



Uniting Church in Australia  
ASSEMBLY

# SPACE FOR GRACE

## FACILITATOR GUIDE



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# INTRODUCTION

Not a day goes by when I don't give thanks to God for the blessing of diversity.

In our Church, in our country Australia, throughout nature I am constantly in awe of the beauty, the intricacy and the interconnectedness of God's creation.

My own life has been enormously enriched by exploring and engaging with different people and cultures, particularly the First Peoples of northern Australia. Sitting under trees with the law men of Elcho Island and tuning in to their way of thinking was a turning point in my personal formation.

I'm sure many of you have been significantly moved in your personal faith or participation in God's mission by an experience of difference or diversity that has challenged your worldview.

As Andrew Dutney said in his Retiring President's report to the 14th Assembly, God calls us to be a church which receives its diversity as the precious gift of the Holy Spirit that it is; a foretaste, sign and instrument of "that reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation."

That gift, while precious, often isn't easy for us to receive. It often requires sacrificing our own sense of self and a great deal of time and effort on our part.

As Andrew pointed out:

Reconciliation doesn't mean everyone being the same. It doesn't mean one version of being human or being Christian replacing all the others. It means people and groups that are different and divided from each other being brought together in Christ to

respect, value, trust and serve one another – in all our annoying, embarrassing, frustrating, frightening diversity.

Being open to difference and grappling with it respectfully is the great and eternal work of reconciliation that continues within the Church and beyond.

The Assembly's Multicultural and Cross Cultural Ministry Reference Committee has been at the forefront of this work in the Uniting Church in Australia. Its members are frequently the ones who are called on when we fail to recognise the gift of diversity.

So I'm delighted that the Space for Grace process the Reference Committee has been working with for a number of years of fruitful intercultural exchange is now being opened to a wider audience.

Space for Grace is one of a number of tools to aid us in understanding and reconciling our differences – whether they be on marriage, on Biblical interpretation, or our focus on mission.

No matter how difficult the conversation or how wide the differences are, there is nothing that cannot be resolved if we are prepared to hear one another and leave the space for God's grace.

I wish you all God's blessing as you seek to make your own Space for Grace.

**Stuart McMillan**  
**President**

**Uniting Church in Australia**

# THE SPACE FOR GRACE PROCESS

By Amelia Koh-Butler and  
Tony Floyd



In 2015 the 14th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia received a report from its Multicultural and Cross Cultural Ministry Reference Committee inviting the Church to create a 'Space for Grace' in the way it makes decisions. The specific focus was the Uniting Church's discernment on marriage, particularly in relation to same-gender relationships.

Members of the Reference Committee wanted to share the approach we had developed over a number of years in the way we made our decisions together across a very diverse group of people.

When we faced important matters in the life of the Church we created what we described as a "Space for Grace" by carefully and respectfully including the stories and experiences of the diverse people in our group. By doing this we demonstrate that we value one another and the blessings of God in all our lives.

The invitation the Reference Committee offered to the Assembly urged:

*"Please talk about marriage. Please experience and nurture 'one-anothering community' in Christ: they are gifts of grace, and we do well to treasure our conversations about it.*

*[We] can model creating spaces of safety, even of silence, in which we as God's people may hear each other's voices, and in them the voice of the Holy Spirit...*

*This is not about culture/language differences, but about how in our personal and communal living out of our faith in the One God, we discern, hear and respond to the Spirit of God in our midst. "*

The Space for Grace process is still being developed and refined, but has served our group of culturally and linguistically diverse leaders well over a number of years and helped us stay in community, despite our different backgrounds, theologies and worldviews.

Making decisions in a Space for Grace involves a commitment to:

- Go beyond our normal boundaries of safety into a space where we trust the Spirit of God to move us into sacred relationships. We call this "the grace margin". This requires a trusted facilitator who assists in holding people to respectful behaviours.
- Form a community of respectful listening by using a system of mutual invitation to speak - and allow room to listen.
- Avoid judgement and analysis or deconstructing of people's stories. Instead recognise that they are subjective and represent the reality that person has experienced.
- Identify themes in common and differences to be further explored.
- Share hospitality and faith (e.g. break bread, share a meal, share the Eucharist).
- Respect each other's stories as sacred - safe and treasured, because they are the stories of the children of God - only to be shared with the express permission of the storyteller.
- Continue to work together as a group to identify what

can help people to pursue discernment while still maintaining respect.

When the Space for Grace is created, groups usually get imaginative about what they do next. Groups may enter into relational covenants or make commitments about what kind of relationships they continue to pursue.

## PURPOSE OF SPACE FOR GRACE

- To bring God's people together.
- Develop behaviours that will move from being a gathered community into God's Spirit-empowered community.
- Discern God's will for the community.
- Develop actions to live out being God's Spirit-Community.

This booklet contains foundations for, reflections on, and some tools and examples to aid God's people in recognising and intentionally entering such a space.

## The GRACE margin

*covenant to risk the way of Jesus together*

EXCLUSIVE  
BOUNDARY

FEAR Zone



Protective boundaries: like 'us', follow 'our' rules, acceptance by gatekeepers

FEAR Zone



Outsiders are invited & welcomed in to explore & contribute

INCLUSIVE  
BOUNDARY

The grace margin is a risky space beyond safe boundaries, where difference is respected, but where people may be stretched, grown and transformed by God (Law, 2000).

Transformative experiences include: encounters of truth-telling, allegiance and power (Kraft, 1991).

*(Simplified from Eric H.F. Law 1999)*

# HOW TO FACILITATE A CONVERSATION USING THE SPACE FOR GRACE PROCESS

Step 1	Prepare the space and clarify the area of discussion
Step 2	Introduce RESPECT Guidelines
Step 3	Introduce Mutual Invitation
Step 4	Story-sharing with active listening
Step 5	Identification of themes/areas for consideration/agenda items
Step 6	Validation of themes/agenda - Check with Group
Step 7	Prioritise themes/agenda to work on
Step 8	Theme conversations
Step 9	Determine any directions or decisions the group agrees to pursue.
Step 10	Determine what will happen to the 'parked' themes.
Step 11	Report

There are no short cuts on this journey. Depending on how well a group knows and trusts one another, establishing a Space for Grace may take a number of days, one meeting or a number of meetings. The process intends that every member of the group is understanding of and able to move to the next step together.

Throughout the gathering, there needs to be structured space for building and strengthening relationships. Allow time for sharing meals and informal conversations. Hospitality is integral to building and nourishing community.

## Step 1 Prepare the Space

### *Spiritual*

Pray over the preparations and in the physical space (before, during and after)

### *Physical*

#### Create a Welcoming Space

- Ensure a comfortable and defined space (use flowers, comfortable chairs).
- Offer refreshments, as hospitality-sharing is a key component.
- Provide name-tags. Ask people how they wish to be called. Don't guess, spell correctly!
- Symbols that remind and shape who and whose we are (Bible, Candle)
- Recording the Conversation. Use something non-intimidating, flip-chart butcher's paper, sticky notes, whiteboard, somewhere themes can be visibly parked for later attention.

### *Relational*

#### **Option 1**

Ask people to complete their own About Me Profile (see sample provided at the end of this guide). Prepare beforehand so people can place these on a welcome wall. During the pre-gathering time, people can read each other's profiles.

#### **Option 2**

If you have more time, ask people to share about themselves. Perhaps some core values, how they express their faith. Avoid introductions that emphasise power or privilege differences. This is an encouragement for people to relate with one another as people using personal insights, rather than status or authority.

**Emotional**

Be aware when people respond emotionally. People experiencing heightened emotions may not respond easily to logical or reasoned trains of thought. Use the RESPECT Guidelines (see Step 2). Such responses are not inappropriate, but should be treated with care and wise guidance so as to remain respectful and respected, and not determine the direction, manner and purpose of the discussion. Try to avoid assumptions about what individuals or communities might react to and how those reactions might be expressed.

**Mental**

Have a question for people to reflect and pray about before they come

**Area to be discussed**

Clearly identify the area that will be talked about. Make it clear that there are no predetermined outcomes and no decisions which must be made. If there are to be outcomes, decisions or reports, these will flow naturally from the life of the group.

## Step 2

### Introduce RESPECT Guidelines

Introduce and apply the RESPECT Guidelines as taught by Episcopalian scholar Rev. Dr Eric Law, who has visited and worked with the Uniting Church in Australia.

- R** Responsibility. Take responsibility for what you say and feel. Use “I” statements.
- E** Empathetic listening. Use empathetic listening. Put yourself in each other’s shoes.  
  
You don’t have to agree. Create a goal of mutual understanding.
- S** Sensitive. Be sensitive to differences. Some people talk stories. Some people give succinct points. Some people spiral around a topic. Some people communicate through silence.
- P** Ponder. Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak.
- E** Examine. Examine your own assumptions and perceptions.
- C** Confidentiality. Confidentiality is different from secrets. Share constructively to uphold the well-being of the community. Individuals decide and speak. What is shared in the group can openly be shared with others if those involved give specific permission.
- T** Trust. Trust ambiguity — we are not here to debate who is right or wrong.

*Eric Law, from the Kaleidoscope Institute*

[http://www.ecfvp.org/files/uploads/Resources\\_from\\_Eric\\_Law.docx](http://www.ecfvp.org/files/uploads/Resources_from_Eric_Law.docx)

### Step 3 The Mutual Invitation Process

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, the conversation should proceed in the following way:

The leader or another designated person shares first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. You don't have to invite the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person invites another to share.

The leader should remind participants to listen and not to respond to someone's sharing immediately. There will be time to respond and to ask clarifying questions after everyone has had an opportunity to share.

If you are not ready to share yet, say "I pass for now" and invite another to share, and invite that person to share later on. Do this until everyone has been invited.

*This process of mutual invitation also comes from Rev. Dr Eric Law.*

We recommend it because facilitation that exclusively uses the "volunteer style" of interaction can favour those from individualist cultures and exclude people who have a different cultural understanding of power and community. In some cultural settings, group members will not speak up in a discussion unless they have been invited.

The mutual invitation process is used to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak when the facilitator gives the instruction to do so.

As group members become more accustomed to using this

tool, they make connections with everyone in the session because they are required to invite each speaker by name.

The person who is invited may or may not be someone from whom she/he ordinarily wants to hear. When mutual invitation is used, it encourages deep and wholly listening to one another, because there are no interruptions or refutations allowed until everyone has spoken who wants to speak.

There may be those who are uncomfortable singling out another person to share. There are safeguards built into the process to minimise discomfort. Each person invited to speak has three options: share, pass for now, or pass which means "I do not chose to share on this topic".

Secondly, the passing back and forth of the invitation to speak ensures no one who wants to contribute is left out of the process.

### Step 4 Story-sharing with Active Listening

In the next step, participants are invited to share stories and be active listeners. Active Listening requires the listener to fully concentrate, understand, be attentive without interrupting and then remember what is being said.

Divide into groups for story-sharing. Keep in mind you probably need 8-12 people to allow for a diverse group of people of different cultures. Where people are from a non-dominant cultural group, there usually needs to be at least 2-5 people from minority cultures who help each other to communicate, possibly assisting with translation or clarifying questions.

Allocate roles across the group or groups as follows.

ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY
<b>Inviter and Carer</b>  Note: Every member of the group is invited to participate in this Inviting and Caring	The Inviter/Carer is responsible for ensuring that the story-sharer is heard without interruption or the interpreting of others.  The Inviter may ask the others if there were any words or images or actions that were unclear – and then the Inviter may ask the storyteller to clarify. (Note: Care needs to be taken that this is not an invitation to comment, judge or analyse a story’s content. This is purely a recognition that some terms used may not be understood.)
	<b>ACTION</b> The first person invites another person to share a story related to the issue being explored. If the second person becomes the story-sharer the Inviter takes on the role of Carer. If the second person ‘passes’, the Inviter asks someone else.
ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY
<b>Story-sharer</b>  Note: Every member of the group is invited to participate in Story-sharing	The Story-sharer has the responsibility of sharing their own story or a story that they are intimately connected with. It should be a ‘grounded’ story – a true story – not a parable or hearsay.  The purpose of the story is to bring one of many lenses through which to see an issue.  The Story-sharer should not share someone else’s story without permission. Also, if they do have that permission, they should not name who they are talking about.
	<b>ACTION</b> The person in the group who has been invited may choose to share a story OR may ‘pass’.  If the person decides to ‘pass’ they are invited again after others have shared (and may choose to share or not share).
ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY
<b>Facilitator/Listener</b>	The Facilitator listens to the story-sharing and monitors that people engage with the Inviter/Carer/Sharer process, reminding people when necessary how to do this, until the group becomes well-versed in the process.  The Facilitator takes on the role of key Listener, and may ask others to take on Reflective Listener roles to assist in identifying themes.  During breaks, the Facilitator and Listeners start to identify together the themes being raised.  These may be listed for later sharing with the whole gathering.

	ACTION
	The Facilitator gives the instructions and acts as overall moderator, ensuring a safe environment.
ROLE	RESPONSIBILITY
<b>Reflective Listeners</b>	Reflective Listeners identify themes from the stories.  If some themes recur, they may be highlighted. Reflective Listeners do not give feedback about stories, although they may need to clarify terms. Later, at the invitation of the Facilitator, they may ask their group if there are theme areas that should be added to the whole based on the stories shared.
	<b>ACTION</b> The Facilitator gives the instructions and acts as overall moderator, ensuring a safe environment.

## Step 5 Identification of Themes

During a break, the Facilitator and Reflective Listeners collate possible themes from what they have heard and record them in a way participants can see what's been identified. If there is more than one group you might colour-code themes according to different groups, so the groups can check on their material and see if different groups shared stories with similar themes. Alternately recurring theme areas could be highlighted or asterisked.

Each group will identify its own themes according to its participants. For example, in the early Space for Grace conversations about a Christian Theology of Marriage, the facilitator of a very diverse group identified a range of issues to be explored:

- cultural expectations
- gender roles in different contexts
- parental responsibilities in marriages (and impacts when marriages are broken)
- unfaithfulness and adultery
- abuse within marriage and when is divorce needed
- third gender and marriage
- age of people marrying
- who decides who marries (including arranged marriages, permission-
- giving or blessing)
- responsibilities related to ageing parents, in-laws, etc
- property
- betrothal
- family implications (including stepchildren)
- is marriage between two people or two communities/families
- marriages involving transgender or ambiguous gender identity
- same gender family implications

## Step 6 Validation of Themes

When the Facilitator and Reflective Listeners have collated possible themes, the whole group is presented with the list so they can check and validate the themes. The whole group now gets the opportunity to add any themes that may have surfaced during the sharing of the stories. It is not a time to introduce new themes, external ideas or additional stories. The themes arise from the diverse stories of this particular community in this particular time.

If small groups are being used, it is appropriate to break back into the small groups and check: are the various themes we covered on the list? Is there any we need to add? Every named theme is valid because they arose from carefully listening to the shared stories.

## Step 7 Prioritise Themes to work on

Option 1  
The whole or small groups make a priority list

Option 2  
Through discussion and consensus, the group devises a priority list.

Issues that are not placed on the list can be “parked” for later discussion/action.

One way of doing this is to gather together, check the themes across the groups and then ask people to circle the themes that were most important from the conversations. Give each person a second go at circling or nominating priority themes so there is built-in validation within the process.

## Step 8 Theme Conversations

Explore together what traditions, Biblical material and ways of reasoning could assist in this conversation.

### Traditions

Invite explanations about relevant traditions from different cultures, to better inform the whole group. Some traditions can be spoken about. Others may be better explained by acting them out or sharing a song, dance or ritual.

**Example 1.** In some traditions, the first time a husband and wife clearly see one another's faces is in a mirror (literally seeing in a mirror dimly) at the time when their marriage is blessed by a family member, who reminds the couple of the importance of reflecting the relationships that have formed them in their new relationships.

**Example 2.** In some cultures, the giving and receiving of gifts/rings has symbolic significance.

**Example 3.** Korean spouses usually retain their family of birth name at their marriage. In some other cultures, one or the other spouse changes their name. Decisions about naming may hold different import in different cultures.

**Example 4.** Numerous cultures have traditions around the establishing of new household or crossing thresholds or being welcomed into new relationships.

### Bible Study

To undertake a shared Bible study, it may be necessary to identify different passages and different styles for addressing them. Some forms of Bible Study do not encourage or allow the full participation of voices from minority groups or cultures, so it is helpful to consider how you might encourage active participation from the whole group.

### Option 1 - Deep Talk

“Deep Talk” resources encourage wondering together and invite multiple ways of thinking and reasoning, rather than privileging a dominant style or attitude.

These resources are based on Lectio Divina and Godly Play wondering questions. Lectio Divina is a way of reading the scriptures developed in the 12th century by the monk Guigo which encourages practitioners to gradually let go of our own agenda and open ourselves to what God wants to say to us. Godly Play is a variation of the Montessori tradition of religious education that was developed in the United States by Dr Jerome Berryman.

Deep Talk takes a number of Godly Play principles and some Godly Play stories along with some new stories and adapts these for a spiritual process suitable to secular and religious settings, to help groups consider their organisation/workplace's vision, mission, issues or challenges. This has been used in Finland in secular and church contexts usually with existing staff.

Deep Talk sessions, similarly to Godly Play, begin with the making of a circle; the showing of a story; and a wondering time. Then everyone changes places and a dialogue game is played, arising from the story, then the group explores their work and life together. At the end, there is a celebration and chance to say farewell.

All Synods have Godly Play contact people who are aware of Deep Talk strategies.

### **Option 2 - Prepared studies**

Ask Bible study scholars and leaders to bring studies about the agreed passages. The group breaks into small groups and may use some of the Deep Talk wondering techniques.

### **Option 3 - Lectio Divina**

Once a passage has been identified, it can be read two to three times with pauses, allowing people to reflect before shared discussion takes place.

For the purposes of Space for Grace, there should be multiple passages, rather than one or two.

This allows for multiple themes to be explored from across the Scriptures. It eliminates the possibility of choosing a passage and interpretation which may support a particular position. Using multiple passages opens up the opportunities for people to give input into the conversation and allows different voices and reflections to be heard.

### **Ways of reasoning**

While some people are comfortable with taking a linear approach to reasoning, others undertake reasoning by identifying questions about relationships. The first approach may place less emphasis on relationship factors. The latter approach may only value a reason if it enhances relationship strength.

For example, in Western cultures people might ask questions about when, where and how. For Indigenous Australians people might ask who, whose and where people are connected to.

Also, reasoning reflects different language thought processes. For example, people with German-stem languages will often prioritise time-manner-place in organising data, while Indigenous Australians are more likely to prioritise kinship and links with the land.

When reflecting on stories, Biblical inputs and traditions, it may be helpful for the Facilitator to ask, “What are we prioritising here?”

Check if the various traditions, experiences, Biblical learnings and forms of reasoning have been integrated into the group’s thinking BEFORE moving to proposals or decisions.

## **Step 9 Determine directions/decisions the group agrees to pursue**

This may involve the development of proposals for how the group might want to move forward with the next step of their discernment.

There are different ways this might happen.

If the group gathered is a fellowship group or a congregation, time might be set aside for the group to develop proposed directions or decisions.

If the group is a Council of the Church, there may be time allocated for a Working Group or a Task Group appointed to put together the proposals.

Alternatively, in table groups, participants might work together on what would be important in any proposals.

The Manual for Meetings outlines these processes.

## **Step 10**

### **Determine what will happen to ‘parked’ themes.**

As a group, revisit the themes which were named but were “parked” for later consideration.

Discuss:

Who will work on them?

Will we refer them on?

What needs to happen to them?

‘Parked themes’ should not be lost. If there is no-one to pass them on to, they should at least be included in the reporting/ findings from the gathering.

## **Step 11**

### **Report**

The Facilitator is responsible for ensuring there is a report/ record from the gathering. This is to be circulated to all participants.

The report/record should not include evaluation or analysis of issues unless directed by the group.

The group may determine who else to send the report/ record to.

*Note: the authors wish to thank Facilitator Rev Lindsay Cullen for his helpful feedback following his facilitating of the two 2017 Space for Grace conversations undertaken on behalf of the National Assembly.*

# **APPENDIX**

[STEP 1 – SAMPLE Relational Profile for Sharing]

## **Profile - About Me**

### **Photo**

### **Preferred Name**

### **Three things about my life**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### **Two things about my home**

- 1.
- 2.

### **Something about God and me**

### **Why I accepted the invitation to come today**

