



RETIRING PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS TO THE 17TH ASSEMBLY

I acknowledge this is the unceded land of the Burramattagal people Dharug nation. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and to their descendants. I honour them for their care of country through lore, culture and spirituality. I thank them for the welcome we received yesterday. Let us seek to honour what is asked of us in that welcome.

I pay my respects to all First Nations people who are present today or who are watching online.

I give thank to God and the Assembly for calling me to the office of President. It has been one of the great joys and privileges of my life. It has given me the opportunity to travel across these lands and the world to witness firsthand the movement of the Spirit renewing the whole creation. Witnessing the many faithful communities of faith and faithful disciples of Jesus joining in with the work of the Spirit has filled me with gratitude at all God is doing and hope for what God will do. This role has at times been personally costly, but I have gained so much more than I have given.

I chose Dwelling in Love as the theme for the 16th Assembly. It was an invitation to reflect that the impulse of God is to love, and to invite us into this love, to make our home and purpose in God and God's love. This love enlarges our hearts and minds to see God's care for the whole creation and for each of us. Dwelling in love fills me with joy - at all that God is doing and for the people who collaborate with what God is doing. At the same time it makes me restless for the reign of God.

In this report I will reflect on some of the things that have brought me joy and some of the things that have made restless during my time as President. This is not a full account of what I have done over my term as President, rather it is a reflection on what is on my heart as I finish.

1. KEEPING THE COVENANT

One of the things I noticed when I was a guest of the Methodist Church of Aotearoa/New Zealand Annual Conference was the way the Conference regularly asked themselves, 'How does this help us be a treaty-keeping Church?', in reference to the Treaty of Waitangi '

This stayed with me and made me think that at the forefront of all we do as a Uniting Church, in the forefront of our decision making might be the questions, 'Does this honour the Covenant we have made?' and 'How will this help us keep the Covenant?'

At the reconvened Assembly we renewed the Covenant and at this Assembly we will mark the 30th anniversary of the Covenant. Good things have come from the Covenant but still there is work to do. The dial on Indigenous disadvantage has not moved enough in these lands now called Australia. Congress does not believe it has the support it needs to do all it believes God is calling it to do.

Keeping the Covenant is not just about focusing on disadvantage. I have witnessed firsthand the excellent ministry done in the name of Congress and the Uniting Church by pastors, ministers, and members. As a Church we should desire for these successful ministries and programs to continue to flourish and grow and be supported by the whole Church.

To ask this question would encourage Councils of the Church to ask not just what they can do to support the wholistic ministry of Congress but also how they can know and support the aspirations of the local Traditional Owners in their own area. While it is important to give support to the work of



Congress, we will not be truly honouring the intent of the Covenant, nor addressing the truth of the diverse lands we live on, if we fail to build relationships with, and support the work of local Indigenous groups. I believe we can find a way to both forge relationships with Traditional Owners in the land we work, worship and live - and support Congress.

This question is also important because the colonial churches are one of the few institutions in civil society who were around at first impact. They witnessed and participated in the policy that led to land dispossession, the removal of children and other systemic acts of injustice. The Church must work to put right the things we participated in destroying and use this long memory to hold governments to account.

2. REJOICING IN CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

One of the things people often say to me when they learn I'm the President of the Uniting Church Assembly is, 'You are the people with the cards'. They often mistake our 'cards' as simply a way to vote, rather than as a tool to be used in our process of discernment laid out in the Manual for Meetings.

Consensus decision making is a spiritual practice of discernment. It asks us to come into any meeting or discernment conversation with an open and humble heart. Paul reminded us in his second letter to the Corinthians, that we only see through a mirror dimly. This is true of us as individuals and church. None of us has a full and complete understanding of God and God's ways. So we come to our decision making in a spirit of humility and with an open spirit.

Consensus decision making invites us to listen deeply, not just to the words being said but to what might sit under them. It encourages us to speak when the Spirit prompts us, knowing we speak into a listening community. It encourages us to be curious about how and why people hold the positions they do and be willing to gently ask, particularly of people we disagree with. It calls us to listen to the minority voice, to the voices we so often overlook and discount and to ask if the Spirit is speaking through these voices. It requires us to trust the group and be willing to be guided by the other and the whole, even when we are sure we are right, because maybe we aren't. Consensus decision making invites us to trust that the Holy Spirit is present and will work through God's people.

I am discouraged when I hear people apologising for the fact that we use consensus decision making. Yes, it can sometimes seem like a slow and cumbersome process. But I believe this process actually doesn't cost us much time in the long run for when people feel heard they are more likely to come on the journey with those they disagreed with. It is a gift many other churches, ecumenical and confessional bodies around the world are using with enthusiasm. It would be a shame if the Church that taught many of these churches and bodies about consensus didn't continue to nurture this gift.

We have not done a good job of supporting people who lead consensus processes with the skills and spirit to guide the meeting. We have failed to educate the whole Church about not only how consensus works but also why we are committed to being a church that discerns God's will for us using consensus. We are taught the basics of the process but not the different ways we can seek consensus. We have not always cultivated a commitment to mutual discernment across the Church.

I hope we continue to value the Manual for Meetings and consensus decision making and continue to explore how we deepen our use of consensus decision making.



3. BEING A UNITING CHURCH

One of the privileges of this role is the opportunity to attend global and regional ecumenical and confessional gatherings. This experience has led me to believe that we need to do more to develop and share what it means to be a United/Uniting church as a distinctive expression of church with our ecumenical partners in Australia and globally.

This does not mean that we leave behind the theologies and spiritualities of the traditions that formed the Uniting Church. Rather I hope we might find our home more in the fellowship of United/Uniting churches and join with them in exploring what particular theological and spiritual gifts United/Uniting Churches contribute to the ecumenical community. Like other union churches we have learned how to seek deeper unity, how to die to what we love for the sake of the gospel and new ways of practicing faith how live as movement while also tending to history and institution.

4. PAYING ATTENTION TO OUR LANGUAGE

When I was a theological student in the early 90's there was much debate about the language we used in the church for God and for each other. This has shaped me so that I pay attention to the language being used in worship, in speech, and in what is being written across the Church.

As I have moved around the Church I have seen an overreliance on one or two images for all of who God is and all that God has done and is doing. We are people given the gift of creativity and imagination. And we have been given the Scriptures which were written by people who knew and named God and God's activity in many ways. We can name God Sophia, Sovereign, Mother Hen, Lodestar, Liberator, Anchor, Ancient of Days, Tree of Life alongside Father and Lord.

We have become lazy about inclusive language. We often fail to respect the request of other people to speak of them in terms and with pronouns they choose. I do not believe I am diminished as a person when I repeat the request of another to use the name they choose, or to honour the pronoun they feel best describes them. In this way we respect the God given dignity of each and every person.

Paying attention to language also calls us to think about how much our language and image is shaped by the dominant culture and how little space we make for images from diverse cultures, how reluctant we are to include languages other than English in our worship, bible studies, and meetings, how unwilling we are to listen to people with accents different to our own, and how lazy we are learn how to correctly say names we are unfamiliar with. In all this we miss so much wisdom and so many insights into how to live as disciples.

4. THANK YOU

To Mark Kickett Congress National Chair and every member of Congress I have met you have told me stories of your country, you have spoken with me about how you live both a follower of Christ and as proud people of culture. You have prayed with names for God which while new to me are as ancient as these lands. You have shown me grace I did not deserve, and I am so thankful. I pray I will always be worthy of what you have taught me.

To the two General Secretaries I have served alongside Colleen Geyer and Lindsay Cullen. Thank you for ensuring I had the support and resources I needed to do this role, for your wisdom and advice shared and always taking my calls when I rang with yet another issue to discuss, for your care of me.



To members of the Assembly Standing Committee for overseeing the life of the Assembly over the last three years with discernment, courage and grace. Thank you for reflecting with me on how I exercised my ministry and for being my community of accountability.

To my brilliant and kind EA Lara Regan who has wrangled my diary, organised my travel, set up my Zoom meetings, stayed on top of my correspondence and kept me organised and on track. Your support has enabled me to do all that is required in this role.

To the Assembly staff who do such great work for the Church and who have resourced and encouraged me over my term as President. Particular thanks go to the communications team Rebecca Beisler, Michael Zewdie and Bethany Broadstock whose skill and wisdom has helped me look and sound so much better than I would on my own.

To the Assembly agencies UnitingWorld, UnitingCare and Frontier Services and the National Directors Dr. Sureka Goringe, Claerwen Little and Rob Floyd for the remarkable work you do to heal the world and support people in need. Thank you for inviting me to share in this work. Thank you also to the Nation Safe Church Unit and National Redress to John Cox and Sarah Lim for providing me with guidance and advice in areas of the Church's life that are so often hard.

To the Act2 Steering Committee and staff whom I've worked closely with, it's been a privilege.

To the Moderators who have been colleagues on the journey and are a safe community to share the joys and struggles of leadership with.

To my chaplains Marrpalawuy Marika, Radhika Sukumar-White and Reuben Edmonds, for praying for me, listening to and supporting me.

To everyone who has encourage me, guided me, corrected me, or prayed for me. You have sustained me so that I know I have dwelt in the love of the Church and God.

To the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania for providing me with office space and good office company, and for welcoming me home again now that this role has finished.

To all the Synods, Presbyteries, congregations, agencies and faith communities, who welcomed me and offered me hospitality. You enriched my understanding of who we are as a Church and how God is at work in our midst.

To everyone who appeared on my podcast, Dwelling, thank you for being willing to have a conversation with me that others would listen to. I loved every single conversation.

To my friends, for your support, love and encouragement even when I was so often unable to be a good friend in return. I look forward to having more time to nourish our friendships now I have finished this role.

To my beloved Michael. One of the ways I know love abides is that his support, encouragement, and love of me continues to sustain me even though he no longer with me physically. Love is never wasted.

To my daughters whose love is sustaining, whose disinterest in my work grounds me and whose lives and interests give me joy. They have borne my constant absence with good grace and have always made time for me when I'm home. I'm so proud of you and I love you.



Through all of this the Spirit of Christ, present in prayer and in people, working through so many to sustain, strengthen, and reassure me that I am held in the love of God.

Thanks be to God for all that has been over these last three years and for all that is to come.

Sharon Hollis
Ex-President
July 5 2024

