

Uniting Permanency Support Program

It takes a village.



How we see,
find, and engage
with family.

Uniting

Understanding our roots

Our family is the proverbial egg that we once hatched from. Everything about who we are, our nature and nurture, comes from our family.

Sometimes we may find ourselves far from our family, not seeing or talking to them for months or years. We may feel that we have nothing in common with them. We may feel we have been kept from our family. We might choose to run away from our roots because they're too painful to face. Ultimately however, our past holds the key to our future. Without access to our past, negotiating our present and future can be challenging.



The meaning of family in First Nations cultures

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have strong family values. Their cultures are based on large family structures. This means that bringing up children is the responsibility of the whole of family and the community in which they live. This includes Aunties and Uncles, brothers and sisters, grandparents, Elders, and cousins.

“Family is not an important thing. It’s everything.”

When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we must embrace our differences in how we raise children.

Family members also have other core functions within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies. As with non-Indigenous cultures, families teach children about social norms for interaction with others, along with specific cultural values and rules.

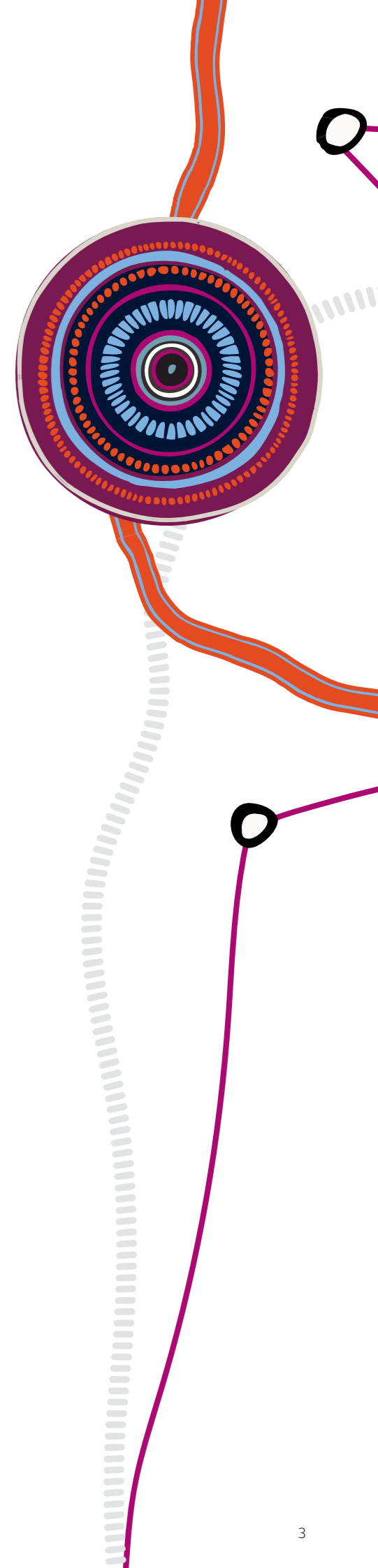
Children and young people in care often have to learn cultural ways over time, sometimes with people who are not from their culture and this can be difficult. It takes time to build trust and respect with the child or young person and to show how they have gathered this knowledge from their relationship with the child or young person’s birth family, extended families, and the community the child or young person belongs to.

Aboriginal kinship

Aboriginal kinship reflects a complex and dynamic system of belonging, and it defines where each individual sits within their family and community kinship system. The value of this kinship system is that it shapes people’s relationships, instils family and community obligations, and monitors appropriate behaviours towards each other.

Children may refer to their uncle and aunty as their ‘father’ or ‘mother’ and their cousins as ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters’. They know who their real mother and father are, but under these societal (kinship) laws, other family members have equal importance. The common Aboriginal terms of endearment are ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ when talking to people. These are derived from the kinship terms and associations.

Source: cspm.csyw.qld.gov.au and edited by Uniting PSP Aboriginal Cultural Advisor Jo Gilkison



If not, why not?

For too long, child protection systems have not engaged meaningfully with the family of children in statutory care. This has come at a cost.

There are children 'in the system' who worry and fret about the brother or sister they used to live with. They may now live far apart, in separate homes, with limited opportunities to visit.

Likewise, many children in care will daydream about the grandparent they used to see, with whom they felt safe, and wonder where they might be now.

Through no fault of their own, children in care often spend a childhood disconnected from parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and extended kin.

Even with the love, compassion, expertise and warmth of foster care families, a lack of meaningful family networks can have lifelong consequences for the emotional wellbeing of children.

I invite you to become a 'family warrior' in our team, starting our journey together with just one simple question in mind. If a child does not have meaningful links to their family, why not?

These core beliefs underpin Uniting's Family Engagement practice:

- All children have family members, both maternal and paternal, who can be found if we try.
- Children have a right to know the whereabouts and wellbeing of family members.
- A sense of identity, belonging and being loved unconditionally, are essential to a child's health, development and dignity.
- Connection is a prerequisite to healing.
- Successful support for traumatised children relies on respectful, collaborative engagement with family members.
- Parents and families generally want the best for their children and need connections and supports to be able to provide adequate care for them.

By joining a Family Engagement Consultant on a journey of family discovery, you will arguably be delivering the greatest gifts a child could ever have. The gifts of knowing who they are, where they come from and where they belong.

You are an incredibly important person in the life of a child. Please open your heart and mind to working with others in this child's community. Let's strive together to build robust networks for life that will always catch a child and hold them securely, even at the most difficult of times.

Our team's mission puts a child's safety, both physical and emotional, at the core of all our work. Please accept my invitation to help build the crucial network that will safeguard a child you care about.

We strive to see, activate and engage the communities that surround children in care by identifying common goals, dreams, expectations and hope.

Yours sincerely,



Tim Bishop
Uniting Manager of Family
and Carer Engagement





Why family seeing and finding?

Much like health and education are important domains of care for any child, Uniting recognises that knowledge of, and connection to, family is essential to a child's psychological safety and wellbeing. Having a documented plan for a child to be meaningfully connected to family is essential.

Family seeing refers to the dignified act of acknowledging family that we know about. It's the gesture of reaching out to family and actively including them in a child's network for life. "We see you and we will advocate for your connection to a child in our care."

Family finding is the effort we make to identify, locate and engage with family members who may be unknown or estranged.

It's known that the more a family can build support and resilience within their own network, the greater the likelihood that formal child welfare interventions will be effective and time-limited.

It's also recognised that the more caring adults a child has directly involved in their life, the greater statistical chance they have of achieving positive life outcomes after they leave care.

Family seeing and finding aims to develop 'networks for life' that could, over time, operate independently - without need for the input or control of a child protection agency.

How is family seeing and finding honoured at Uniting?

Uniting's Permanency Support Program employs Family Engagement Consultants (FECs) who specialise in identifying and finding family members of children in our program.

FECs specialise in developing robust and accurate genograms or family trees that help children and young people understand where they fit into their family network. They will talk to family members who have often never been invited to participate in the life of a child in care.

There will be times when a FEC will work directly with a child or young person to help 'map out' personal memories of their family and other important people from their past. This work will sometimes be taken further, with the FEC tasked to locate certain people and invite them to reconnect with a child in care.

A FEC may facilitate family and kin meetings (sometimes referred to as village meetings), where the group is encouraged to work together and identify their own collective goals to support a child or young person that they all care about.

FECs have one overarching goal – to have family and kin playing active and meaningful roles in the life of a child. They are non-judgemental family specialists who work collaboratively with all members of a child's network including carers, family members, caseworkers, allied professionals and, of course, the children and young people themselves.



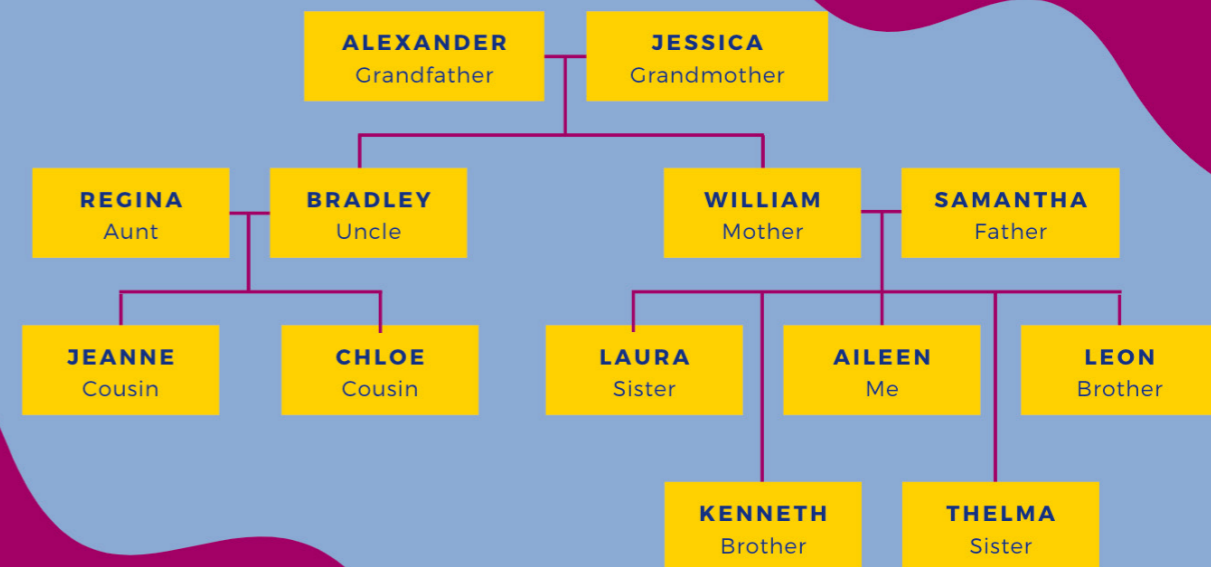


A message for children

Everyone has a right to know about their family.

What do you know about your family tree?
Does your family tree look a bit like this one?

My family tree



A message for young people

There are lots of young people who don't know too much about their family tree.

Getting to know 'who's who' in your family network can be really fun and it's definitely interesting.

Sometimes parts of your family tree will be all stored up in your head, and a Family Engagement Consultant can help you get it out of your brain and onto paper! It might end up looking like a diagram or, if you have a creative streak, it could end up being a piece of art.

Most young people who start working on their family tree (also called a genogram) suddenly remember people they used to know, and learn about new people they never knew about before. Some of those people might be living close by or far away, and there will also be people in your tree that aren't alive anymore.

It's very normal, and healthy, for your emotions to start running wild as you think about your mother, father, your brothers and sisters, grandparents and lots of other people who are important in your life. As you start your family work, it's likely you will have feelings of great happiness and, also, at least some feelings of sadness.

At every step, your Family Engagement Consultant and, of course, your carer and caseworker, are here to listen. Nobody can truly predict how you might feel and that's why the adults around you, including family, will listen carefully when you tell them what emotions come up for you.

It's important to remember that your feelings about different people change over time. How you felt about someone when you were 5 years old might be very different to how you feel about them today.

You have a right to know about your family tree and you also have the right to ask questions about people in your family. Your Family Engagement Consultant will also be talking to other people in your network to get more information and help make your 'tree' as meaningful as possible.

They are really looking forward to working with you on your family project.

Did you know?

All children in care have special rights, including the right to know about their family. If you don't have a copy of your Children's Charter of Rights ask your caseworker.

It's a great little book to have on hand.



Sometimes it's easier to talk privately with someone who doesn't know you:

KIDS HELPLINE

1800 551 800



Who else could you talk to about your feelings? Have you thought about your youth mentor, therapist, counsellor, or trusted school staff and family members?

A message for parents

We are so grateful that you're willing to work with us on strengthening your child's family and carer network. The more trusted adults in their lives, the better their chances of them achieving contentedness in adulthood.

You probably hold more essential information in your head than you may realise. But we respect that talking about your family, your childhood and your connections can be painful. We know that trust is something you will need to build in order to work with a Family Engagement Consultant.

Let's start by busting some myths:

- **We work alongside, but not for, the casework team.**
Family Engagement Consultants are employed by Uniting, but they sit independently of the casework team. They do, however, seek the views of many people, including the caseworker.
- **We are not working on behalf of carers.**
Family Engagement Consultants will talk to carers, but they remain independent professionals who work with everyone.
- **Our work does not involve exploring restoration to parents.**
The living arrangements of children and their 'permanency goals' are best discussed with the casework team.
- **We don't make decisions about Family Time Plans.**
Caseworkers will work with you, children, and carers to arrange family visits and plans.
- **We are not looking for a new 'placement' for your child.**
Family Engagement Consultants focus on relationships and meeting the needs of children, not determining their living arrangements.
- **We are never on the 'side' of a particular family member.**
Family Engagement Consultants will work fairly and equally with all family members, both maternal and paternal.
- **We don't work for Centrelink, DCJ or any government agency.**
The Family Engagement Worker is employed by Uniting and does not work on behalf of any other agency.
- **We are not seeking child support payments from anyone.**
The purpose of Family Engagement is about building relationships.



How can parents help?

If parents share their knowledge, they can help a child make sense of who they are and where they fit in their family and community.

A Family Engagement Consultant will probably ask you questions like:

- Is the family tree we have on record true and accurate?
- What do your family relationships look like? What extended family do you know about and stay in touch with?
- Can you give us contact details of family members that we should talk to?
- Which people were important to your child before they came into care? Were there family members, friends, neighbours, teachers or other trusted people that championed you and your children?
- Do you have photographs of people who your child might remember?
- Who do you think should be playing an active role in the life of your child?
- If a child's father is unknown or unconfirmed, what ideas do you have to help confirm who he might be? Who could we talk to, or what records could we search? Do you remember their address, phone number, names of their friends or family, where they worked or where they liked to hang out? What clues might you have to help identify your child's dad?
- Could you work with people in your child's family network, even if that relationship hasn't been easy in the past? Remember, the only goal is to meet the needs of your child and make sure they know they belong.

An extra message for dads and unconfirmed fathers

Sometimes dads are worried that we're asking questions on behalf of DCJ or Centrelink, seeking child support payments or some other obligation from you.

This is not true.

Our only goal when working with you, is to highlight your importance in the life of a child. What do you want your child to know about the paternal side of their family?

By working with a Family Engagement Consultant, you might provide a single piece of simple information that answers a range of life-changing questions for the child you care about.

Trust is always important. Please know that we want to talk to you exclusively about the needs of your child and helping them to make sense of their own identity. How do you see your relationship with your child, moving towards the future?

A message for family members

When a Family Engagement Consultant (FEC) reaches out to you, it may be natural to wonder:

- Why am I being contacted?
- Do the child's parents know I am being involved in this conversation?
- Will this conversation cause family conflict?
- Will 'getting involved' cause me disappointment?
- What could I offer to this child at this stage in my life?

You are a valuable part of a child's life.

FECs would like you to know that they have your young family member's best interests at the heart of all their work. You can be an important part in the child developing a proud sense of family.

As a family member of a child or young person in Uniting's Permanency Support Program, you are very likely to have information, family knowledge, photographs or stories that will help a child make sense of who they are.

Family members are under no obligation when they talk to a FEC. However, your connection to a child in our program is one we would dearly love to nurture.

Family members can help a child in one or all of the following ways:

- Providing feedback about the accuracy of a child's genogram or family tree
- Providing that 'missing part of the jigsaw puzzle'. Information about previously unknown or misunderstood family connections and dynamics
- Giving essential information that may help confirm the identity of a child's father and possibly their whereabouts
- Confirming if you would like to establish a connection and relationship with your young family member and if this might look like letters, exchanging photos, emails, video calls or meeting up face-to-face occasionally or on a regular basis.



A message for carers

For some carers, it can be unsettling to learn that robust Family Engagement work is about to commence.

Some commonly held worries of carers can include:

- If family is found, could the child I care for be transitioned out of my care?
- Could this work have a negative impact on my relationship with the child I care for?
- Will this work be upsetting to the child or young person I care for, and could they be 'retraumatised'?
- Could this process put my household in danger?
- Is it likely this work may get a lot of hopes up and end with disappointment for parents, family and children?

There is always some risk in any work we do on behalf of children and young people. When it comes to Family Engagement, there is a vastly greater risk in not doing the work at all.

These kinds of concerns are natural for carers to raise, and they are respected. Please remember that Family Engagement Consultants are not seeking new placements for children. They specialise in bringing people together with the goal of creating a village around children in care.

Before commencing Family Engagement work, the FEC will schedule a consultation with you, seeking your views about the strengths, challenges and opportunities of Family Engagement work for a child in your care.

Although the work of a FEC requires delicacy, it's also acknowledged that there's a high risk to children in care if this work is not carried out at all.

Carers, with the strong guidance of their PSP team, should be central to helping children make sense of often-complex family dynamics. Typically, it is the carer who wields the greatest influence over a child's perception of their family.

A child's perception of their family undeniably influences their perception of themselves.

If a foster carer is observed offering warmth and inclusion to parents and other family members, a child in their care is likely to maintain an open mind about these same individuals.

Similarly, when a foster carer has an absent or negative relationship with parents and other family, a child in their care could easily form ambivalent views about their kin or, at worst, a fear and hatred of the people in their biological network.

Uniting, like all other Permanency Support agencies, carries an unhelpful legacy from the previous practice of keeping carers and birth family separate, whereby:

- Some carers who have been in their roles for many years are concerned about the involvement of birth families. They can, at times, be reluctant about the forging of family connections for children in care. This usually stems from a sense of protection for the children they care for but overlooks the long-term positive outcomes for the carer, the child and the child's family by having a child's sense of identity strengthened.
- Birth families are lumbered with negative stereotypes which don't take their own life context into account. These perceptions hinder their opportunities to form natural connections with children in their family who have been assumed into care.
- Too many children in care are significantly disconnected from family including their parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents and extended kin. Many adults who missed out on family relationships in their childhoods speak of grieving for the many lost opportunities of sharing profound life experiences with people who "should have been there".
- Children and young people become at risk of attachment and mental health issues, related to their confused sense of identity and their need for family connection.
- Children in care who have not witnessed their carers and family working together, can be burdened with strong feelings of divided loyalty and/or guilt if they feel they are favouring one party over the other.

It's never too late

One of a carer's most important responsibilities is to help build family connections, regardless of restoration, kinship placement, guardianship, adoption or long-term care.

With the benefit of studies, research and, most importantly, the voice of children who are, or were, in the foster care system, we are now obliged to ask one basic question: *If a child does not have meaningful relationships with biological family, why not?*

There are so many beautiful, powerful examples within our program of foster carers actively collaborating with biological family. In all of these instances, the child who has become the focus, can clearly articulate a realistic description of who they are, where they fit, their living arrangements, why they are in care, who keeps them safe, who they love, and who loves them in return. When carers and family share decision-making and influence over a young life, the rewards for the child are profound and lifelong.

All carers should be courageous 'family warriors'. Advocating for a child to understand their family tree, to know their ancestry and to have active relationships with as many family members as possible, is arguably the greatest responsibility a carer has.

It's never too late to take up this challenge. Sit with your Family Engagement Consultant and look at a child's family tree. It's more than likely you will find a disconnected brother, sister, aunty, uncle, cousin, grandfather or grandmother who may just be longing to hear about the child that lives with you – the very same child you care so much about and want to see flourish into adulthood, cushioned by the love and protection of as many caring people as possible.



Frequently Asked Questions

How are Family Engagement Consultants different from caseworkers?

Much like a speech therapist provides guidance and advice in their specialist area, FECs also work expertly in meeting the needs of children in just one important domain.

Uniting FECs do not report to the same supervisor as caseworkers. They work in their own dedicated team, providing specialist work and recommendations which are often transferred into the child or young person's case plan.

FECs do collaborate with caseworkers, but they work as closely with children, young people, carers and family. Once a FEC concludes their work, their recommendations will become the focus of caseworkers to follow.

You will find that caseworkers often attend appointments with the FEC, so they are aware of the work they need to continue when the FEC concludes their engagement.

Is Family Engagement work focused on finding new homes for children in care?

FECs do not seek to find new or alternative placements for children in care. Their role is purely about establishing a 'network for life' for the children and young people they engage with.

The FEC will also aim to activate that network, helping facilitate conversations about how each network member can play a helpful role in the life of the child who is at the centre of the network.

Can a Family Engagement Consultant support restoration goals or change family time plans?

It's not the role of the FEC to provide advice about family time plans or permanency goals such as restoration, guardianships or adoptions. These matters sit with the casework team who have oversight of a child's case plan.

What can reconnection look like for a family member?

For family members who are re-establishing links with a child in care, reconnection typically starts gently with an exchange of emails or letters, or exchanges of photographs on occasion.

Following the lead of the child or young person, reconnections can evolve to include phone calls, video chats and get-togethers.

FECs may invite family members to become participants in 'village meetings' whenever these are established.

What is a 'village meeting' and how do they operate?

In some instances, a FEC will work towards establishing 'village meetings' (also known as blended perspective meetings or family meetings) where members of the network meet to share their thoughts on the child's needs and how these could be met. The meetings are facilitated by the FEC.

FECs will often remind network members that village meetings are not forums for revisiting past issues or grievances. Rather, they are occasions for everyone to name areas of need in the life of a child, and propose strategies for meeting these. The meetings look forwards, not backwards.

It can be confronting and stressful for members of a child's network to meet for the first time.

FECs might start by introducing family and network members in smaller groups, possibly via short video chats or brief face-to-face catch-ups.

The ultimate aim is to have as many network and family members meeting together regularly on an ongoing basis, with the exclusive purpose of discussing the needs of the child or young person and how these will be met.

Although village meetings may feel awkward or artificial at first, over time they should become a cornerstone for decision-making. By participating in such meetings, members provide their consent for the sessions to be documented and the meeting minutes to be made available for the review of all members.

Extra support

Your Family Engagement Consultant is looking forward to talking with you further about the work they are about to commence.

For many people, this is new and uncharted territory. You may find the experience emotional, and that's only natural.

We encourage you to seek support from those you trust, or through independent counselling services. Rallying support around you before you participate in this journey may give you additional resilience and comfort.

For carers

Call TELUS Health on **1800 835 871**

For children and young people

Call Kids Helpline on **1800 55 1800**

For all adults

Call Lifeline on **13 11 14**



About Uniting

Uniting NSW.ACT contributes to the work of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT, through community services, spiritual care, social impact and advocacy.

We provide services for people through all ages and stages of life, and drive solutions to systemic issues so people experiencing disadvantage can live their best lives.

Our purpose is to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice.

We value diversity and always welcome everyone exactly as they are.

Get in touch

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A stylized graphic of a tree with a dark green trunk and a light green, rounded canopy, positioned on the right side of the page.

Uniting