

WEST EPPING UNITING CHURCH WHAT KIND OF COMMUNITY?



**Sunday 25th November 2018
Rev John Barr**

There are a number of important points that I wish to share with you today concerning what it means to be “church” and how we live our lives as Christian community.

POINT ONE

To call ourselves the “church” is no ordinary thing. It means that we are to be much more than a social group or a gathering of like-minded people. We are an unusual group because the only qualification for entry into the community called the church is a desire to follow Jesus and to share that desire with others.



Hence, the first thing I think about concerning being the church is that we should have a huge, wide-open front door where everyone is welcome. And I mean this literally as well as figuratively. Our doors need to be wide open every Sunday with a big bright welcome notice out the front and with people lined up, keen to receive newcomers!

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Moreover, we are no ordinary community because we are called into being by God and we are accountable, not ourselves but to God. This means we do not exist for ourselves. Rather, we exist to bring glory to God. We exist not for our own sake or for our own benefit. We exist for the sake and for the benefit of others.

POINT TWO

We are a community where everyone is gifted in some way or another. And this means everyone has a role to play.



In the past there was often an emphasis on “experts” or a “priestly class” in the church. But in the Uniting Church we believe in the “priesthood of all believers”. This means everyone who desires to follow Jesus has a place in the life and witness of the church.

It may be in liturgy or music. It could be as an evangelist or a preacher, a pastoral carer or prayer group leader. It could be as a steward or a welcomer, as a person who offers hospitality or has skills in administration, finance, property management and maintenance, technology, flower arranging, card making or cooking. Or it could be simply being a friend to others or praying quietly at home each day for those in need.

It doesn't matter how young or old you are, how abled or differently-abled you are, how academically qualified you are – everyone has a gift and everyone has a role to play in this community.

And here it's important to understand that on-one is more important than the other. No-one is more indispensable than the other, no-one is more deserving or entitled than the other. Everyone belongs. Everyone is important. Everyone has some kind of role to play.

POINT THREE

We are a community where there is respect for each other, where there is a valuing of diversity and difference and where there is a safe place created for everyone.

Reference to a “safe place” may seem obvious. But by “safe place” I mean a place where everyone can share their experiences and where they can also share their needs.

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And this means we are to be open to everyone - to children, families, young adults, singles, mid-lifers, seniors, migrants, refugees, indigenous and non-indigenous, people of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, people whose sexuality is different, the poor and the rich, the educated and the uneducated, the abled and the differently abled.

Everyone is to be respected, appreciated, encouraged and loved. For, everyone is created in the image of God – and this makes us all equally special.

POINT FOUR

We are a community that listens and reflects. It means we do not submerge ourselves in simply being busy or conducting all sorts of programs for the sake of us appearing to get things done.



Rather, we are a community who is prepared to pause and to constantly look and listen carefully for the guidance of God's spirit. We are a community who is open to learning from others and who is prepared to discern the voice of God in the most unexpected places.

In doing this, we are a community who values and celebrates its past by engaging fully in the present and by committing ourselves to the future that God has in store for us. And we do this with confidence and hope.

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POINT FIVE

We are a community that is open, transparent and generous. We are a community that embodies and reflects the unconditional love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We are a community of grace.



And this means there will be no “insiders” and “outsiders”, there will be no stereotyping, typecasting or labelling of others. There will be no gossip, grudges, intimidation or bullying.

There will be no disingenuous comments or underhanded criticism of people related to their cultural backgrounds, their ethnic identity, their sexuality, their gender or their degrees of ability. Being a community of grace involves a Christ-like love for the other.

POINT SIX

We are a community who are shaped wholly by the values of the Gospel, values that embrace mercy, compassion and a commitment to justice and peace.



We live in challenging, complex times. But we shouldn't be drawn into a shallow popularism or be dictated to by the fears and prejudices of the dominant culture around us. Rather we are a community called into being by God to be a prophetic, countercultural witness.

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This means our values and our way of doing things may see us being an alternative community – a community that is different to the status-quo – a community grounded in the grace and mercy of God.

POINT SEVEN

We are a community of commitment. This means our first allegiance is to Jesus Christ and to the calling Jesus has placed on our lives. In making this claim we need to understand the enormous implications this has in terms of the use of our time, our talents and money.



With Jesus Christ as the top priority in our lives we, as a community of God's people, put our faith into practice by living out the life of Christ in the world. Here our commitment to the Good News of Jesus Christ is far more important than anything else. It takes first place in our lives.

This is far more important than appearing to be a "successful" church, to simply putting bums on seats every Sunday, or to priding ourselves on having a nice church building.

The true measure of who we are is our faithfulness to the Gospel. The key matter concerning our future as a church here in West Epping is our commitment to Jesus Christ.

POINT EIGHT

We are a community who cares for one another. Pastoral care stands at the heart of who we are and of what we do.



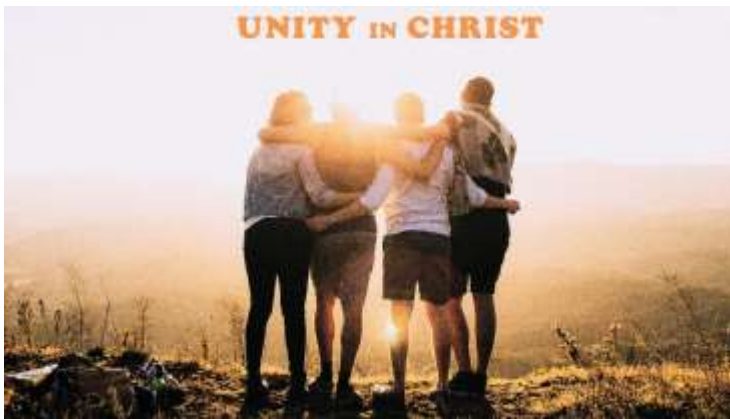
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Pastoral care can be carried in many ways – touching people’s lives at critical moments, engaging in deep conversations, visiting people in hospital, comforting those who grieve, being a friend to others, making an occasional phone call or asking “how are you” at church on Sundays.

Importantly, in being caring community, we do not make unreasonable demands on others or pressure them into being what they are not. Our priority here is to nurture, encourage and sustain one another in a Christ-like way.

POINT NINE

We are a community who affirms our unity in Jesus Christ. Our common identity as Christians is bound up in this. Our common faith in Christ should be stronger than any of the differences that may separate us or attempt to drive us apart.



This mean we are a community who will not walk away from one another because we do not agree, because we hold different understandings of faith or because we are unhappy with decisions that are made on what appear to be key issues.

Rather, we are a community who are prepared to deal with the discomfort of living with others who may think differently. We are a community who are able to live in fellowship with those who may worship differently or may even interpret the Bible differently to ourselves.

In doing so we hear and obey the call of Jesus in John Chapter 17 “that they may all be one”. For, we are to be, as Paul says to the church in Ephesus, a community who affirms “one hope, one faith, one baptism, one Lord and one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:5-6).

POINT TEN

We are a community with a future. This means we do not return to the past. We do not concern ourselves with simply continuing the present. Rather, we become future focussed.

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This future may look quite different. It may seem a little frightening. But God has a future for us and we are invited into that future.

The following graphic has been included as it depicts us all on a journey forward. Where we are going is actually quite unknown. Its hazy and its uncertain.

THE FUTURE



But we are on the move. We have to be. Otherwise we will be left behind. We will stall and we will go nowhere. We may even get runover or pushed aside by other moving traffic!

And the point here is that the words “The Future” do not come with a question mark. This is because there is simply no dispute about the future – it’s a fact of life – it’s happening - it’s a matter that’s non-negotiable. We can’t avoid it.

And, friends, if we are to be who God calls us to be – then we must face that future. We do so knowing there are risks involved. We do so conscious there are perils and there are uncertainties ahead. But we journey into that future with confidence and with hope.

For, as the great John Wesley said: “The best of it all is, God is with us”.

What kind of community are we? I leave this question with you today.

May God bless each one of us as we take our parts in this special community.

Amen.