



Missional Mapping: Sustainable Gardens

A Story of Regeneration

Preamble

This document is not a policy document. It is a discussion starter. It's meant to raise some of the hard questions we find difficult to answer as individual congregations / presbytery / in our diverse ministry contexts, and that we will continue to work on through the year. We hope it names some of our fears about the future but gives grace to face the future with vision and direction.

Our Story

Throughout and Old and New Testaments the vineyard owner is God. And we are merely the tenants of the vineyard. Jesus also said: 'I am the vine and you are the branches' [John 15]. It is a story of dependence on Christ for our strength. It recognises that sometimes there is dying back and there is a need to prune.

These biblical images offer us ways to understand how we regenerate our church. Sometimes we have to graft a new plant onto an old root stock that is resilient. Sometimes we have to repot plants, especially if the pot breaks or the plant has become root-bound. We have to fertilize to encourage new growth. We have to train

tendrils in the right direction. We wait for blossoms to be cross-fertilized. We see the fruits of the kingdom. It is a story of **regeneration** – of **new and renewing** growth.

The vine is a great image for us of 'regeneration'. There are many parables and stories of vines, seeds and plants in the Bible which help us think about our congregational life. Congregations can consider: What mission and ministry are we planting? Pruning? Grafting? Fertilising? Growing, Blossoming and Fruiting? Repotting? How has COVID – 19 affected our congregation/Faith Community?

Planting
Fruiting
Pruning
Vine
Fertilising
Blossoming
Growing
Grafting
Repotting



If your congregation was a garden what would it look like?

What does your garden need to help it grow?

Our Vision

We want to propagate Vital, Vibrant and Viable Congregational Gardens.

Through the work of the Spirit of Christ: For the Presbytery of Port Phillip West to be a network of increasingly **vibrant, diverse, contextual** and **disciple-making** communities of Christ participating in and witnessing to the wonder of God's mission.

The Presbytery of PPW as a Community Garden.

In our community garden are many garden plots. As we look across the diverse plots we realise that no two gardens are the same. Each plot reflects its local context of soil quality, soil nutrients, shade or sun and access to water. Some are well tended and produce fruits. Some are neglected and overgrown by weeds. Some lie fallow. Some have feeble growth. Some grow native plants. Most grow fruits and vegetables from countries far away. Some grow food to eat, others plant flowers for the joy of it.



We want each plot in our community garden to thrive.

Our bold goal is within 10 years, every garden plot can be sustainable!

*PPW wants each congregational plot in our garden to thrive.
Our bold plan is within 10 years,
every ministry context can be sustainable!*

What can the image of sustainable gardens teach us about being church?

Garden Sheds & Pots Within the garden are buildings that need to be maintained. Some people want to build or add on to their church. They have capital to do it. Should they be allowed to develop? Other churches are full and overflowing but have no capital to look at alternatives. Many congregations are selling their manses at the moment, but should some manses be kept for the wider church? There is a need for a presbytery wide plan.



Sustainable Gardens: Weeds are removed and composted. Plants have new compost added to the soil, the soil is improved and mulched. The seedlings are watered regularly. The older plants are sustained by rainfall alone. They plants are producing fruit Pots are well maintained.

What are the signs of a sustainable Churches / Congregations? How might these be reflected in the 7 viabilities of People, Spirituality, Mission, Leadership, Property, Finance and Placement?

What options are open to the sustainable plot?

What should the whole community garden do with regards to sustainable plots that need more support?

Declining Gardens are overgrown by weeds. The dead wood of long-ago trees can be seen. The rocks have not be removed. The plot is dry and topsoil is blown away. The plants are getting less fruitful, and they may wither and die.

What are the signs of a declining church / congregations? How might these be reflected in the 7 viabilities of People, Spirituality, Mission, Leadership, Property, Finance, Placement?



What options are open to the declining plot? Eg. dying, merging with another plot to make it more viable, giving their plot to a more vibrant plot or even a brand new plot to be established elsewhere in the community garden, regenerating the garden.

What should the whole community garden do with regards to congregational plots that are not as fruitful?

Understanding the Changing Environment

Winds of Change Historically we have mapped long eras. The last of these was the Post-Christendom Era. This era was earmarked by the church being at the centre of society. Its church buildings were amongst the first buildings built in the centre of a new town. Schooling, welfare systems, hospitals, and justice systems were based on the Church's Christian principles. The Church sent out missionaries to colonise the world. People were arguably attracted to the church by its good works that sustained the community. The only activity on Sunday was worship. Churches had large Sunday schools. Everybody knew the stories of faith. In fact, the Church provided some social activities too with fellowship groups, mission societies and dances. It is now evident that this era has ended. However, our leaders and councils often act as though we still live in this world, reminiscence and hope that those times will return if we just run a different program or if we just had young families in our church. We recite familiar statements that were once true but are now myths. *E.g., a new minister will bring people in, if we run a fete it will bring new people in, if we build a new modern building people will want to come to our buildings, if we had young families it would all be ok...*

A new era is being born. It has not got a name yet. But it is characterised by a rise in pluralism and relativism. There is a movement away from institutionalism and colonialism. And it is marked by a rapid growth of multiculturalism. There is suspicion of the church's good works. Sunday schools are a remnant of what was there before. Our churches no longer attract people. Mission fields are now on our doorstep. There are whole generations missing from our churches, who do not know the Christian story, stating that the Church is irrelevant to their lives. Cafés and shopping centres are the centre of public life.

What myths do you say to yourself?

What myths does your congregation believe?

The COVID shadow over all our gardens: Some gardens have been in hibernation, unable to meet online and decision-making resting on already stressed ministers. Many were resilient to the shadow wanting to overcome the garden plots: Leadership met on-line, supporting the minister in providing both written and on-line worship. One or two gardens thrived under these harsh conditions using digital technology to shine a light, meetings, prayer groups, bible studies, stewardship giving, and worship were all on-line. Elders and volunteers made phone calls and delivered care packages and newsletters. We are all glad that the sun shines again on our plots.

How has COVID changed your congregation?

More Gardeners WANTED

Volunteers & Aging Congregations. The UCA has run on the backs of volunteers, who now are mostly older. Volunteers who were forced to rest during COVID now feel less able to restart the old ministries and missions that congregations once thought necessary. It may be necessary for congregations to rethink their ministry and mission priorities with a new emphasis on being lighter, simpler, and more joyful activities. It is also getting harder to find people to participate in the inter-conciliar councils that run the UCA. Leadership is needed in most congregations.



Changes to placements and ministry. The VicTas Placement's Symposium 2021 stated that there will be 30% decrease in ministers over the next few years. One way to cope with this is to think of *'every minister as resource minister'* across two or more congregations. Fewer ministers are living in manses, preferring to rent an appropriately sized unit or house, or living in their own home where possible. COVID has caused retired ministers supporting supply placement to inform the presbytery they are no longer available. Ministers who were close to retirement have now announced retirement. And ministers with accumulated LSL are starting to tender their leave with Congregations & PRC.

Fencing new Regions

In Western Victoria Presbytery, they have created regions. Ministers are placed into these regions with responsibility for named congregations. This has helped to combat the possessiveness of congregations over their 'share of the minister'. The ministers are placed regionally and can work as teams to develop vision, ministry and mission priorities with regional councils.

Gippsland Presbytery have also created three regions. A presbytery minister is appointed to each region as a team leader. The ministers work co-operatively with lay leaders to provide ministry and mission across the region.

Tasmania Presbytery has developed a position called a Mission Catalyst. A person is appointed to the presbytery for 5 years but works a series of short-term projects in congregations over 3, 6 or 9 months.

Rural Presbyteries have already done the hard work of sharing ministers across clusters/regions. They can share no more because the distances are too great. There is also a lack of willingness for ministers to come out to rural areas. Rural presbyteries are preparing for a post-minister church.

Traditionally, City and Rural Cities Congregations have not had to share ministry, due to greater financial security and a surplus of ministry agents in the rural city/city. Retired ministers have supported worship in smaller congregations with fewer funds and less financial viability.

What are the advantages/disadvantages of regions?

Garden Plot Planning

These major shifts, we discern, are just the beginning. We need to strategize with all the congregations together to plan for a rapidly changing future. Notably, the Presbytery does not have any set ideas or outcomes other than to help you discern together the way forward. Without a strategy we are concerned the UCA in PPPW may fail to adapt to these major shifts in our society. We need to start asking ourselves the hard questions and give truthful answers. Most of all we need a greater collaboration between congregations.

To this end we are starting a Missional Mapping exercise on the floor of presbytery meetings which will map the life of the presbytery and strategies for the immediate future and over 10 years. Your opinions matter and can only be included if your congregation sends a person to Presbytery. You can be part of the decision making.

Every congregational plot makes decisions that affect the direction of the whole community garden (i.e. the Presbytery). Hence, PPW hope your congregation will have ownership and direction of the future of the community garden as well as their own congregation plot. The Presbytery has a sense of the direction of the community garden because we have a relationship and responsibility to each congregational plot and can see the big picture, including 'the winds of change' affecting the whole community garden.

What is your congregation's vision for the whole community garden? How important is your vision for your congregational plot for the vitality of neighbouring plots? And for the whole community garden?

Gardening Hope

Every time you plant seeds and/or plants in your garden you are exercising faith and hope. You hope that these tiny seeds/plants will grow into what they were designed for. Sometimes you have to wait a long time to see the result, sometimes adverse conditions are needed for the seeds to germinate and sometimes seeds don't sprout. We know from the parable of the Sower that even the seeds that sprout can be picked out by the birds or choked by the thorns. However, the Sower doesn't stop sowing seeds, he scatters them liberally hoping and trusting that the plants will grow, mature and produce. And some do sprout, some produce a great amount of fruit. We need to support those gardens, that are growing, that are producing so that there will be more fruit to share.



We have hope for the gardens of the presbytery. Our hope is based on Jesus who at the resurrection was mistaken for the Gardener. Our hope is in God the owner of the garden. We trust in the promise that God has never left God's church or God's people. We have the Holy Spirit as the living water which sustains us. Throughout our sacred scriptures there is story after story of God's faithfulness and reliability. We need to continually draw near to God and to trust the Gardener and Owner of the garden.

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