

## B2 Retiring President

I acknowledge with deep respect the sovereign First Peoples of the lands and waters where we meet the Bulluk Clan of the Wurundjeri Nation. We honour their elders past and present and all descendants of this nation and all the Kulin Nations. Further I respectfully acknowledge all other Aboriginal and Islander Peoples here today.

I began my message at the 14<sup>th</sup> Assembly in Perth with the Yolŋu expression: *bala limurr roŋiyirr ŋurrŋitjilil* – let us return to the white ash of the fire. The fires of this ancient land and her sovereign peoples, the fires which have warmed and nurtured generations, and the fires around which the creation stories have been told and retold. Fire, which refines and lights the way, fire the symbol of the Holy Spirit at work.

Friends, my reflection through the amazing privilege you have given me to serve the Church in this role has taken my thoughts back to a conversation I had in the old offices of the Northern Synod when I was a Support Worker with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. I had asked two Yolŋu elders to talk to me about the English word “value” and we had begun with the word *miŋurr* which is the value you might give to your car or your guitar or your house. However, part-way through our conversation one elder said the word *rriŋgi* and the next few hours involved leaning about this term’s meaning. I understand *rriŋgi* to be the intrinsic value of a relationship shared with another human being. A value which can’t be quantified, like the value of the relationship I have with Ros, my wife of 43 ½ years. *Rriŋgi* is deep and carries many stories, many life experiences, within *rriŋgi* there is pain and immense joy. *Rriŋgi* can also be communal rather than individual for example between my clan nation and my wife’s clan nation who have for eons been in relationship.

Why am I talking about *rriŋgi*? Because my heart burns brightly for the relationships we have in this culturally diverse community of Christ called the Uniting Church. Each and every part of us; in congregations, agencies and schools: from small communities in the bush to the large cities; from the beaches of the eastern coast to the red Centre and across to the vast, wild and isolated west coast; from the tropical north to the tip of Tassie; and everything in between. The people, beloved of God, in *rriŋgi*-type relationships through Christ and empowered and accompanied by the Spirit.

My heart also burns with love for the relationships we have nurtured, certainly since Union but well before, with our international partner Churches, and for those newer relationships which have been formed internationally. Including the ecumenical relationships, we have here in Australia and through various bodies we are part of globally.

Relationships which have Christ’s love at the heart of them and this makes them core to who we are as the people of God. Many times, in this past three years both here in Australia and overseas I spoken from Romans 12:5: “*We belong to one another*”. These *rriŋgi* relationships are about mutuality and about putting the other ahead of ourselves. These relationships are Christian, for they will know us by our love.

In January of 2017 Revs. Gaby Kobrossi, Krikor Youmshajekan and Emanuel Audisho; with Rob Floyd and I travelled to Beirut, Lebanon. We went in Christian solidarity because sending written messages of support and prayer had become hollow. So, we went as living letters to learn, to pray and to build relationships.

The Christian Church in the Middle East and particularly in Lebanon had been and is still responding to the millions of displaced peoples, refugees from Syria and Iraq who streamed over the Lebanese borders to escape civil war. The church offers the love of God and practical care to all these people, especially the large number of unaccompanied children.

Quite a contrast when you consider various government responses to children seeking refuge in other parts of the world including our own.

The Basis of Union speaks about “special relationships being formed with Asia and the Pacific”. Uniting World’s Charter speaks of Asia, Africa and the Pacific. But friends, the very first paragraph of the Basis says that: “The Church of God is committed to serve the world”.

Rev Dr Geoff Thompson has pointed us in his book “Disturbing Much Disturbing Many” to the fundamental shift in the Joint Commission on Union’s thinking which was significant in their agreement and decision to form the Uniting Church in Australia. They agreed:

“The Church is in and for the world or it is not the Church”.

So, I want to challenge us to revisit our understanding and the limits we have placed on international relationships. I don't for a moment underestimate the financial and resource constraints upon us. However, our God can do more than we ask or imagine, so let's imagine and grow the kinds of relationships which are critical at this time in history for the people of God to not only survive but to thrive. Let's not limit ourselves or God in our imagining, after all our friends in the Middle East told us and demonstrated to us, they don't practise a theology of survival, they practise a theology of impact!

One of the greatest impacts in my life and my faith journey has been the connection with the rich cultural diversity of our Church. For me the connection with and the priority I have given to the former Multicultural Cross-Cultural Ministry National Reference Committee together with the 12 National Conferences has shaped me and blessed me. These communities, these rringi relationships have spiritually enliven me through out this triennium.

Friends, the rich, linguistic and cultural diversity of our Church is an absolute gift of God. You have heard me say that I believe the Spirit of God is transforming our Church into a truly intercultural fellowship of reconciliation. This cultural diversity of course, brings with it particular challenges to not automatically assume the worldview we hold, any of us, or our particular cultural understandings are the right or only ones. God is transforming us into a community that opens itself to the other and this "opening" enables us all to glimpse something more of the mystery of God in the process. Our practices, our theological education, indeed everything about us needs to be reshaped by and through this rich cultural diversity which is the Uniting Church in Australia today.

To be an authentically Australian Church, as it is often claimed, requires we learn about and from this nation's sovereign First Peoples and thereby grow in relationship with them and this land. Rringi is what underpins my deep affection for First Peoples. I'm a member of the Birrikili, Gupapuyngu Clan Nation. This in turn gives me a complex web of relationships far beyond the Yolngu Nations of Arnhemland, in fact right throughout this vast ancient land.

I'm proud that our Church has chosen to journey in covenant, under God with the Congress.

The Statement to the Nation at the beginning of the UCA's life set the tone of a relationship First and Second Peoples together. Then the formal ceremony to enact our Covenant, committed us to journey in relationship. We followed this with an apology for our part in the stolen generations tragedy. Next, we recognised in our Preamble to the Constitution the history of this nation, the dispossession and the pain caused, together with our part in it.

This is why the former President Sir Ronald Wilson launched the Mapoon appeal, to right a wrong, to build a church which we had been complicit in destroying. At the 14<sup>th</sup> Assembly Marda Pitt and I relaunched that appeal and I'm delighted to say that together with individual donations, Synods and the Assembly have generously and sacrificially given. We now have a fund that is in excess of \$720,000. In partnership with the Mapoon Council, the Assembly, UAICC and the Queensland Synod will now negotiate with the Queensland Government and the Mining Trust to secure the remaining funds to honour the commitment to the people of Mapoon. I am very grateful to the Queensland Synod for agreeing to project manage this next phase of negotiations.

We honoured the culture and law of First Peoples, as God given in the Preamble to our Constitution. Then we called the whole Church to a week of prayer for First Peoples and particularly to focus on the injustices committed against First Peoples which continue today.

Notably the so-called Northern Territory Intervention of 2007, which totally disregarded the human rights of Australia's Indigenous peoples. Intervention Mark 2 in 2012, called Stronger Futures, failed again, completely ignoring the Australian Governments support in 2009 for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

My friends, new generations of First Peoples continue to be removed ("stolen") from their families at alarming rates and way too many teenagers and adults are incarcerated. These are blights on our common humanity and the human rights of First Peoples under international law. Our call is to continue to shine a light upon these injustices and to partner with the UAICC to bring about change.

And so, it was in 2013, after this disgraceful period in Australia's history the Uniting Church reaffirmed we had "a destiny together" in this land, First and Second Peoples. In this we gave moral leadership to our

nation. Now at this Assembly it is my hope we will again give moral leadership to the nation and cement our Rringi relationship with First Peoples by affirming their sovereignty.

I want personally to apologise to my Indigenous sisters and brothers for the failure of the Church to honour your culture and law. For our failure to engage with you to understand more through your eyes and heart, rather than insisting you conform to our western mindset and ways. I particularly apologise to those men who candidated for ministry and were told they could only have one wife. I apologise to the women and children who suffered because the covenant relationships they had with their husbands were broken because we the Church failed them, failed to listen and learn. In this I am ashamed, and for these failings and the hurt caused, I apologise.

We will continue to advocate for the Federal Government to honour the 'Statement from the Heart', as a matter of justice and recognition to be implemented, for First People to be given a voice.

Within the Uniting Church I look forward with expectation to the establishment of a First Peoples Spirituality and Theology Institute. Now we "walk on country" and glimpse something of creation and the Creator, then my friends our eyes will be opened to the rich heritage that is, as First Nation elders have said, for us all to share, our destiny together in this ancient land.

Two of the most exciting communities within our Church I've been privileged to share with are Yuróra (the National Christian Youth Convention) and National Young Adult Leaders gatherings. These represent the wonderful diversity of our Church. They also are fabulous examples of what a true intercultural community, a fellowship of reconciliation is meant to be.

Again, there are some challenges for us to work on together with these young leaders. Firstly, research from the states indicates that by college young Koreans and Chinese people are leaving the Church in large numbers. So, it is possible this rich and growing community of young adults and young leaders in our Church won't be around if we don't seriously address the failings the research points too. This means young leaders have to be given a place, a voice, leadership; they have to be nurtured, mentored and encouraged.

Secondly, we can't just leave the issues that arise for Second Gen young people i.e. those born in Australia or who were very young when they arrived. We can't leave the issues for the community to work on alone. Nor can we leave out of the conversation the very generation that is affected. So, for example too many young men of Pacific Island and First Peoples communities are in jail. The solutions friends, don't just rest with these communities. They rest with us, because of relationship, we are involved and the imperative is for us to work together.

More generally we must intentionally invest in the youth and young adult communities of our Church, to mentor, resource and encourage. I have seen some great examples of this in various parts of our Church around the nation. My prayer is for the intergenerational, intercultural community of Christ to be fully raised up amongst us.

We have matured as a movement, demonstrated to my mind, through greater collaboration across the various Councils of the Church for the benefit of others.

None more so than the work of the National Task Group working on the Church's response to Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. You have received a report from the Task Group and Executive Officer will be with us at this Assembly for this business. The detail is important. What has been critical for me is our process, particularly the way we have collaborated across our councils and maintained a focus on being survivor-led and trauma-informed.

The Royal Commission has been the catalyst for us to work more closely together as a Church. There's a sense of maturity and purpose in our work together that I believe is life-giving.

There are other examples I could speak about to illustrate the way we are collaborating intentionally across the Uniting Church in Australia. However, I have chosen this very visible example to make this point. We offer a model to the wider community, through an open and collaborative process, a generous life-giving way, which is a counter to the often closed and selfish practices of so many organisations. I call on all parts of our Church to embrace collaboration and generosity as the life-giving way of Jesus.

The theological concept of the Self-emptying God, what theologians call Kenosis is something I have been deeply reflecting upon. I'm thinking that this collaborative, generous, life giving way of Jesus which we are,

through the Spirit empowered to live, is what the Spirit is saying to the Church at this time. Perhaps beloved it is what God's gift has been at all times for the church. May we all be attentive to the Spirit.

I want now to give thanks firstly to God for sustaining and enriching me throughout this time as your President. I have also been blessed and supported by three wonderful chaplains Zac Hatfield Dodds, Isabel Thomas Dobson, and Rev Dr Ji Zhang; thank you friends for journeying with me and praying for me. Judy Orme has been my Executive Assistant, par excellence. Attending to so much and so many with such care and dedication, thank you.

There have been two Assembly General Secretaries in this triennium, so firstly thank you to Rev Terence Corkin for your advice and wisdom in my transition into the role.

Colleen Geyer it has been my joy to serve our Church with you and for us to offer the Church a model of shared collaborative leadership. Thank you.

The community of the Assembly Officers has been a wonderful place of fellowship, discernment and wise counsel, thank you to Deidre Palmer, Andrew Dutney and Colleen Geyer.

Colleen and I have also sought to engage the Synod Moderators, UAICC Chair (now President) and General Secretaries with the Assembly Officers as the national leaders of the Church and I am grateful to you all for the relationships, wisdom and the shared love of the church we hold together.

I want to acknowledge the Northern Synod who has supported me, loved and prayed for me and has blessed the Assembly budget by providing office facilities and support, a wonderful gift.

We have friends, a fabulous Assembly office staff team and I am truly grateful for you all and the opportunity to have served alongside you.

This gig is such an honour and privilege. It is personally and spiritually rewarding and yet costly. I want to acknowledge the gift my wife Ros is and has been for the Church. Ros challenges me, engages with me, corrects me and loves me and I love her and am so grateful to God who has blessed us throughout our life together.

Sisters and brothers, marrkapmirri, my deep affection for you all. Thank you.

Stuart McMillan  
8<sup>th</sup> July, 2018