



National Lay Preachers' Conference President's Reflection
4–6 September 2026
Pilgrim College, Melbourne

Entrusted with the Word: Weaving Christ's Love

Before there was a sermon, there was a story. Before there was a church building, there was Country.

This was an invitation from Brooke Prentis, a Wakka Wakka woman and Aboriginal Christian leader. She attended the National Lay Preachers' Conference at the Centre for Theology and Ministry in Naarm/Melbourne on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Country. Brooke opened with a woven basket, where each strand held its own story and integrity. When woven together, the strands became strong enough to support more than themselves. This image aptly reflected the theme *Weaving Christ's Love, emphasising the role of a Lay Preacher*.

Lay Preachers, worship leaders and church leaders came from across Australia. Through worship, presentations, workshops and conversations, we explored Scripture, disability and inclusion, First Peoples' wisdom, intercultural ministry, social justice, mission and the craft of preaching.

I give thanks to the Victoria Tasmania Lay Preachers Association, the National Lay Preachers Committee, Pilgrim Theological College, conference organiser Alastair Davison, Association President Di Wookey, and everyone who contributed to planning and hospitality. I particularly acknowledge Rev David Kim and Kelly Woods for their leadership and support throughout the VicTas Synod. They created a generous space in which people could contribute and belong.

I had the privilege of opening the conference with worship and preaching and later delivering a keynote on *The Calling of Lay Preachers in a Changing Church*. Yet I came away aware of how much I had received. The biblical scholars, theologians, practitioners and Lay Preachers renewed my love of Scripture and refreshed my preaching.

One of the warmest moments came when I asked people to raise their hands to show how long they had been preaching. Hands stayed raised at 20, 30 and 40 years – and one person had preached for more than 50 years. We laughed and applauded, but beneath the moment was something deeply moving: decades of prayer, preparation, courage and service, all represented in one room.

As the conference unfolded, one question kept returning: what has been entrusted to us, and how do we carry it out faithfully?

Brooke invited us to imagine a sermon as a place of holding. A sermon gathers Scripture, Country, culture, memory and the lives of those who will hear it. It may need to hold grief, doubt, faith, lament and hope. This kind of preaching begins with deep listening, with the whole person attentive to God, community and place.



Every sermon is preached somewhere. In Australia, we open Scripture on Country: on lands that carry ancient stories, continuing sovereignty, the wounds of colonisation and the enduring wisdom of First Peoples. Christian churches, including the traditions from which the Uniting Church emerged, have sometimes offered refuge and advocated for justice. At other times, they have participated in dispossession, assimilation and the silencing of Aboriginal voices.

Faithful preaching cannot act as though this history is absent. Country remembers. First Peoples remember. Love requires truth.

Other contributions drew us more deeply into the responsibility of interpreting Scripture. Rev Dr Daniel Sihombing set contrasting images of Jesus before us and asked, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” Our culture, history and experience shape the Christ we portray, often without our awareness. Listening across cultures can reveal where we have made Jesus resemble ourselves or familiar forms of power. It can open us again to the Christ who crosses boundaries and refuses to be contained within any one culture’s imagination.

Rev Dr Bec Lindsay invited us to wrestle honestly with the richness and difficulty of the Hebrew Scriptures. Scripture can speak life, yet it has also been weaponised to support colonisation, racism, sexism and exclusion. We interpret it in community, under the lordship of Christ and attentive to the Spirit. The preacher must ask what an interpretation does to the lives of real people and whether it bears the fruit of love, justice and life.

Emeritus Professor Rev Bill Loader brought us back to love as something deeper than sentiment. Preaching should do more than tell people what they ought to do. It should help people encounter the love of God, which releases them from fear and creates room for love to flow through them. Love received enables us to love others.

The conference also connected our inherited traditions with the practical work of proclamation. Rev Professor Glen O’Brien encouraged us to engage our Wesleyan inheritance critically rather than nostalgically, receiving its witness to universal grace and personal and social holiness in conversation with the questions facing the Church today.

Rev Dr Ted Campbell, an ordained elder in The United Methodist Church and pastor of Liberty First United Methodist Church in Texas, brought Wesley’s preaching to life through his attention to voice, cadence, gesture and clarity. How we speak can help or hinder people’s hearing. The preacher’s craft matters because, in our shared Wesleyan tradition, preaching is a means of grace.

Ted also spoke about the congregation he serves – once a large church, now in decline – and asked us to pray for them. His request stayed with me. Across the world, Christian communities are asking how to remain faithful as what they have known changes. We hold Ted, Liberty First and our siblings in The United Methodist Church in prayer, trusting that the life of the Church rests finally not in its size but in the living Christ.

Elga Rodriguez grounded our conversations in the experiences of people with disability. She invited us to examine the disabling barriers created by our buildings, communication and assumptions. Accessibility concerns dignity, participation and belonging. People with disability are not merely recipients of ministry. The Church needs their gifts, wisdom and leadership.



These threads brought me back to the Scriptures I had preached at the opening worship: Ezekiel 33 and Matthew 18. Before Ezekiel could speak, he had to listen, because the Word did not belong to him. This remains true for every preacher. We are entrusted with the Word, but we do not own it. We listen, speak faithfully, and love the people among whom God has placed us. What happens through that proclamation belongs to the Holy Spirit's mysterious work.

The *Basis of Union* describes Lay Preachers as people “endowed with the gift of the Spirit for this task.” They are not placeholders until an ordained minister becomes available. Across the Uniting Church, accredited Lay Preachers sustain worship during vacancies and transitions, travel long distances, serve rural and remote communities, offer pastoral care, and open Scripture from within the ordinary realities of work, family and community life.

This is sacred ministry within the whole people of God.

The changing shape of the Church was never far from our conversations. I heard that some accredited Lay Preachers are serving congregations outside their own presbyteries. Their generosity is helping communities continue to gather around the Word, particularly in places with long vacancies or limited access to ordained ministry.

This is faithful ministry, but it also calls the wider Church to attention. As Lay Preachers respond to needs across presbytery boundaries, we must ensure they are not left to carry this work without clear communication, pastoral oversight, continuing formation and practical support.

The councils of the Church have distinct yet connected responsibilities. Church Councils invite and receive the ministry of Lay Preachers. Presbyteries recognise them, maintain their rolls, and exercise oversight. Synods provide approved training pathways, while the Assembly establishes national standards and requirements. In a changing Church, these responsibilities need to work together effectively.

I hope this gathering prompts conversation across our councils about how this ministry is coordinated and sustained. Accredited Lay Preachers are not simply people to be trained and sent wherever a preaching roster has a gap. Their experience in local communities can help the wider Church understand where ministry is needed, how communities are changing, and where new forms of witness are emerging.

We are not asking Lay Preachers to determine the Church's future. We are asking the whole Church to receive their ministry, support their calling, and join them in listening for where Christ is leading us.

We need the wisdom of those who have faithfully preached for decades. We must also nurture younger preachers and receive the gifts of First Peoples, Pasifika and Asian Australian Christians, people with disability, multilingual preachers, and those serving in new and digital communities.

This means more than inviting new voices into structures already shaped without them. It requires us to share authority and to remain open to how their gifts may change us. The Spirit has not entrusted every gift to one generation, one culture, or one expression of the Church.



There is a prophetic question for all of us, and I include myself: are our sermons helping the Church hear Christ, or merely reassuring us that nothing needs to change?

Preaching cannot summon the Church to transformation while protecting it from it. A sermon on reconciliation must lead us more deeply into truth and into a covenant relationship. A sermon on welcome should make us notice who still cannot participate or belong. Proclaiming that we are one body in Christ must shape whose wisdom we trust and whose leadership we follow.

At the centre is Jesus Christ, the risen crucified One, whose grace exposes domination, draws near to those pushed aside, and creates a new community across boundaries. Every sermon is spoken from somewhere. Faithfulness requires us to recognise where we stand, listen beyond what is familiar, and allow the living Gospel to address the Church afresh.

For me, this brings us back to *lalanga* (weaving), the Tongan practice of weaving. No single strand makes the whole *fala* (mat). Each of us offers what has been entrusted to us, trusting the Spirit to weave our gifts together with others'.

To every accredited Lay Preacher who continues to study, pray, listen, and proclaim Christ's hope: your ministry matters. Christ still calls you, and the Spirit continues to work through you in the people and communities you serve.

And to the whole Church: may we recognise this gift among us, accompany it faithfully, and receive what the Spirit is saying through it.

May our preaching tell the truth, make room for grace, and help weave a people shaped by the courageous, boundary-crossing love of Jesus Christ.

Rev Charissa Suli
President, Uniting Church in Australia

