



pathways to the river 2013

Seeking Living Water

This report attempts to map the current landscape of the Children's and Youth Ministry at Brunswick Uniting Church and recommends actions for the next 12 months. Written by someone embedded into the life of the congregation, it does not purport to be highly objective and is certainly not the last word. It invites a lively and ongoing conversation amongst the congregation for the life of children and young people in their midst is to be respected and nurtured.

Church is a place where we can come seeking the Living Water of Christ in community. Our life as a church community is both a gathered event and on ongoing 'ungathered' events of smaller groups meeting and parting. We can imagine the changing patterns of our lives as ways of seeking Living Water. Some of us come down to the river seeking sustenance on a daily basis, some glide along in kayaks, others land up on islands or puddle about on the banks. Some take seasonal pilgrimages, some paddle upstream, some are tossed in turbulence, some feel cast adrift. Some are afraid of drowning and others want to be baptised.

As far as our gathered life for worship, the tracks to the river are clear and well tended. But some of the shapes of what we do and who we are no longer fit the landscape. The territory has changed, our pathways do not intersect in the ways they used to. Do we need boats, bridges or walking tracks to the river? What will we do with the old cruise ship of traditional Sunday School? How do we in an urban landscape, with our scattered and scattering lifestyles practice the presence of God? How will we as a congregation encourage our children and young people to find their paths to the river of Living Waters? How can we *be* a congregation, relating to one another in ways that celebrate the gifts of our humanity across generations.

Julie Perrin, Children's & Youth Ministry consultant, June 2013

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life... flowing through the middle of the city."

Revelation 22:1-2 NRSV

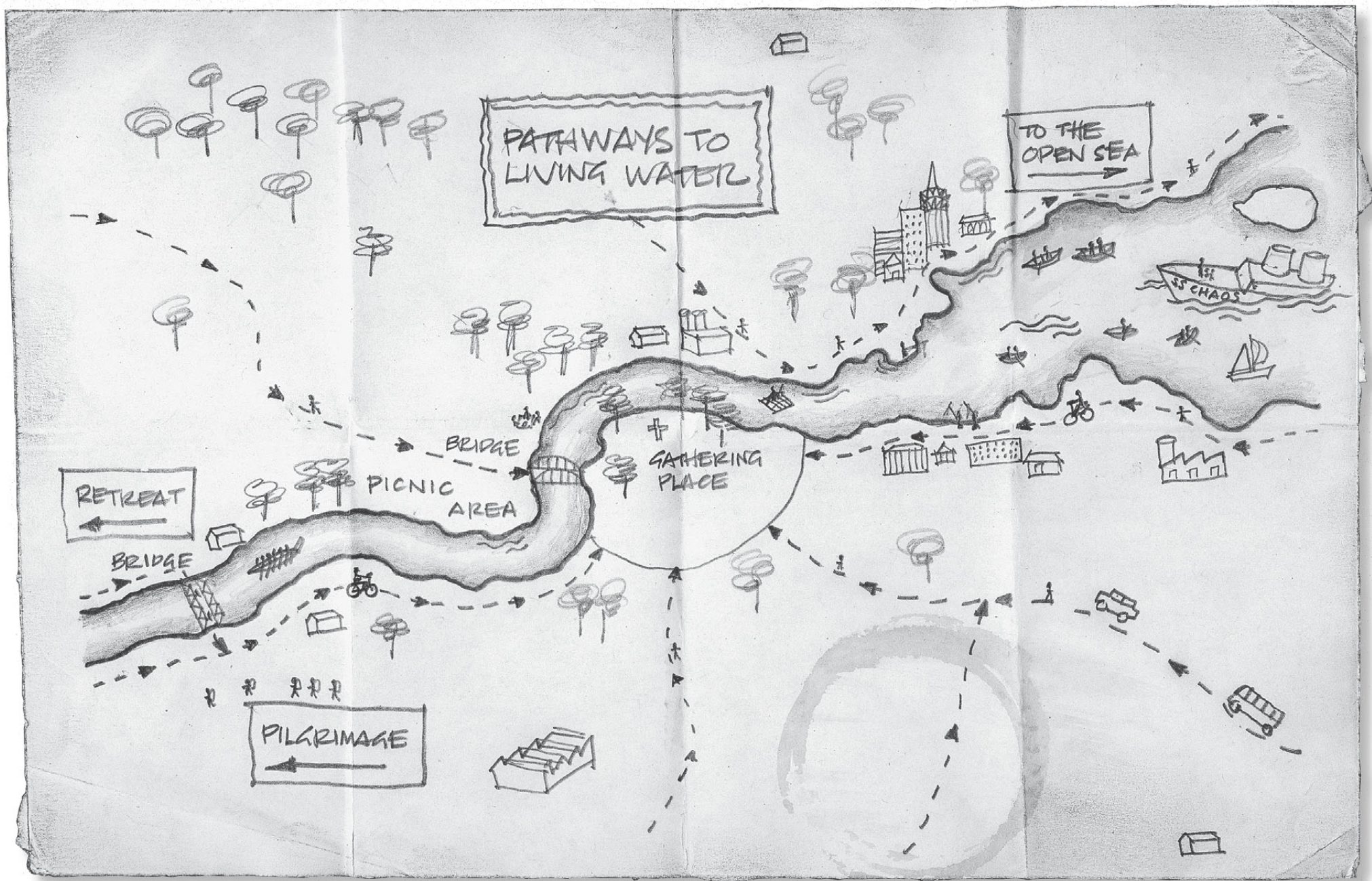


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Friends in Christ, will you promise to maintain the life of worship and teaching, witness and service, that this child and all the children among you may grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the knowledge and love of God?

With God's help, we will live out our baptism as a loving community in Christ: nurturing one another in faith, upholding one another in prayer, and encouraging one another in service until Christ comes.

[Congregational promise made during baptism ceremonies]

Executive summary

There is a strong desire at BUC to both nurture our children and give space for our young people to develop in Christian faith and stay connected to the church community. The saying that “it takes a whole village to raise one child” also applies in the church. It takes a whole congregation to embrace our children and encourage our young people in the life of faith. If this concept is not embraced by the congregation – no matter who is employed or volunteering in Youth and Children’s Ministry – it will be unsustainable and unsatisfying. A Children’s and Youth Ministry worker can provide certain structures and lead some activities but unless the congregation understand their own role in relationship to all their members – children, youth, young adults and older adults – the task will falter.

115 people responded to the on-line survey and 83% rated BUC programs for children and young adults as very valuable or extremely valuable. This report makes recommendations for intergenerational activities, and some mixing of traditionally age-based children’s and youth programs. The re-establishment of a Mentoring Program is a clear priority as well as the uptake of regular and occasional leadership for Sunday School and youth activities by musicians, cooks, bushwalkers and people reflecting on their working lives. Attention to re-furbishing the YUCY Hall is proposed and children under five need additional resources and furniture in the worship space.

The tasks of Children’s and Youth Ministry at BUC are conducted in a church environment caught in a tidal pull between a congregation with high standards, gifts and expectations who also have a powerful need for their own rest and replenishment. It will be the repeated experience of a worker that volunteers become unavailable or have to withdraw. For this reason the volunteer pool needs to widen and the scope of tasks to become more flexible. We need to be responsive to the evident gifts that currently exist in our church community. The next phase required to develop this initial work into a solid and flexible framework needs to be delivered through a second phase of work over the next 12 months.

A list of Recommendations for the next 6 and 12 months can be found at the back of this document.

Introduction and methods of collection

In December 2012 I was requested by the Children's and Youth Ministry Committee to consult with the Brunswick Uniting Church Congregation. My task was to investigate current programs and research best practice in the wider church and to recommend future directions. The research took place from December 2012 – May 2013. The diagram below shows the different elements.

1. Document current programs – leaders, practices, attendance note primary issues
2. Interviews – local leadership and regional leadership Youth Ministry leaders /educational consultants
3. Read recommended theological and practice-based Youth Ministry texts
4. Attend professional development
5. Document interventions/pilot programs
6. Attend camps – visit youth camp, student house weekend and church camp
7. Attend meetings C & Y, YUCY planning



What this plan covers

Current activities/programs of Children and Youth at Brunswick Uniting Church

Recommendations for the next 12 months

Age groups referenced: 0-4 babies and pre-schoolers, 5-13 primary school, 13-18 secondary school, 18-25 young adults (YA's)

What this plan doesn't cover – financial planning

The intended audience of this plan

Level 1) BUC congregation Level 2) Church Council Level 3) Children & Youth Committee

Consulted: Drew Hannah, Adrian Greenwood – CTM Youth and Young Adult Ministry; John Emmett, Cheryl Lawrie, Padraig O Tuama – Culture and Context Unit, Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Conferences /PD attended Ivy Beckwith – CTM Children's Ministry, Godly Play Australia April, CTM

Training offered: Tenebrae, SS teacher training and consultation leadership for All Age SS

Gatherings Attended Student House dinners, Church camp, Student House weekend, Youth group camp, YUCY Bible studies

Planning Meetings C & Y meetings attended YUCY planning meetings

BUC – numerous individual interviews and conversations, including previous C & Y workers James Dobson, Beth Donnelly Sunday School parents, teachers, parents of pre-schoolers, Primary School students, Secondary Students, Young Adults, Adults.

Whole congregation surveys Postcard survey given to whole congregation Sun March 17, 45 responses

On line survey May 5-15 with 115 respondents

Special Projects Photo display and children's sayings – Photographer Eva Rugel

Pilot Project All Age Sunday School on Holy Communion Sundays

“We talk a great deal about being the family of God, and it is most important that we model this.”

Bethwyn Smyth *A Comprehensive Approach*

Theological thoughts

Just as it takes a whole village to raise one child, it takes a whole congregation to encourage their faith. In 1997 Craig Mitchell wrote, “We cannot expect to nurture young people to mature faith apart from an intergenerational community of faith.”¹ This is borne out by a recent sustained piece of research across diverse congregations in the United States that claims:

The Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry discovered that it is the culture of the whole church that is most influential in nurturing youth of vital Christian faith... Congregational commitment to young people is at the heart of effective ministry with youth.²

Sometimes we in the Uniting Church become understandably alarmed at the drift of young people away from our denomination and our congregations. There are other churches and groups who preach a language of certainty, and they appear to be feeding a hunger that we refuse to bait. They get the numbers, they appear to be ‘successful’. It takes a courageous young adult or adolescent soul to stay in the church community here. There are not many peers. In truth, our relationship with our local young people is quite fragile. It would not take much to lose them. If we can listen more closely to their experience – giving them space and companioning them in ways they find helpful and human and honest – we may be making a place in which they feel they can belong and come and go from as they need to. Andrew Root calls this “place-sharing” and makes a strong argument that our relationships with young people are not simply a pretext for influence. He says:

If we are to build a structure that can stand the test of our turbulent lives, we will need to have the imagination to...rebuild relational ministry on a theological footing that...penetrates the very heart of God’s love for humanity in Jesus Christ, who is eternally for and with us.³

As Christians we are called into a community that embodies the love of God for the whole world – for old and young, woman and man, slave and free. As a congregation we need to step up to being more fully present to our children and young people. The job belongs to the whole congregation. We can ask a Children’s and Youth worker to assist in co ordinating our response, but the task of relationship cannot be outsourced and should not be limited to parents of children and young people.

“I am not a parent and sometimes I feel it is hard to find a way into the conversation around children... I need ways of getting to know the children and young people.” KB



“I liked the simplicity and the clarity,
it was memorable and tangible.” AQ

BUC Survey on children and young people

The survey was conducted online in May 2013 and received an excellent response, with 115 participants.

Respondents – there was a reasonable spread with representation of all age categories – the largest group of respondents aged 30-50 (33%). There was also a reasonable balance of gender, with just under 40% males and just over 60% female. Four in every five respondents had been attending BUC for more than two years. 40% of respondents were a parent of a child or young person connected to BUC, of whom 12 respondents had a child aged 0-5 and not yet in school.

Overall it is worth noting that respondents were typically very positive about BUC youth and children's programs. The survey highlighted a number of areas where improvements could be made to enhance children's services. It's also important to acknowledge that responses from secondary school aged young people and young adults were reasonably low and cannot be seen to be necessarily representative.

While 60% of respondents were not parents of a child or young person, 60% also said they had no connection with Sunday School at BUC over the past five years. This suggests that there may be a latent resources and that at least some of those in this cohort may enjoy participating in activities with children if given the resources / opportunities to join in. This is a topic that could be worthy of further research if the church

feels that children and youth activities are part of whole of church responsibility.

Parents of children aged 0-5 Almost all felt very/extremely welcome. Some said they only felt comfortable if their child was not noisy or when their child was with them – but the relatively low response rate and variable answers from the 12 parents involved simply flag this as an area for further investigation in discussion with parents. There was a clearer response with most parents strongly feeling that they would be happy to see more things for their child / children to do during church. Suggestions included more chairs and drawing tables and consideration of designated or suggested seating areas for parents to sit with children.

This group showed a thirst for more resources, with 9 out of 12 saying they would attend a play group connected to the church; 8 saying they would like resources to help them practice their faith as a parents and 10 saying they would be interested in resources and simple ideas for practicing faith at home.

Secondary students and young adults – a very low response rate for these groups – just three secondary age students – so it is difficult to make clear conclusions about this group. Interestingly four out of five young adults said they would not like more opportunities to participate in delivering worship – indicating further conversations are required with this cohort to discuss the ways they would want to engage.

Primary Students –13 responded to the survey and none wanted to be taught exclusively by their own parents – although the majority liked the idea of being taught by a combination of parents and other people.

Interestingly when asked about what they liked about BUC, 100% said morning tea. Other key reasons for attending church were friends, making things, church camp and the fact that ‘people talk to me’. These points provide an interesting link to the potential role for people who may not want a formal Sunday School role but want to play a part in the life of children and young people in the church.

A total of 10 children said they liked going out from church and that they were friends with other kids in their class. Most Sunday School participants said they enjoyed it quite a lot or very much; most felt they had learned quite a lot and most wanted to go again because they had had a good time.

If SS did not exist, 8 said they would keep coming to church 4 said they would not. Most thought the goal of SS should be to learn about God in an interesting, relevant way. Asked to name what they liked most about SS, craft and ‘making things’ was the top preference by far. All said that the best time to have SS was during church and seven said they would like to go on a SS camp or day trip.

Teachers – 26 people named themselves as Sunday School teachers in this survey – if they were all active on the roster we would not be in difficulty! 35% said they had been teachers for more than 10 years – raising questions about the need for succession planning for Sunday school teaching.

Most felt that they knew children well enough to connect with them, but the majority also found it very or even extremely challenging to prepare Sunday School classes. Despite this, the majority also said teaching Sunday School was fun and fulfilling. Eight teachers had said it was problematic to withdraw children from worship, but the majority said it was not a problem. Teachers said they would be willing to trial a pilot of 4 weeks of teaching SS before church – but because parents have not supported this option in the survey, it appears not to be a viable option to pursue.

All respondents 86% said they would like to see children and young people taking on more roles in leading worship at BUC. While there is a need to respect the 13 respondents who did not want to see this happen, this is a clear and unambiguous expression for the inclusion of children and young people in the life of BUC. Four in every five respondents (83%) rated BUC programs for children and young adults as very valuable or extremely valuable. These two facts are very significant – and a powerful endorsement of the role of children and young people in the life of BUC.

“It takes a whole congregation....”

“You made each of us to take you as a gift to others.”

“Why is it that there is never a problem filling the music roster which requires significant time commitment, but on the SS Roster people are constantly bailing?” PP

“Teaching SS is lonely.” FF

The Sinking of the SS Chaos

Sunday School, as its name suggests is a vehicle of an earlier era. We have struggled long and hard with ways of keeping the old ship afloat. In the experience of the C & Y committee, the dear old "SS Chaos" is sinking. Built for the life on the open seas and a constant crew of volunteers, it now lists awkwardly at the mouth of the river. We love the ship, we love the memory of the ship, the children love the ship, but no one has time to crew regularly any more. We are indebted to people who have stayed on the roster long after their own children have grown past Sunday School, but we need to spread the load.

Interestingly, in the life of our 'casual' church our time-poor people are more than prepared to devote serious time to music making and there is rarely a problem filling the music roster. We could make SS more of a team activity rather than the potentially lonely experience it can be for a teacher. This will be addressed in the integrated approach piloted in Term 3, 2013.

Meanwhile let's visit the old ship from time to time, maintaining a short series of classes for part of each term – let's leave the SS Chaos resting there so children can keep playing on it, climbing over it and finding treasure. But let's also provide some smaller lighter vessels – kayaks, a home-made raft, dinghys and even a dragon boat. We need flexible boats and pathways to the river for faith development and community connectedness. These new boats might include an Artspace that requires minimal preparation and regular themed events such as Cook-offs and Music-making that could be taught by a wider circle and age-group than current teachers.

And perhaps we should have a ritual to mark the sinking of the beloved vessel. We could rename and launch our new lighter vessels and simultaneously recruit more paddlers, and river-explorers – not only parents but other adults and young adults.



We come thirsty

Looking for water

We are distracted

Looking over our shoulders

We are casual, committed, confused –

We are seeking

Pathways to the river.

We bring our children

We miss our young people

We come down to the river to pray.

“Pass on the faith through doubt and struggle. Don’t be afraid to do this.”

Andrew Root *Relationships Unfiltered*

Gone fishing 16 -18+

It seems the landscape changes once young people reach the age of 16. If these young people are going down to the river, they are, for the most part 'gone fishing'. Suddenly it runs confusingly against their task of individuation and separation from their parents to show up at church. Whatever the reasons, many (but not all!) in this age-group find it hard to join in the worshipping life of the community.

So our task of staying connected alters. We need to honour the ones who are present as well as those who are absent. We need to give them enough space to trust their independence and enough contact to know that they are still valued and known and respected.

For those who stay participating in the exceptional musical life of our congregation is often a key piece. The possibilities for participation and performance and spiritual awareness are met at many levels for those who have an instrument or want to sing.

In the 16 – 18 age-group sleeves-rolled-up tasks and adventures beyond the familiar landscapes are also called for. Social and sporting activities on the edges of the church community work well – witness the enduring life of the Sunday evening netball teams which include 12 young people and YAs aged 16+! Hiking and camping can create ways of expanding the ways to meet the river. Heading off to NCYC early 2014 will attract interest if there is a critical mass and a range of age-groups going.

Evening or late night gatherings are more likely to appeal than Sunday morning worship. It is of note that seasonal services such as Christmas Eve and Good Friday and the associated social gatherings see a big turn out from many YAs who are otherwise fairly disconnected from the church community. There may be further opportunities (eg Maundy Thursday) that align with seasonal events and can lend a tidal pull.

Theologian Andrew Root describes the importance of 'place-sharing' with young people and the necessity of companionship without an agenda. In Biblical language this is taking up the language of God "tenting among us". Tenting among us is living deeply with and alongside each other without perfectionist fear or respectable veneers. I believe this kind of integrity can be hugely valued by young people and the Mentoring program may provide some structure for those who want to take it up.



Recommendations Summary – the next 6 months

- 1) **Presentation** linked into worship “it takes a whole congregation” expanding the conversation about children and youth including on-line invitations to congregation to join specific new opportunities for meeting and working with children and youth
- 2) **Mentoring** co ordination in consultation with Minister, leadership team formation, mentor training and pilot launch
- 3) **SPACES** immediate audit and budget for refurbishment of YUCY hall including built in cupboards for SS and YUCY use
- 4) Additional furnishings and resources for preschoolers in church – see Appendix spreadsheet, Babies and pre-schoolers
- 5) **Administrator** appointed re oversight of **Safe Church** policies, co ordinate with SS Training and Property Committee
- 6) **Collaborate** with **Student House Committee** re links with local YA’s and future needs for SS and YUCY assistance
- 7) Data entry and administration of **Database** notifications to be updated and maintained
- 8) **Alternative SS Rostering** & notification system trialled in sync with other church rosters.
- 9) **All Age SS** continued on Holy Communion Sundays with widening base of volunteer helpers
- 10) **SS vertical streaming** model trialled T 3, 2013 for Years 3 – 6 & 7 –9 Years P – 2 continue in age-based group

Recommendations Summary Next 12 months

- 1) Consolidation of Mentoring program
- 2) Year 10 + to organise an overnight hike in consultation with bushwalkers in the congregation
- 3) Year 10 + participate in refurbishment, painting of YUCY Hall
- 4) Years 7 – 9 SS altered from current format replaced with helper roles and alternative series
- 5) Years 7 – 12 occasional Q & A re faith work and life with adult volunteers
- 6) Years 7 – 9, 10 – 12 SS Periodic Alternative Bible Studies periodic short series
- 7) Expanded SS teachers and helpers list, including training for Years 7- 9 helpers, cooks and musicians
- 8) SS training minimum once per semester and SS teacher/helper meetings once per term
- 9) Maintenance of WWCC records and data base and email notification systems
- 10) YUCY and YA leaders mentoring to be formalized. Investigate putting more structure around volunteering, internships and short term paid positions
- 11) YA worship, including Tenebrae, mission and social events
- 12) Social networking developed for contact with youth and YA's

Endnotes and acknowledgements

¹ Craig Mitchell, (1997) *A Comprehensive Approach, Ministry and Mission with children, young people and families* JBCE

² Roland Martinson, Wes Black, John Roberto (2010) *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* EYM Publishing

³ Andrew Root, (2009) *Relationships Unfiltered*, Zondervan

Children's & Youth Committee Philip Potter, Ian Ferguson David Moorhouse, Ray Hardman, Caitlin Mullen, Tim Winkler

Children's & Youth Consultant December 2012 – June 2013 Julie Perrin www.tellingwords.com.au

Portrait Photographs Eva Rugel

Coloured Photos Saide Cameron, Julie Perrin Cover Design & Map David Wong

Down to the River to Pray – excerpt, Traditional

opposite : Deeper River II

Artist Rachel Peters www.tidalart.net

O sisters let's go down

Let's go down, come on down,

O sisters let's go down

Down to the river to pray

O brothers let's go down

Let's go down, come on down,

O brothers let's go down

Down to the river to pray.

