Flourishing Communities, Regional, Remote and Urban

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Our vision:

We live in communities where we are connected and we care for one another. In communities all over Australia, from our big cities to remote regions, we seek the well-being of each Australian and uplift those who are on the margins.

Our hopes:

- We are connected. There is a high level of social participation. People feel a strong sense of identity and of belonging.
- We create safe spaces in our homes, in the wider community, online and in our places of faith.
- Rural and remote communities thrive. They have access to basic services, including health, education and technology.
- There is wide representation in our decision-making from different ages, cultures, abilities, religion, gender and geography. People are free to express their own ideas.
- People with disability in Australia fully participate in society. They can choose the services and support they need to live a full life.
- Our lifestyle and culture promote good mental health and our Government, workplaces and communities have policies and practices which support this.
- All people can access the essential services they need, including younger and older generations, people at the end of life, people with disabilities, First Peoples and people vulnerable to violence.
- Vulnerable people receive the support they need, whether that is protection from violence, quality care, medical services or harm reduction services.

Witness from the Bible

- The witness of the Old Testament speaks to God's desire for communities of "shalom", a peace which encompasses fruitfulness, justice, wholeness and blessing for all people. See for example **Genesis 1: 27 – 28; 12: 1 – 3; Psalms 72, 128; Isaiah 11: 1 – 9; Zechariah 8: 4 – 12**.
- Likewise, Jesus spoke of bringing safety, life in abundance and peace **(John 10: 7 – 10; 14: 27)** and taught the importance of meeting the needs of those who were suffering **(Matthew 25: 31 – 46)**. He identified love of God and of others as the primary obligations for shaping life **(Matthew 22: 34 – 40)**.

- The New Testament epistles give a vision of a community of inclusion and peace **(Romans 10: 12; Galations 3: 28; Ephesians 4: 1 – 3)** and highlight the importance of love for all in enabling this vision **(Romans 12: 9 – 13; 13: 8 – 10; 1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5: 13 – 14; 1 John 4: 16 – 21)**.

What the UCA has said

The Statement to the Nation (1977)

"We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate healthcare, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms."

Dignity in Humanity: A Uniting Church Statement on Human Rights (2006)

"The image of God that is reflected in human life, the form of life that corresponds to God, is the human community – all people – finding its life and sustenance in relationship.

Thus, the Uniting Church believes that every person is precious and entitled to live with dignity because they are God's children, and that each person's life and rights need to be protected or the human community (and its reflection of God) and all people are diminished."

An Economy of Life: Reimagining Human Progress for a Flourishing World (2009)

"The Christian faith understands that God's goal for life is wholeness. The Biblical stories, sacred witnesses to the history of our relationship with God, articulate a vision for human wholeness and wellbeing grounded in the values of the reign of God: love (of God and each other, even our enemy and especially those most vulnerable), justice, peace, grace, mercy and forgiveness, hospitality, inclusion, connectedness and compassion."

The State of the Nation

High rates of mental illness

- 1 in 5 Australians experience a mental health condition in a given year and almost 1 in 2 will experience a mental health condition at some point in their lifetime.[42]

- Of these, anxiety disorders were the most prevalent, afflicting 1 in 7 (14.4%), followed by affective disorders (such as depression) (6.2%), and substance use disorders (such as alcohol dependence) (5.1%).

- People who experience depression and anxiety, and their families and friends, experience significant levels of stigma and discrimination.

- 9 per cent of Australians report loneliness at any one time.[43]

Key Actions:

1. Adequate funding of appropriate services for people facing mental illness, including new initiatives such as digital health services in rural and remote areas.

2. A whole-of-community approach to overcome stigma and discrimination for people who experience mental illness.

Lack of Safe Spaces

- One in 33 children received child protection services in 2015-16, with 73 per cent being repeat clients.[44] Emotional abuse and neglect were the most common primary and co-occurring types of substantiated abuse and neglect.

- It is likely that up to 14% of older Australians experience elder abuse in any given year, with the prevalence of neglect possibly higher.

- Workplace bullying is on the rise and is associated with poor psychological health.[45]

- Almost 25% of school students in Australia, or an estimated 910,000 children, experience bullying at some stage during their time in school.[46]

- 10% of young people (aged 16-24 years) experience cyberbullying.[47]

Key Actions:

1. Community approaches to building resilience, teaching respectful relationships, and identifying abuse and neglect.

2. Creating Child Safe Communities to prevent child sexual abuse, in line with recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

Rural and remote communities are suffering

- Large parts of Australia have experienced severe drought in the past 2 years due to record low rainfall and above average temperatures over successive seasons, depleting livestock numbers and destroying crops.

- This decline in agricultural production impacts the economy and employment in rural and remote Australia. In turn, farmers experience significant stress about the effects of drought on themselves, their families, and their communities.[48]

- In rural areas there are higher levels of civic participation, social cohesion, social capital, volunteering and informal support networks between neighbours, friends and the community.[49] However, Australians living in rural and remote areas tend to have shorter lives, higher levels of disease and injury and poorer access to and use of health services, including mental health care, compared to people living in metropolitan areas.[50]

- Rates of self-harm and suicide increase with remoteness. The suicide rate is almost double among men 15-29 years who live outside major cities.[51]

Key Actions:

1. Improved mental health support for people in rural and remote Australia, that is adequately funded, flexibly used and well managed locally.

2. Investment in rural infrastructure to help prepare for drought conditions.

People with disabilities need better control and choice

- An estimated 1.5 million people with disability needed formal assistance from a service provider for at least one everyday living activity in 2012. Around half of these had an unmet need for formal assistance - either they got less assistance than they needed or no assistance at all.
- The roll-out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) requires adequate resourcing by the Commonwealth, states and territories.
- The transition to the NDIS is having a significant impact on the support workforce, with some providers struggling to recruit and maintain a suitably skilled workforce.

Key Action:

An NDIS that is fully funded and properly rolled-out where no one is left behind in the process.

People with drug-related issues are stigmatised

- Current approaches to drug use which focus on policing and imprisoning increase stigma for people who use illicit drugs and create barriers for people seeking treatment.
- There is a shortage of detoxification and rehabilitation services, particularly in rural and regional areas.

Key Action:

Refocusing policy and responses to drug use on helping people to access drug treatment and harm reduction services.

Discussion Starters

You may like to ask one or more of the following questions in a small group discussion or select one or more to put to MPs or community leaders.

1. How will you support drought-affected communities?
2. What policies will you put in place to address mental health, including in rural and remote Australia?
3. How will you support the roll-out of the NDIS?
4. What is your policy or approach to illicit drug use and treatment?
5. How will you address bullying in our workplaces and schools?
6. How does or how can your community assist drought-affected communities?
7. What local initiatives are possible to address important social issues including mental health, illicit drug use and bullying?

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