that has emerged from your mission conversation. This list of prioritised commitments will reflect what you've learnt and the outcomes of the 'woven conversation' - in particular the dynamic interaction of the three threads: LOOK, LISTEN and DISCERN. As you finalise your list, give attention to the following:

- discerned outputs from the AFFIRM and DISCOVER threads;
- a healthy balance of existing (affirm) and emerging (discern) commitments;
- be as specific as you can; avoid being so vague that you avoid any real substance;
- let the total number of commitments be achievable for your community (not too many);
- do you have a sufficiently passionate team of people (small or large) ready to actively pursue each commitment?

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- consider how your commitments excite and energise the missional heart of the community;
- claim a common sense of God's call upon your community to resource and support those who can lead your identified commitments

Detail the 'next steps' associated with each commitment.

In many ways, this is a harder exercise than simply naming your mission commitments. However, detailing each commitment is worth the effort because it will guide future actions and give a basis for evaluating progress. In some sense, this 'next steps' exercise is more important than any grand vision. Mission conversations need to give attention to the details as much as they look at 'big picture' thinking. Strive to tease out answers to questions like:

- WHAT are the next steps we pursue to further this commitment?
- WHO is committed to leading initiatives related to this mission commitment?
- HOW will actions be taken or trialled?
- HOW will participation be invited and encouraged?
- WHEN will it be tried?
- WHAT training and resources are needed? What partnerships will help us move forward?
- HOW will progress be assessed and when?



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Another model of approach could explore these perspectives:

- INVITE - Who might we invite into conversation to further these commitments?
- EQUIP - What training is needed for the commitments?
- ENCOURAGE - What is needed to encourage these commitments? What mentoring, group support, and follow up?
- EVALUATE - How will we know how we are progressing, learning, adapting?

The Synod's booklet '*Supporting information on the Statements of Intent*' may provide a helpful lens to strengthen the 'next steps' associated with each mission commitment.

Describe a vision that honours your mission commitments. This may be a review and modification of your current Vision as a gathered community. Or it may require a complete rethink about the words that capture where the vision of your mission commitments are pointing. This vision expresses your community's effort to describe the call of God upon your life together. The key question is: What will your priority mission commitments look like when they are fully achieved? 'Dream' of the future three-five years from now and ask:

- Who is part of what is happening?
- Who has benefitted and who is being blessed by the mission life?
- How have people grown and changed – in faith? In ministry? In service?
- How has God been honoured in the community witness?
- How has God's love been shared and experienced beyond the church?
- Does the vision acknowledge, inspire and encourage the community's ongoing participation in God's mission? Is it memorable and clear? Does it paint a helpful picture of the future?

Plan to share the details of your mission conversation. How will you share the results of your mission conversation – today and in the time ahead; within your gathered community and with the wider community?

- How will it be communicated?
- How will it speak to your leadership and organisational structures?
- How will you encourage discussion and seek/consider feedback?
- How will your commitments remain open to amendment and new insight?
- How will your commitments be communicated and kept 'alive' within the community in the time ahead?

CHECK LIST: Have we captured what needs to be said from our mission conversations?

- Have we named our mission commitments?
- Are we committed to them? If not, remove them from the list!
- Have we teased out the details to move forward with our commitments in the coming year(s)?
- Have we named what resources and supports we need?
- Have we articulated a vision that these commitments point to?
- Have we asked how to foster ongoing mission conversation: in our leadership meetings, in our group life, in our worship?
- Have we set a time to review our progress and update our 'living' commitments? Have we set a time – perhaps in 3, 6 or 12 months – to CREATE our next space for mission conversation?

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SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

- **LISTEN, LOOK and DISCERN** - outcomes from what you've learnt in these vital threads of your mission conversation
- **Supporting information on the Statements of Intent.** Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (July 2017). This resource may assist gathered communities as they wrestle with the details of 'next steps'. How do we organise ourselves to remain focused on God's mission in a changing world? The ten Statements of Intent speak to how, with the Spirit's help, we might organise ourselves in a way that 'smooths the path of a faithful pilgrimage'.¹⁰ Available for download from <https://ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources/>

¹ The purpose of mission conversations is explored in complementary Mission Conversations resources.

² Henry Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), p. 63.

³ A. Roxburgh and F. Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 87.

⁴ Francis Brienen, "Mission in Bold Humility: Sharing in God's Mission Today" in *Uniting Church Studies* Vol.5 No.1 (March 1999): p. 14.

⁵ Andrew Dutney, *Manifesto for Renewal: the shaping of a new church* (Unley SA: Media Education, 2016).

⁶ A. Roxburgh and F. Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 182.

⁷ Stats have Faces – *Leaders Guide* (Queensland Synod, 2014), p. 4.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and be glad), on the call to holiness in today's world (March 2018).

⁹ A. Roxburgh and F. Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), p. 17.

¹⁰ D'Arcy Wood, *Building on a Solid Basis* (JBCE: Melbourne, 1986), p. 61.

