



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

Exploring the Vision

A study series
for small groups

Following Christ,
walking together
as First and Second Peoples,
seeking community, compassion
and justice **for all creation**

Study 6 For all Creation



Study 6

For all Creation

Pre-study preparation for leaders

In this study, 'Exploring the Theme' and 'Connecting with Scripture' are combined into one section. In addition to the familiar introductory and worship components, the central sections are designed to encourage creative engagement.

- 'Exploring and Connecting' – On pages 4 and 5, five images offer personal reflection and group discussion about our relationship with the Earth. Readers can choose one image, a selection or all of the images as a focus for reflection and prayer. The images are also on the Study Series tab at: ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/ if you would like to project them or create 'stations' to encourage people to move about.
- 'Considering our Response' – Five responses offer reflection and prayer that may help shape our personal commitments to issues raised in this study. Creative engagements with the five responses are encouraged. Response 5 audio file is on the Study Series tab at: ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/

Leaders of your gathered community are encouraged to creatively shape this study. Planning may allow for group interaction in familiar and new ways.

'Additional Resources' are provided at the end of this study. These offer ideas to combine with one or more of the earlier activities or to use in other group or worship settings.

INTRODUCTION

In the Uniting Church's 1977 Statement to the Nation, we affirmed that as a church,

"We are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for their use and enjoyment."

Paragraph three of the UCA's Basis of Union reminds us of that "coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation". God's desire and purpose is the healing and wholeness of all creation.

In confession, we acknowledge that too often the Church has stood with those who would dominate and misuse the land in irresponsible

and destructive ways. Yet, in following the witness of the First Peoples, the Church is reminded of the call to care for God's creation, to uphold its integrity and to protect the life that comes from God as a gift and blessing¹. The Synod's Vision invites us to seek this hope for all creation, walking together as First and Second Peoples, through the divine gifts of community, compassion and justice.

How do we understand this commitment today? The Christian message is always spoken in a particular time and place. It is an embodied word. Forty years on from the Statement to the Nation, we are still working through the challenges of how we treat our natural environment. How do we understand our relationship with creation in a relevant and sustainable way for our current context? This study offers some images of that relationship to encourage us to explore and respond.

Key Contributors:

Ms Cath James, Rev Michele Lees, Rev Wes Campbell, Rev Gordon Bannon, all from Castlemaine District Uniting Church, Presbytery of Loddon Mallee.

¹From 'Theological reflections on the Vision and Mission Principles' April 2016 – available online at: ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources/

GATHERING WORSHIP

Welcome

Scripture: Psalm 148

This Psalm is a call to all things in heaven and on earth to praise the Lord.

Consider reading this Psalm as a group, perhaps in creative ways. Some ways include: reading verse-by-verse around the circle; alternate reading between two halves of the gathered community; or women and men reading alternately. If you have a projector, appropriate images could be displayed as the Psalm is read.

Share:

Invite anyone who is willing to briefly share their most treasured image of creation from Psalm 148.

Prayer:

After nominating a leader, share the following responsive prayer:

This we know, the earth does not belong to us,

We belong to the earth

This we know, all things are connected,

In ways that are seen and unseen

This we know, we did not weave
the web of life

We are merely a strand in it

This we know, whatever we do to the web

We do to ourselves

Let us give thanks for the gift of creation

**Let us give thanks that all things hold together
in Christ**

Amen

EXPLORING & CONNECTING

This section offers five different images and ways to understand our relationship with the Earth. Each image invites personal reflection and group discussion. See also the earlier section on page 2, 'Pre-study preparation for leaders'.



Source: flickr.com/photos/gsf/6049973495/

Image 1: Voyage to the Moon

This vivid photograph of the blue planet Earth set against the dark velvet of space reminds us that our present generation views the universe in ways which differ vastly even from our recent ancestors. Only a few centuries ago the Earth was thought to be flat, surrounded by chaotic waters. Recent scientific investigation has given us access to the immensely complex microscopic world, to the vast distances of space, and even to the structures of human life itself².

Scripture: Psalm 24:1-2

For reflection:

How does this image affect and/or inform your understanding of creation and your relationship to it?

Image 2: Care for the Earth



Source: Pixabay free images

In Genesis 2, God asks us to “till the garden and keep it” (Gen 2:15), placing us as the caregivers. Care for the earth is widely used to describe our relationship with the Earth. For many gardeners it is an image that resonates. However, there is a risk that this image can subtly reinforce the idea that the Earth is separate from ourselves, that we are in control as the carers and earth is the ‘thing’ we do something to.

Scripture: Genesis 1:20-25

For reflection

How does this image affect and/or inform your understanding of creation and your relationship to it?

Image 3: Web of Life



Source: Pixabay

²Wes Campbell, *Christian Faith in the 21st Century*, Uniting Church Centre for Theology and Ministry, Nov 2016, p.6

The biblical creation story in Genesis 1 reminds us that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1) and, despite the distinct creation of heaven and earth, both were good. Pope Francis wisely reminds us: “Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.”³

Humans have always struggled with how to integrate aspects of ourselves with the world – body and spirit, mind and matter, church and the world, individual and community. In Galatians we are reminded that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

If we understand God as Creator and ‘sin’ as disconnection from God, from our neighbour, and from creation, then sin includes our own disconnection from the physical world; such disconnection contributes to the ‘groaning of creation’ (Romans 8:22). God’s desire for us is to be made whole and this includes wholeness in the physical and the spiritual realms of our lives.

Scripture: Romans 8:18-23.

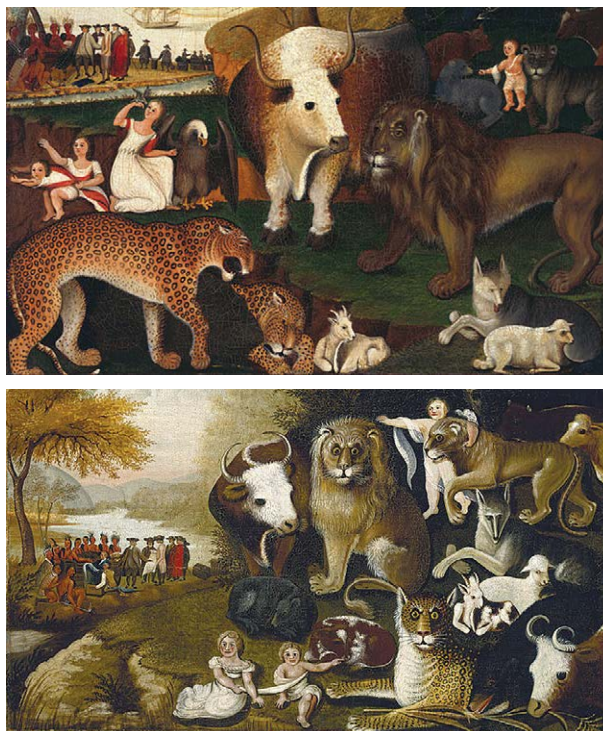
For reflection

In what ways do you experience separation from the Earth?

In what ways do you experience integration?

Are there ways in which we experience or perceive the ‘groaning of creation’?

Image 4: The Peaceable Kingdom - finding hope



Source: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_Hicks_-_The_Peaceable_Kingdom_-_Google_Art_Project_(723124).jpg

The prophet Isaiah had a vision of a new creation, a peaceful kingdom. This new kingdom is ruled by one who is righteous and has “the spirit of the knowledge of the Lord” (Is 11:2). The Earth is also “full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Is 11:9) with predator and prey dwelling together peacefully and a vulnerable child living safely. This image is echoed in Isaiah 65.

Quaker Edward Hicks (1780–1845) displayed his understanding of the new creation with a series of paintings under the title *Peaceable Kingdom* (see above). In Hicks’ paintings we see animals of the field and air together in harmony with young children and a female. This could well be his depiction of Isaiah 11:6-9. In the background we see a group of Quaker settlers signing a treaty with the Native Americans. Could this reflect Isaiah 11:1-5?

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9

For reflection

How can a lion and an ox dwell together? What happens to the lion’s carnivorous nature now that the lion will eat straw like the ox? Is the lion still a lion? How can this “vision of the future” also be “what shapes our living in the world in the present”?⁴ How does Isaiah’s vision of a new creation encourage you to live today seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation?

³ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* - on care of our common home (2015), Article 139.

⁴ Howard Wallace, Year C After Pentecost: Isaiah 65, hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/

Image 5: Creator Spirit



Source: www.flickr.com/photos/iprahin/8065220178

From Joy Murphy-Wandin, Wurundjeri elder ⁵

“Aboriginal people have totems or moieties and for the Wurundjeri people it’s Bunjil the Eagle. Whenever there is a fearsome time or a time of doubt, or you’re not quite sure which way to go or what you should do, most times an eagle will feature, just fly, just be visible, and in that way it gives me a sense that I’m doing the right thing.

“So Aboriginal Spirituality is the law I guess, because what it means is our ancestors have left their mark on this land so that we can just follow on in what they did, in their footsteps, in their way of life. And even though times have changed, it still comes back to being a spiritual creation. Bunjil created the land, the mountains, the rivers, the animals, the birds, the trees, all living and natural things and that is why we have the greatest respect for the land. We are born from this land, we belong to this land, and we take care of this land, we respect this land, and we should only ever take from the land what we can give back.”

Scripture: Isaiah 55:10-13

For reflection

How do you relate to this understanding of our relationship with the Earth?

What spiritual practices, if any, remind us to connect with the Earth?

CONSIDERING OUR RESPONSE

Many people struggle to make their day-to-day lives reflect what they believe. There is no one big fix or one-size-fits-all. We need to constantly discern God’s vision for the future as well as tend to and grapple with what we have in the world here and now. For our world to be made whole in light of the environmental damage we are experiencing, we need to be involved in lots of little changes, in lots of places, for a long time. It involves connecting with our particular place to find our own solutions as well as seeing the bigger picture.

We may also have a range of feelings. For some, there may be feelings of guilt and shame for not doing enough; pain when we see waste, pollution, mining and forests cut down; or feelings of indifference or righteousness. Identifying how we feel is an important part of being able to respond.

In addition to our personal response, we need to identify community and global responses. ‘Sin’ can be as much structural and societal as it is personal and familial.

“We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”⁶

How can we respond?

Five responses are offered on the following pages for reflection and prayer. Participants (individually or together) are invited to identify responses and commitments they can make in their own lives.

⁵ This is an excerpt only. You can watch this talk (2:38 mins) at: www.yarrahealing.catholic.edu.au/stories-voices/index.cfm?loadref=79

⁶ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* - on care of our common home (2015), Article 139.

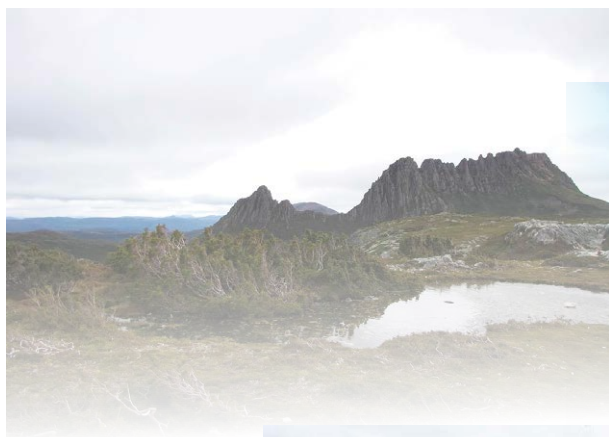
RESPONSE 1

Connecting with your place

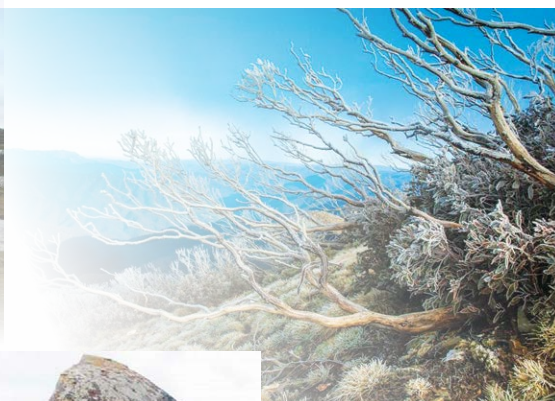
Where do you live and where do you come from?
How do you connect with your place?

These images represent an element of each of the presbyteries in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. Choose an image and imagine yourself

in the landscape. What might you be doing? Does it represent the presbytery you are in? Does it interest, bore, scare or invite you? What alternative photo/image would you suggest that captures your sense of place? And how might you respond to that place with care for creation?



*Cradle Mountain,
Presbytery of Tasmania,
Photo: Paul Chalson*



*Mt Feathertop,
Presbytery of North East Victoria,
Photo: Ian Ferguson*

*Wilsons Prom,
Presbytery of Gippsland,
Photo: Cath James*



*Kangaroo Ground, Yarra Yarra Presbytery,
Photo: Andrew Boyle*



*Black Rock, Presbytery of Port Philip East,
Photo: Ian Ferguson*



*Windmill, Ouyen,
Presbytery of Loddon Mallee,
Photo: Cath James*



*Brunswick, Presbytery of Port Philip West,
Photo: Ian Ferguson*



*Wind near Warracknabeal, Presbytery of Western
Victoria, Photo: Hoon You*

RESPONSE 2

Make it real!

Sustainability is abstract, which means we can continue being 'unsustainable' because it doesn't feel real. In Australia, many of us are affluent enough to be buffered from the effects of droughts, poor crops and floods. Shopping at a supermarket gives us the illusion that things grow all year round. We continue to transport food from overseas or between states regardless of the energy it uses, and we remain disconnected from our local growing seasons.

Try growing your own food or buy local and seasonal produce to stay in touch with what is going on around you.

Notice the changes in the season and keep records from year-to-year noting when birds come, plants flower and rain falls.

RESPONSE 3

Reclaim spiritual traditions

The church has a rich tradition of setting limits in order for us to realise abundance. For example: fasting, letting the earth lie fallow, keeping the Sabbath/day of rest. Discuss how we might reconnect with some of these rituals or create new ones as a community?

Try living without something in order to appreciate when it is in season and in abundance. For more tips on how to do this see: *The Art of Frugal Hedonism*, www.frugalhedonism.com/

RESPONSE 4

Make beauty and awe a part of your life

Many of us connect with God through the beauty and awe of creation. Where and how do you experience this? Find a way of making this part of your daily life – a walk in the bush or on the beach, time in the garden, or other moments with nature you enjoy.

RESPONSE 5

Share, learn and take action with others beyond your group

Share with others by listening to some audio reflections. You can find this audio file on the Study Series tab at:

ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/

Read some stories here about what churches and communities are doing:

greenchurch.victas.uca.org.au/what-are-churches-doing/

Find out how you can be involved in societal change with the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania:

www.justact.org.au/

CLOSING WORSHIP

Prayer

Have someone in your group lead the following prayer, but pause where indicated to collectively recall your learnings and commitments that have arisen from this study.

God your creative Spirit embraces this earth
You are the beginning and the end
You give breath to all life
Purpose to all creation.

May we know the deepness of your love
The fullness of the world in which we live
The wonder of the infinitely small
And the awe of the majestic

Pause in silence to recall:

- ***the image(s) that helped your learning in the Exploring section.***
- ***the specific commitments you identified in the Response section.***

In the silence, offer these as personal prayers:

God of hope,
we long for a renewed earth
and so we commit ourselves
to be in this time, this place
to be the outpouring of your love in the world
Amen

[Optional – before concluding, invite participants to name (in just a few words) any affirmations, discoveries or insights they'd like to share with the group]

Closing prayer (by Rev Jennie Gordon)

Pray together:

***We go on,
in the compassionate community of love,
finding wonder and wisdom
in all we encounter,
being bearers of hope, kindness and grace
in the name of Christ,
Amen***

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Speaking with the Earth (prayer idea)

What is the Earth telling us?

What do we want to say to the Earth?

Using a globe or map of the world, invite people to paste a sticky note with their message on it in your time of prayers for others.

Ideas for Prayer Stations

These can be part of a Messy Church program, a time of prayers for others in worship or simply used as a devotion to start or close a meeting.

Water (lament)

You will need a large bowl of salty water and some lettuce leaves.

Dip the lettuce in the water and taste the salty tears of all those who grieve. Spend some time thinking of those people you'd like to pray for.

Fire (passion and compassion)

You will need a bowl of sand and some taper candles.

Light a candle for those situations in the world you feel angry about. Put your hand near the flames and feel the heat and energy of your prayers. Take this energy into your life this week.

Earth (new ideas)

You will need a bowl of soil and some sunflower seeds.

Take a seed and place it in the soil. What things do you want to focus on growing in your life this week?

Image source: starfish-initiatives.org/clean-up-your-mess/

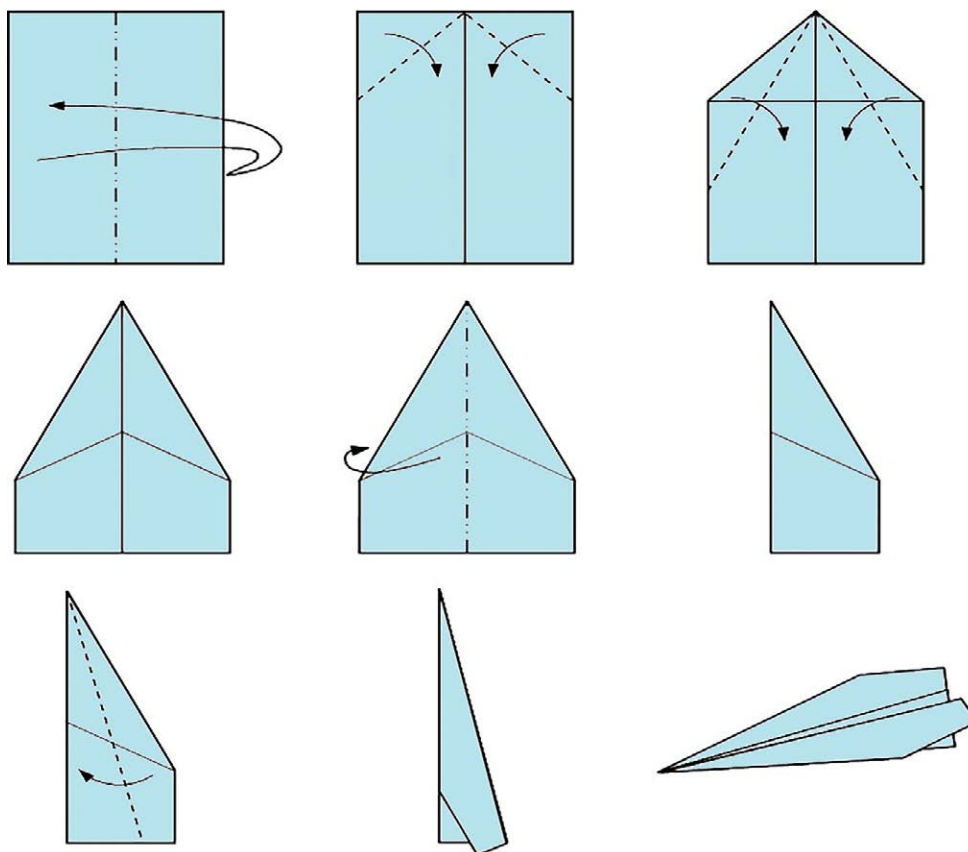


Air (desire for change)

You will need sheets of A4 paper, pens or textas

Write or draw your prayer on the paper. Fold it into a paper plane using the template below or make your own.

Set up a place to fly your plane (outside or where people are not moving) or set up a time during the service where everyone can fly their planes as a celebratory moment. If this will not work in your space, place the planes on the altar or in a basket to be flown later.

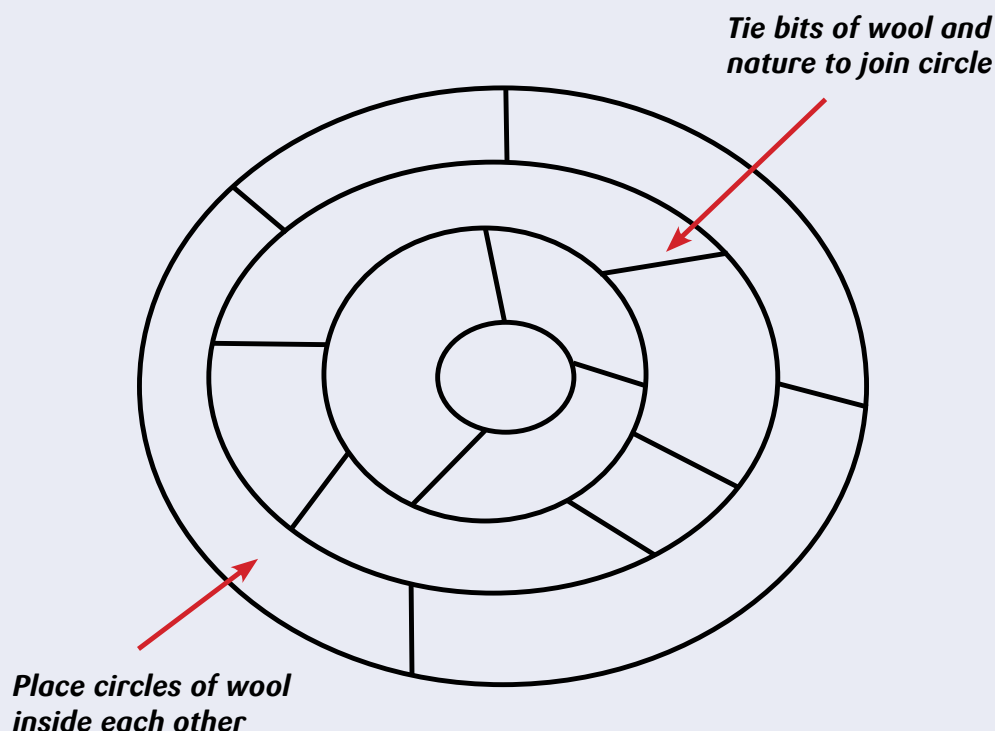


Weaving a web of creation

Cut four to eight strands (depending on the size of the group) of undyed wool into increasing lengths from half-a-metre with each successive length doubling in size. Also cut a further number of equal length 'link' strands (see later). The length and number of these strands will be dependent on the overall size of the web.

This activity is given out during worship. Each person is given a 'link' strand of wool. The varying

length strands are each tied into circles and laid within each other (see the diagram below). The link strands are each tied to one circle then stretched outwards to the next circle. With ties between each successive circle, the full web is developed. When complete the web should be tied vertically. Symbols of creation can be attached to the web and a rough cross made from twigs possibly tied into the centre. Names of different parts of creation can be attached to parts of the web to increase the visual image.



Some useful links from this study.

- All photo images, pictures and the Response 5 audio file are available for download from the Study Series tab at: ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/
Copies of these resources can also be requested via email at: strategic.reviewimplementation@victas.uca.org.au
- Papal Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si* - on care of our common home (2015).
Download at: laudatosi.com/watch
- Yarra Healing (sponsored by Catholic Education Melbourne)
www.yarrahealing.catholic.edu.au/stories-voices/index_wide.cfm?loadref=15
- *The Art of Frugal Hedonism* www.frugalthedonism.com/
- Green Church (Synod Vic/Tas) – with many useful links
greenchurch.victas.uca.org.au/what-are-churches-doing/

Series reviewers: Rev Jennie Gordon, Minister of the Word, Yarra Ranges Parish, Presbytery of Yarra Yarra
Rev Graeme Harrison, Minister of the Word, Living Faith Church, Presbytery of Yarra Yarra

Series Editor: Rev David Withers, Strategic Framework Minister, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania



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