

Seeking a Heart of Wisdom

(Psalm 90:12)



Guidelines for Continuing Education Uniting Church Ministry Agents

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Background

The Church is the community of God's people in the world, called to witness, in word and in action, to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, the church recognises particular people who have a calling to leadership for which they are ordained or commissioned. The types of ministries to which people are called vary, and are in response to the need for a renewed participation of all the people of God in the service of Christ. The nature of the particular calling may include the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, the building up of the fellowship of the church and its commitment to the service of Christ in the world for which Christ died. These callings have at their heart leading God's people in witnessing through word and action, and relating the gospel to the needs of people in the 21st century.

The 1997 Report of the Task Group to Review Ministerial Education recognised that in order to respond to the urgent mission needs of the Australian community, "... the UCA needs faithful leaders who can enable the church to call people to faith in Jesus Christ, to witness to God's call for a just world, and to be a community which is a sign of God's promises for the world."

It established the goals of Ministerial Education as being to prepare Ministers with the following qualities and competencies:

- A growing faith and spirituality that will sustain their lives in ministry
- A conscious and critical commitment to ministry and mission
- Knowledge and appreciation of the tradition of the church
- Skills appropriate for their particular ministry
- Critical imagination

In order to achieve these goals, the Uniting Church is committed to life-long continuing education for all members, and in particular for all those called into leadership ministries.



An Invitation to Lifelong Learning

At the 1997 Assembly, the United Church affirmed the importance of continuing education, and asked of all its Ministers (and by implication ministry agents) that they enter into continuing education learning agreements to foster their faith and understanding.

Under duties of a Minister in the regulations, 2.4.2(k) lists “the enhancement of the Minister’s own gifts for the work of ministry,” of which continuing education plays a crucial part. In the Code of Ethics 3.4a, a ministry agent’s competence includes maintaining “high standards of knowledge and skills in all the areas of ministry relevant to their settlement/appointment. This responsibility requires that the ministry agent undertakes continuing education appropriate to this ministry.”

Normally, ministry agents would discuss their continuing education program as part of their ongoing conversation with their Professional Supervisor.

These guidelines are intended for ministry agents and ministry placements, Presbyteries and Synods, to aid in finding their role in continuing education. They have been prepared with input from across the church, and are offered as a guide to continuing education.



The Shape of the Church in the Twenty-first Century

As society and the church change, the ways ministry is expressed in the UCA are changing. Continuing education for ministry needs to respond to these changes. Several major shifts are:

1. “The disappearing middle”: In churches and many organisations, the middle-sized is disappearing. This means that the classic one-minister/one-congregation “pastoral sized” model that has dominated our concept of ministry is disappearing. Ministry training in the past, both pre-service and continuing education, has assumed this model as a default setting, but can no longer do so.

One result of the disappearing middle is the emergence of Resource Ministry. In Resource Ministry, one or more small congregations exist independently, with a ministry agent providing the “resources” for the congregation to fulfil its vocation as the Body of Christ in its local community, but not directly ministering within the congregation as in the classic model. While originally finance-driven, this model of church is recognised as an authentic New Testament expression of church. In this understanding of mission, church and ministry, the apostolic dimensions of ordained ministry are reflected in oversight of lay-led congregations. The practical expression of this in ministry agents’ continuing education is in equipping, mentoring, team-building, delegation, conflict resolution and building shared vision.

2. A second result of the disappearing middle is the growth of “program sized” Large Regional Churches. Large Regional Churches may arise from amalgamating smaller churches or through missional growth. Their characteristics include a complex structure with multiple worshipping, learning and fellowship sub-groups, as well as multiple staff, whether paid or voluntary, in significant leadership roles in sub-groups, and/or across the whole congregation in distinct areas such as Christian education, pastoral care or youth ministry. While looking very different from Resource Ministry when viewed from the outside, somewhat surprisingly much of the same knowledge, and many of the same skills and attributes are required as the ordained Minister “steps back” compared to ministry in conventional pastoral-sized churches: equipping, mentoring, team-building, delegation, conflict resolution and building shared vision.
3. In recent years the number of institutional chaplaincy placements within the UCA has increased, notably in the expanding aged care sector, but also in newer areas such as disability services and rural chaplaincy. Simultaneously the number of traditional congregational placements has been in decline. These two factors mean that chaplaincy is increasing in significance in both absolute and relative numerical terms. Related to this has been a strong emphasis on professional standards with its closely related requirement for role-specific continuing education.
4. Another broad area of changing patterns of ministry is in Fresh Expressions, emerging church, new ways of being church, or other such descriptions. This may involve church plants and pioneering ministries, or it may be in establishing parallel groups related to an existing congregation but reaching a totally different demographic. Some examples revolve around eco-spirituality, visual arts and particular music where it expresses a sub-culture. Learning needs arising from this pattern of ministry include: integrating prior life experience and learning with ministry, context-specific cultural or artistic knowledge and attitudes, languages, entrepreneurial skills and attitudes, and community development.

The four trends, above, to Resource Ministry, Large Regional Church leadership, institutional chaplaincy and Fresh Expressions are all occurring within a broader shift as society and the UCA become increasingly multicultural and cross-cultural. While not another separate form of ministry, this shift impacts on all of the preceding.



To Be Nourished for the Journey

Areas of Study

In setting out suggested areas of study, flexibility and variety are critical, given the diverse kinds and settings of ministry. Nonetheless, certain core areas of study are foundational for most ministries. These include:

- academic theological study (including biblical studies, systematic theology, missiology, church history, culture and society etc)
- ministry practice and skills (which must always entail theological reflection)
- spiritual growth and formation.

These three broad areas indicate that a Ministry agent needs to give attention to her or his knowing, doing and being.



Allocating Your Continuing Education Time

Planning for the year ahead will possibly be in more depth and detail than planning for the future years of the learning agreement. However, broad outlines of areas of study can be sketched for the later years, as part of a long-term learning plan.

There is a Sample Learning Agreement at the end of these guidelines.

Time Commitment

Ministry agents are given a minimum of 14 days of continuing education leave per year. This time is meant to include preparation and contact learning time. This is a minimum amount, with ongoing planned reading programmes and other enrichment like spiritual disciplines being integrated into a ministry agent's regular duties. Those in part-time ministries would have their time for continuing education on a pro-rata basis.

Types of Courses

Biblical, historical, and theological studies may be taken up in a number of ways:

- where accessible, attendance at Theological/College units,
- conferences offered centrally or regionally
- distance education or on-line learning
- independent reading etc.

Skills for the practice of ministry may be offered in:

- seminars on preaching, liturgy and worship
- specialised seminars on rural, urban, Aboriginal ministries and other culturally-specific ministries
- specialised seminars for Deacons, Chaplains or those specialising in youth ministry, including conferences offered outside the church which are germane to their work, e.g., community development, social analysis, drug-related issues, mental health ministry
- leadership development events; facilitation skills seminars
- seminars on changing patterns of church and ministry
- pastoral care skills
- education methods
- justice issues etc.

Continuing education in the area of Spiritual Growth may be undertaken in a variety of ways:

- through training in spiritual direction (ministry agents may be recipients as well of spiritual direction)
- through attending spiritual retreats
- training in Aboriginal spirituality.

It should be noted that as part of their continuing education in the practice of ministry, ministry agents are required to seek training on the range of issues including professional conduct, ethics, prevention of sexual misconduct, suicide prevention and discipline/discipleship regularly.

In engagement with issues of society and culture, ministry agents are encouraged to consider such areas as:

- ministry and evangelism in a multicultural, post-modern, secular context, including in communities with cultural and linguistic backgrounds different from their own community of origin
- Aboriginal and covenanting issues

- ecumenism
- inter-faith dialogue
- issues in rural ministry.

Issues of society and culture may be pursued through:

- courses offered by Theological College
- course work or seminars in regional universities, TAFE
- other educational agencies.

Any of these options may include distance education or on-line learning.

Where ministry agents opt to do a degree or diploma this would normally constitute their continuing education time for that period.



Resources for Continuing Education:

(Note: the contact details have been substantially revised.)

New South Wales / ACT

United Theological College
16 Masons Drive, North Parramatta NSW 2151
Tel: (+61 2) 8838 8927
Fax: (+61 2) 9683 6617
Email: utc@utc.edu.au

Charles Sturt University

This has a range of distance education courses. See <http://csu.edu.au>, click on “courses” and then “theology”.

Northern Territory

Nungalinya College
PO Box 40371
Casuarina NT 0811
<http://www.nungalinya.edu.au>

Queensland

Pilgrim Learning Community
GPO Box 674
Brisbane 4001
07 3377 9724
<http://pilgrim.qld.edu.au>

Trinity Theological College
GPO Box 674
Brisbane 4001
(07) 3377 9950
<http://trinity.qld.edu.au>

University of Queensland
<http://www.uq.edu.au>

South Australia

Uniting College for Leadership and Theology
34 Lipsett Terrace
Brooklyn Park 5032
(08) 8416 8420
<http://college.uca.sa.org.au>

Victoria and Tasmania

Centre for Theology and Ministry
29 College Crescent (between Ormond College
and St Hilda's College)
Parkville 3052
Phone: (03) 9340 8800
info@ctm.uca.edu.au
<http://ctm.uca.edu.au/>

Melbourne College of Divinity
<http://www.mcd.edu.au>
<https://online.mcd.edu.au>

Western Australia

Perth Theological Hall
PO Box 76
Bull Creek 6149
(08) 9360 2395
<http://www.wa.uca.org.au/education/pth/>
pthall@central.murdoch.edu.au

Murdoch University
<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/Courses/Theology>

National

Australian Catholic University
<http://www.acu.edu.au>
Click on “Courses” and then “Theology and
Philosophy.”



Ministry Agent's Responsibilities

In consultation with your Presbytery PRC and Supervisor, fill out a Learning Agreement as a guide to your continuing education over the next few years. Be prepared to revise this plan in the light of changing opportunities and needs.

1. Undertake the agreed course of study, using your 14 days per year of study leave as a starting point.
2. Yearly, discuss with your Church Council or other committee of management your continuing education studies.
3. After completing the courses outlined, notify your Presbytery and update your profile when seeking a new call.

Congregation, Agency, or other Ministry Placement Responsibilities

1. Discuss with the ministry agent and give input on what kinds of continuing education might be most helpful in their placement
2. Yearly, be informed of the ministry agent's continuing education programme and learning outcomes for ongoing ministry.
3. Taking account of Synod stipend guidelines, support the ministry agent's continuing education with appropriate funding.

Presbytery Responsibilities

(See booklet: "Fostering Continuing Education for Ministers in Your Presbytery" for ideas on implementation)

1. Work with ministry agents on their Learning Agreements; the PRC will normally ask the ministry agent's supervisor to help advise in Continuing Education, planning study proposed for the present year and outlining general areas of study for the next few years. Alternately, the Pastoral Relations Committee may delegate this responsibility to an appropriate body. The ministry agent and a representative from the Presbytery will sign the Learning Agreement.

- Guidance on continuing education could be incorporated into a yearly retreat for ministry agents, paired with self-care and other reflection on ministry practice.
- Encourage ministry agents to allocate their study leave across the areas of study (as listed above) and to take into account their gifts and their placement's needs and the needs of the wider church.

2. Record Keeping: The Pastoral Relations Committee (or other group to whom they delegate this responsibility) will keep a copy of the Learning Agreements for ministry agents on file. Yearly, they will encourage ministry agents to reflect on and update their learning agreement.

3. Give support to all Ministry agents working in settings who may need advocacy to gain time and support to carry out their continuing education studies. (Deacons, Chaplains, Youth Workers, those in rural settings and others may need special advocacy to access their continuing education allocation.) Identify any placements that have difficulty implementing the guidelines in terms of time allotted, finance, and coverage during leave, and help to arrange the needed support where possible.

4. Work with the Synod to include in the training of Supervisors or mentors work on guiding ministry agents in their continuing education.

5. Work with the Ministry agent's Congregation, Agency, or other Ministry Placement to encourage them to:

- Reflect with the ministry agent on what kinds of continuing education might be most helpful in their placement given their mission and needs
- Make space for the ministry agent to inform them on their continuing education programme and learning outcomes for ongoing ministry
- Support the ministry agent's continuing education with appropriate funding according to Synod guidelines.

Synod Responsibilities

1. Through the MEB or other appropriate body, give careful consideration to funding for continuing education, either through annual allowances, grants, or loans.

2. Consider appointing a Continuing Education Coordinator (if one is not at present in place) who can liaise with the Theological Colleges and Presbyteries, broadly encourage continuing education, and develop structures to put in place programs ministry agents will undertake.

3. Training of Professional Supervisors should include work on guiding ministry agents in their continuing education.
4. The Synod Secretariat will determine how often and in what form to offer seminars for ministry agents in the area of professional conduct, ethics, and the prevention of sexual misconduct. Likewise, training in cross-cultural awareness and Aboriginal spirituality could be coordinated at the Synod level.
5. Give special consideration for the needs of newly ordained or commissioned ministry agents. Studies have shown that a program of reflection on ministry issues and collegial support can help ministry agents in their initial transition to ministry, helping in retention and commitment. (In the Synod of Victoria, Ministers in their first 3 years of placement take part in an Orientation to Ministry Program, that is in house for 2-3 days twice a year.)



Accreditation

1. Academic Study

Continuing education undertaken through tertiary studies will be accredited through normal awards, e.g., diplomas, degrees. Copies of these and transcripts are kept as part of a ministry agent's continuing education file.

2. Other Study

Certificates or Written Statements of completion (if issued) are kept, together with a brief description of studies undertaken.

3. Portability and Continuity

Presbyteries will accept study satisfactorily completed in a ministry agent's previous Presbytery. Any study begun in one placement may be continued in any following placement, provided it remains appropriate continuing education for the ministry agent in the new setting. This may be negotiated during conversations between ministry agents and their proposed placement.