



## RETIRING PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly

Dr Deidre Palmer

July 17, 2021

President, members of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly:

### ***Acknowledgement:***

I acknowledge the sovereign First peoples of the lands and waters from which we are gathering. I pay my respects to their elders - past, present and emerging - and honour their continuing culture in this land from time immemorial. I pay my respects to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are gathered here and commit to walking together based on truth-telling, justice and Christ's liberating hope.

Thank you for entrusting me with the responsibility of serving the Uniting Church as your President. It has been an amazing privilege and a time of profound reliance on the grace of God and the equipping of the Holy Spirit.

I've experienced the greatest joy witnessing and hearing your narratives of hope as the Uniting Church, as you embody the Gospel of Christ. As a Church, we have persisted, adapted, and drawn on the Spirit's creative gifts so that we are

empowered to live God's call to be compassionate, followers of the Risen Crucified Christ.

The last 16 months have been difficult for our Church, nation and global community. I'm conscious of the challenge those of you in lockdown areas are currently facing, and the grief and loss experienced, as we have been isolated, disconnected, and had our lives disrupted. We thought we were in a better situation, but we still face uncertainty.

Globally, progress made in alleviating extreme poverty has been lost, as the most disadvantaged again suffer the greatest impacts of COVID.

We also face the climate crisis witnessed in unprecedented bushfires, drought and intense weather patterns.

Many of us are exhausted.

Often, I've turned to Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4, that speak of the extraordinary power that comes from God. "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed" - and call us to "not lose heart".

God has enabled us to endure through conflict, failure, drought, bushfire, injustice, discrimination and this pandemic, and with Christ-like eyes, inspires us to focus on what really matters in people's lives and in the life and mission of our Church.

These last three years have taught me (us), that we can plan, imagine a way forward and be totally disrupted. But we are a people of Resurrection – we follow a risen, crucified Lord, who is with us always and empowers us to be a people of love, reconciliation, and hope. You are witnesses to this hope as you gather here.

I've shaped much of my preaching, presentation of the Assembly's work and conversations through the lens of my theme for this triennium – Abundant Grace, Liberating Hope. As the Church faces challenging times, I've been deeply aware that it's God's abundant, extravagant love and grace that holds us together. It transforms our view and enables us to be the people and communities of faith we are called to be.

As I've travelled across the nation, I've invited people to name the signs of Christ's liberating hope that they see around them, and in the life and witness of our Church.

I've seen God's abundant grace and hope in

- Our covenant relationship and our walking together as First and Second Peoples
- our being a multicultural and intercultural community in Christ
- our participation in God's renewal and healing of the Whole Creation

## **OUR COVENANT RELATIONSHIP AND OUR WALKING TOGETHER AS FIRST AND SECOND PEOPLES**

In 2019 we celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the covenant when the UCA truthfully acknowledged our past, and in a hope-filled way sought to become a new community of Christ characterised by justice, healing, dignity and flourishing for all.

At the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly we passed a resolution affirming the Sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and acknowledging their spiritual connection to the land.

It has been a joy to work with Pastor Mark Kickett as the National Chair of UAICC. Thank you, Mark, for your inspiring, prophetic and compassionate leadership. Thank you to Garry Dronfield, the past President, to the Congress National

Executive and all the members of UAICC who continue to bear witness to God's call to transformation, and justice.

I have met with UAICC members across the country. I 'm deeply moved and grieved by their stories of enduring the pain of dispossession, and the ongoing impacts of colonisation and racism. I'm inspired by their stories of spiritual connection to this ancient land, of community, of joy, of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform our lives personally and as a country toward justice and healing.

## **BEING A MULTICULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL CHURCH**

We are a multicultural and intercultural church. This is our lived experience. From Pentecost to the movement of the Holy Spirit today, God weaves us together in our diversity and common faith in the transforming and liberating Christ. It's important that we continue to explore the depth and breadths of what this means for our life and witness as Christ's Church.

I've had the privilege of meeting with our 13 National Conferences regularly, sharing the joys and concerns and the narratives of hope that we see in the cultural diversity of our Church.

Thank you to National Conference leaders for your pastoral leadership.

Thank you to the 2<sup>nd</sup> gen leaders, who are discipling the next generation and equipping them for ministry.

## **FOR THE WHOLE CREATION**

Our 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly passed a resolution “For the Whole Creation”, an affirmation and continuation of the Assembly’s work and advocacy for the healing and renewal of creation.

Embodying God’s hope includes our commitment to participate in God’s call for the renewal of the whole creation and live responsibly in connection with the whole earth.

In my conversations with young adults, as I’ve asked about their concerns for our world, and how they hope our Church will engage in the public space, they’ve prioritised addressing the climate crisis.

Many in our Church are involved in God’s renewing and healing of the Creation. First Peoples, our theologians and Biblical scholars, Christian Students Uniting, Environmental action groups as well as our partners churches, particularly those in the Pacific.

The theme of my first President's Conference in Fiji, in July 2019 was "For the Whole Creation" – we took significant time to speak about climate change.

## **RESPONDING TO DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE And Eliminating Gender Based Violence**

The 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly reaffirmed a commitment to respond to domestic and family violence – this is a focus we share with other churches, our wider society, the global church and the United Nations.

Domestic and family violence has been called the shadow pandemic and we have advocated through our agencies for funding for services and accommodation for those escaping domestic violence and preventative work.

As the Assembly, I have worked alongside Rev Charissa Suli in producing the "Beyond Violence" resources for liturgy, pastoral care and theological reflection.

Signs of Christ's liberating hope are seen when we embody the way of Jesus, creating relationships and communities based on equality, respect and dignity, and safe places for women and children.

I have sought to faithfully represent the decisions of the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly in our Church, in other churches, in community and political fora.

## **MARRIAGE**

Our decision on marriage was a significant one.

Through our discernment processes in the council of the Assembly, we decided to hold two equal and distinct statements of belief on marriage. Ministers and celebrants in the Uniting Church are free to conduct or to refuse to conduct same-gender marriages.

Moderators, General Secretaries, Synods, Presbyteries, UAICC and National Conference Leaders and I have worked to ensure that the Church was well informed and their rights and freedom in relation to marriage through the Uniting Church were clear.

## **ASSEMBLY AGENCIES**

Working with Assembly agencies, I have witnessed our Church embodying Christ's liberating hope.

## **Frontier Services**

On a trip with Frontier Services and a bush chaplain to visit families severely affected by the drought, I was moved to see

the support those families felt from the Chaplain, Outback Links and Frontier Services staff. Thank you to Jannine Jackson and Frontier Services staff for your advocacy and commitment to standing with people in remote Australia. Thank you to our bush chaplains your pastoral care, compassion, practical assistance and advocacy.

**UnitingCare Australia**, our peak body for UnitingCare community service agencies across the country is highly respected for its work in community services, its research, and policy expertise.

Thank you to National Director, Claerwen Little and the UnitingCare staff for the ways your ministry enables us as a Church to have a compassionate, well informed, prophetic, public voice on Government policies that affect those who are most vulnerable in our communities.

Associate General Secretary, Mr Rob Floyd, and I have worked with UnitingCare on our response to the Religious Freedom Bills. UnitingCare also resourced our advocacy documents “A Vision for a Just Australia”, “Build Back Better”, and our response to Royal Commissions.

## **UnitingWorld**

It has been a joy to work with the Uniting World team. I deeply appreciate Uniting World's theology of mission, of the mutual relationship and solidarity we share with our partners in God's mission of justice, grace and hope in our world.

Thank you to the National Director, Dr Sureka Goringe and the UnitingWorld staff. The global pandemic has caused severe disruption to your usual ways of working, but you have not missed a beat in pivoting to new ways to continue to support our partnerships.

Through the End COVID FOR ALL campaign involving a coalition of non-government agencies we are advocating to ensure our neighbours in the Pacific and Asia will have access to vaccines.

It's inspiring, to hear of and support the work of our partner Churches in nurturing people in discipleship, developing and equipping leaders, addressing the climate crisis, working to overcome gender-based violence and embodying the equality of women and men.

## **RESPONDING TO DISASTERS**

Recent bushfires, drought and the pandemic have caused much grief and loss - our people and communities need love, care, and support.

I commend and thank Rev Dr Stephen Robinson, and our Disaster Recovery Chaplains across our Synods for their compassionate and reassuring presence and practical assistance.

## **ECUMENISM AND GLOBAL COMMUNION OF CHURCHES**

As the Uniting Church, our life and mission are deepened and strengthened through our relationship with our ecumenical sisters and brothers in Christ and with the Global Communion of Churches.

I've represented the Uniting Church in many international gatherings - with the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific (MCCP), Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), World Methodist Council (WMC) and World Council of Churches (WCC).

Recent NCCA meetings with national church leaders have been online and an important opportunity to hear the churches

response to COVID 19 and to offer insights into ways we can advocate for and respond pastorally to the most vulnerable.

As the Assembly Standing Committee and across our church, we've had conversations about **OUR IDENTITY AS THE UNITING CHURCH.**

This is a longer conversation than we have time for, but I want to highlight three key themes and a challenge for us:

### **EVERY MEMBER MINISTRY**

A great strength of the Uniting Church is based in the scriptural call from 1 Corinthians 12 to be the Body of Christ. None of us are spectators. As disciples of Christ, we are each transformed by the radical call of Jesus, to love and work for a more compassionate world in which all people and the whole creation can flourish.

My President's Conference this April, was on God's Call, every member ministry and living our Christian vocation, and exploring our many expressions of Christian discipleship

## **EQUALITY OF WOMEN AND MEN**

One of our identities as the UCA is the equality of women and men. We are part of the Christian tradition that proclaims Jesus' ministry, teaching, and relationships, as liberating for women.

Globally, women and girls continue to have their voice silenced or diminished both in the wider society and in the church.

Whenever women are treated as second class citizens, and where theology and Biblical interpretation contribute to their oppression, this seriously undermines the churches' witness to the good news of Christ.

I'm deeply grateful for our witness to the abundant life God intends for us all.

## **OUR PARTICIPATION IN GOD'S MISSION IN THE WORLD**

The representation of our Church in the public space arises out of our faithful participation in Christ's mission in the world.

This representation has included:

- consultation with the Federal Government on the Religious Discrimination Bill
- advocating for new community sponsorship programs through the Australian Churches Refugee Task Group
- advocacy on international aid and Pacific partnerships

- and campaigns to call out human rights abuses in solidarity with our partner churches

## **YOUNG UNITING CHURCH MEMBERS – Discipleship and Leadership**

One of my key focus areas has been the ministry, discipleship and leadership of young people.

I've been privileged to sit with young people across the Uniting Church and listen to their stories of faith, discernment, and their vision of following Christ in a world of challenges, and possibilities.

It was a delight to host a National Young Adult Leaders Conference (NYALC) with the Assembly Resourcing Unit, in January 2019, and Around the Table conversations across the country.

These events were opportunities to listen to the stories of and engage in conversations with our youth and young adults about their joys, griefs, and concerns, their journey with Christ, and their Christian discipleship, their views on how the Uniting Church might engage in the public space, their hopes for who we are and are becoming as the UCA, and their hopes for the world.

I have included my reflections and report on these conversations as an appendix to this report.

### **National Gatherings:**

It is important for us to consider how we connect young adults nationally, purposely offering faith formation, a view of the breadth and depth of the Uniting Church, and strengthening their networks. National Christian Youth Conventions have been significant gatherings where people have experienced the multicultural nature and theological and liturgical diversity of our Church. They have encouraged a broadening of horizons, a deepening of/or a coming to faith in Christ, discerning God's call to ministry and expressions of Christian vocation. In recent years, National Young Adult Leaders Conferences have likewise been life-giving and transformative.

I commend to the Assembly the importance of running National Events. The shape they take is secondary to the gathering together.

As part of this report, I asked three of our young adult leaders to share with us their hopes for the UCA now and into the future.

## **Comments from Susi Suli, Raul Suganathan and Mark Brisbane**

### **EVANGELISM**

A challenge for our Church continues to be evangelism.

How do we share the Gospel of Christ confidently and authentically? How do we invite people into a transforming personal relationship with Christ and into life-giving communities of faith?

Our witness to the generous love and welcome of God, and the shaping of our communities of faith as inclusive prophetic embodiment of Christ's justice, healing and reconciliation are some of the most evangelical acts in which we engage.

### **THANKYOUS**

In closing, I want to say thank you.

**To the songwriters, musicians, poets, liturgists, artists** that have carried us through this time, for the comfort, hope and encouragement you've offered to our church and the world around us.

**To those who run our technology**, for the ways you have used your gifts to keep us connected, to enable us to hear one another, and support those most vulnerable.

**For those of you who have offered leadership pastorally**, in local churches, Presbyteries, Synods and chaplaincy, those who've preached and led worship, in ways you'd never have anticipated 2 years ago. May you know the strength and creative renewing of the Holy Spirit.

### **Assembly Standing Committee**

Thank you for your dedication as the governance body of the Assembly between Assemblies.

Thank you to **the Assembly Staff**, it's been inspiring to work with you as we embody the hope of the Gospel of Christ, through our ministries.

### **Communications Team**

Thank you all for the ways you have resourced me to present who we are and our witness in the best ways possible.

### **Moderators**

I've deeply appreciated the collegiality I've experienced with the Moderators. We offer pastoral support to one another, speak

about common issues, and share the narratives of hopes that we see in our various ministry contexts.

**General Secretaries** – for your tireless, constant and faithful service to our Church.

### **Synods**

It has been a privilege to be part of each Synod – face to face and remotely.

### **Assembly General Secretary**

Thank you for being a colleague in sharing this journey. Together we guided the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly through its significant decisions and I pray for God's strength and wisdom for you, as you continue to offer leadership to our Church

**Thank you to the Assembly Officers** – ex- President, Stuart, who is concluding his 9 years of service and to Sharon our new President.

**Neryl** – my EA – we have been on this shared journey. I have greatly appreciated your creativity, your ability to set up my diary, get me places and cancel things that can no longer happen.

**To my Chaplains** –for your pastoral care – for your listening ear, your prayerful support.

**Past Presidents** – wisdom and counsel, in preparation for this ministry and along the way.

**Pastoral Supervisor** – for your wisdom and guidance

**Many people have prayed for me** during this time, I have felt upheld by your prayers, and your messages of support for the work of the Assembly. Thank you.

**My older daughter, Kate, my son-in-law, Tas, and my grandsons** – for your support and keeping me grounded and bringing me many moments of wonder and joy

**Joanna** – my younger daughter, your passion for the Uniting Church and living your Christian vocation inspire me. Because of COVID, we've filmed over 40 different videos in our hallway studio together. Thank you for being the videographer.

**Lawrie** – my husband. We've shared our faith journey for 43 years since we were both young adults. It was the UCA that brought us together. I thank you for your love and companionship as we have sought to follow Christ. I look

forward to continuing to share this journey of life and faith with you.

**Sharon** – It is wonderful to have installed you as President – I'm sorry this hasn't been a worship service where you could see all the Assembly, members of the wider UCA, family, friends, ecumenical partners surrounding you. I hope you know that the prayers and love of our Church are with you.

These have been three of the most intense, challenging, exhilarating and blessed years of my life.

Thank you to the Uniting Church – the beloved community of Christ, to which I'm so blessed to belong.

I give thanks above all to God, who has equipped and sustained me through this time with hope and joy.

God is always more than we can imagine – more loving, more inclusive, more creative, more willing to work with our frailties, more able to equip us with gifts and strength than we had thought possible. As the Uniting Church may we continue to be shaped by the abundant grace of God and bear witness to Christ's liberating hope.