

PRESIDENT'S REPORT – July 18, 2020 Assembly Standing Committee

Since we last met face to face, we have had safety measures put in place to protect our community and sustain our life and health systems in the face of the global pandemic COVID19. My last flight was on March 15, when I flew back to Adelaide from ASC. Since that time, we have closed our church buildings and transitioned and adapted into an online space and an uncharted path. In some places in Australia our congregations are returning to face to face worship and other gatherings, building on what they have learned, including continuing with online, as well as face to face worship. In Victoria people are again in lockdown due to the increase in the spread of the virus. This is causing significant distress, disruption and deep concern for all those impacted. Our prayers are with the Synod of Victoria and the Presbyteries, congregations, agencies and schools, as they respond to this escalating crisis. This challenging time has reinforced for us the importance of our support for one another across the life of our Church and our identity as a community grounded in Christ, connected to one another, and engaged compassionately in the world around us.

Zooming in

You were all part of the historic meeting as an Assembly Standing Committee via videoconference. The word “Zoom” has a whole new meaning for us, as this way of communicating becomes an important part of our staying connected with one another. Like many UCA members, staff, Synod and Assembly Officers, I have been part of meetings via Zoom, and have also stayed connected to people through email and phone. I have been part of various worship services – pre-recorded and livestreamed. I have had opportunities to be with communities in Port Augusta and Brisbane on the same Sunday. I have spent time in England at the Conference of the Methodist Church in Britain – without leaving the comfort of my hallway!

“Spiritual leadership and encouragement to the Church”

Over the past two years, one of the ways I have sought to fulfill one of the responsibilities of the President to give spiritual leadership and encouragement to the Church has been by visiting the diverse parts of the Uniting Church, gathering with Presbyteries, Synods, local churches, visiting schools, taking part in national gatherings of our National Conferences and networks, hosting roundtables, leading retreats and workshops on the Assembly's work and the hopes and challenges that face the Uniting Church. I have come to a deeper understanding of the work of Frontier Services, Uniting World and our Uniting church community agencies, through seeing their mission expressed in local, and global contexts. My way of engaging with our Church reflects my understanding of the incarnational nature of the Gospel of Christ – we are called to embody the love and compassion of Christ in our communities, and we are called to be present to people, listening to their stories, their griefs and struggles, their hopes and dreams.

This way of exercising my ministry as President is also consistent with the gifts that I have sought to develop through my work as a theological educator, and social worker, and it reflects the love I have for being with people, hearing their stories, and sharing with them in our common faith and commitment to following the way of Christ.

With the COVID 19 safety measures, the restrictions on travel and face to face gatherings, I have had to re think the way I exercise this ministry, with the deep assurance, that God equips us for the ministries to which we are called, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Of course, I am sharing in a human experience that is faced by millions of people, including members of our Church, who are living through a crisis, that most of us had not imagined.

As I have reflected on our calling as the Uniting Church and participated in worship online, and been part of various webinars and had conversations with leaders in Government, churches, local communities and with our global partners, I have been struck again by how timeless the Gospel of Christ is with narratives that bring hope and prophetic challenge to our present context. We are all

familiar with these narratives, but their familiarity doesn't diminish their power to continually transform our lives, the life of our Church and society:

- God in Christ reveals to us a God who loves us unconditionally and calls us to love God, our neighbours and ourselves.
- Christ's life and ministry, death and resurrection brings a narrative of love triumphing over hate, justice for the oppressed, a voice for the marginalized and a reversal of powerful world orders in the light of the reign of God.
- New life breaks through in the midst of suffering and death
- Hope emerges in situations and lives where despair could have swallowed us up.
- A narrative of welcome, inclusion, and hospitality to strangers. A narrative that refuses to create 'them and us', but rather embraces God's vision of a reconciled community and renewed creation.
- The Holy Spirit, Giver of life, who is present and active in the world in every impetus for peace over violence, acts of kindness and love, and seen in our people generously giving and advocating for the wellbeing and flourishing of all people.

The following are some of the ways I have engaged in ministry as President over the past four months:

Meeting with the Moderators

We schedule regular meetings face to face twice a year but also gather either face to face or via videoconferencing for specific matters, at times with the General Secretaries and other Staff and members of the UCA.

Our regular face to face meeting was scheduled for the week after ASC in March. This was cancelled and as we are not yet able to meet face to face, we have met more regularly via Zoom. It is a pastorally supportive group. We speak about what we are seeing in our Synods and across the country, informing one another of common strengths and challenges, and also the distinctive nature of our various communities.

We have spoken about ways people in ministry placements, congregations and agencies are being pastorally supported during COVID19.

We have collaborated on three writing projects as a way of supporting the Church during this time:

1. A cycle of prayer – "Prayers for this Season" (available on the Assembly website)
2. Reflections on "What Sustains us". We encouraged members of the Uniting Church to share what is sustaining them at this time. (available on the Assembly website)
3. What are we learning from our responses to COVID19, where do we see signs of the Spirit at work, what challenges and hopes for the future do we see emerging? (available in the week of July 13)

Meeting with National Conference Chairs

On April 22, members of the Assembly Resourcing Unit and I met via Zoom with National Conference Chairs. This was an opportunity for us to share about pastoral concerns and ways congregations and faith communities are responding to COVID 19 safety measures.

We also shared some of the focus areas for the Assembly at this time. Some of the key themes that emerged were the creative ability of ministers, lay leaders, pastors and members to adapt to new ways of being church through online communication for worship, pastoral care, and nurturing in discipleship. We spoke about some of the difficulties of providing technical support and online services.

Ecumenical meetings:

I have been part of two ecumenical gatherings of National Church leaders on May 28 in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and on June 25th. These were hosted by the NCCA by videoconferencing. These National Gatherings have been held regularly, but the attendance has been variable. These video meetings included a larger number of leaders, than have been present

at our face to face meetings. It was good to hear how all churches were responding in creative ways to connect with their congregations. They all noted that more people are connecting with their churches online, than would come to a face to face gathering. We are all looking at how congregations/parishes transition from on-line presence to face to face. A number of the churches spoke about community service agencies, providing emergency relief and advocating for those who are not covered under some of the financial supports delivered by the Government.

Meeting with Lutheran and Anglican leaders

The President of the Lutheran Church in Australia and New Zealand, Rev John Henderson and the Primate of the Anglican Church in Australia, Rev Geoffrey Smith, are both resident in South Australia, so we are taking the opportunity to meet – to have conversations about our roles – common foci, and support one another. We were able to have lunch together a couple of weeks ago and are planning to meet again later in the year.

Our global partnerships

- On March 25th, I attended a webinar hosted by the Christian Conference of Asia on the churches' responses to COVID. It was a joy to reconnect with one of the women from the Asian Ecumenical Women's Assembly, who is serving the CCA in Pakistan.
- World Methodist Evangelism – I participated in a planning group with the Evangelism committee of the World Methodist Council. Steve Francis and I were part of this group.

I have sent video greetings at the invitation of ecumenical partners, who have been holding conferences:

- Greeting to the Church of Scotland that was included among other greetings from partner churches in their online Assembly gathering.
- Greeting to the Presbyterian Church of Korea, for a conference they were holding on the church's response to COVID19
- Greeting to the Methodist Church in Britain for their Conference meeting.

British Methodist Conference

I was invited to attend the Conference of the Methodist Church in the UK in June in Telford, England. The Conference was not able to go ahead face to face, but instead the global partners were invited to connect online. We had a two session pre-Conference gathering with the global partners and then we participated in the Conference. Rev Conrad Hicks, Director of Global Partnerships, hosted the gathering along with other staff, including Rev Steve Pearce, who is our connection for the Pacific.

I appreciated the incoming President's address on Orientation, Disorientation and Re-orientation, a theme inspired by Walter Brueggemann's commentary on the Psalms.

Uniting Leadership

I was among a number of leaders that attended the Leadership and Theology Conference in February. As a follow up, the Uniting Leadership team, invited a number of us to write a 500-word reflection leadership during and post pandemic. (Paper is attached).

Pastoral Notes

- In response to COVID19 restrictions, I have written 3 Pastoral notes to our Church – (March 5, 18 and 26) all published on the Assembly website
- I have written to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition expressing our support and prayers for them, as they offer leadership to our country.
- A pastoral letter advising the Church about on-line Communion – the ASC decision and guidelines.
- Pentecost message (video) – as we celebrate the movement of the Holy Spirit, weaving us together as community and empowering us for Christ's mission in the world: a thank you to

the Uniting Church for people's creative response and adaptability – for their continued faithfulness, care for one another, and advocacy for those who are most vulnerable.

- 43rd Anniversary of the Uniting Church message (video)
- Pastoral letter to the Church regarding The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. (sent on May 13) (I attend the National Task Group responding to the Disability Royal Commission).
- Pastoral letter on Racism and Police Brutality (June 20) in response to the murder of George Floyd and the President of the USA's use of the Bible,

Expressing our Covenant relationship

Walking Together as First and Second Peoples

- I attended a virtual breakfast in reconciliation week. I was invited by the Moderator of SA, Mr Bronte Wilson to join 6 others (appropriately physically distanced in the Adelaide West UCA meeting room) to view the Breakfast, and an excellent presentation by Patricia Turner from NACCHO on the theme "In this Together"
- Rev Mark Kickett, Interim Chair of National UAICC, and I, met to discuss our response to the murder of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement, and advocacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regarding Aboriginal deaths in custody.
- We offered Pastoral letters for National Reconciliation Week
We encouraged Uniting Church members to take these three actions:
"1. Show support. Send your message of solidarity to the national UAICC. uaicc@nat.uca.org.au
2. Change your frame. Update your Facebook profile picture that says what your Church has to say on these issues. We've designed two for you. Uniting Church against racism. Uniting Church against black deaths in custody. You'll find them among Facebook's frame options. (Just search for Uniting)
3. Change the record. The "Change the Record" campaign is a national campaign for social policy measures that will reduce incarceration rates and deaths in custody. They are collecting petition signatures to send to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition. Please sign the Change the Record petition on their website and support their initiatives."
- Mark and I also discussed with Stuart McMillan, our focus for NAIDOC week, which was to be held in July, but has now been postponed until November.

Advocacy areas:

- We have expressed our concern to the Government about the Israeli Government's plans to annex Palestinian territory. Rob Floyd, Matt Pulford and I are working on further response, if the annexation takes place.
- We joined with other churches in remembering the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War, and wrote to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition affirming Australian participation in working for peace on the Korean peninsula.
- UnitingWorld has been involved with other non-government agencies to advocate with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade about international aid funding. At the request of Uniting World and based on our consistent position on supporting sustaining current levels of international aid I contacted the office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs on this matter.
- I spoke at a "Break the Silence Sunday" on-line worship service, led by Pilgrim Uniting Church – expressing concerns regarding the rise in domestic and family violence during the COVID19 restrictions and concerns that women and children in these situations are offered support, emergency relief and accommodation if needed. Rev Charissa Suli and I are having ongoing conversations about how we progress the Assembly resolution on our response to Domestic and Family Violence.
- Climate Justice (supporting the Global Climate Action) Video for the Interfaith service

- ICAN – International Campaign against Nuclear Weapons. The Assembly is a member of this campaign and we have consistently asked for Australia to sign on to the UN treaty to ban nuclear weapons. Part of our participation in ICAN will be an Interfaith service on the Anniversary (August) of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- A group led by the Assembly Resourcing Unit have developed a new advocacy document: “Build Back Better – A Just Recovery Post-COVID 19. This document builds on our document a “Vision for a Just Australia”. We have received very positive feedback about these documents.

The Religious Discrimination Bill

We have not heard of any further developments regarding the Religious Discrimination Bill. I recently participated in a webinar, which was the launch of a paper: “Freedom of religion in Australia: a focus on serious harms” by Ed Santow, Australian Human Rights Commissioner and Kristen Hilton (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commissioner)

It has been a joy to connect with various Uniting Church and interfaith communities through on-line video:

Speaking on-line

- Message for the Global Climate Strike
- Preaching at the Induction of Rev Jock Dunbar in the South Moreton Presbytery
- Reflection on “Blessed are the peacemakers” with Port Augusta UAICC and other members from different parts of the country
- MLC – final chapel service – for anniversary of the UCA.
- Ramadan – Iftar virtual meal.
- Daring Conference
- School of Discipleship
- Turramurra UCA Sunday evening service.
- Introduction to One Great Sunday of Sharing

President’s Roundtable

I had five planned over the past couple of months. I will seek to initiate these again face to face. I have communicated with people who have been part of the previous Roundtables and hope to follow up with them over the next month.

President’s Conference – Oct 2-5, 2020 Called by God – focusing on living our Christian vocation in our daily life.

Registrations are coming in for the President’s Conference in October. There are a number of ways for people to participate. With the current COVID19 safety guidelines, we are able to have 100 people face to face at the venue: UCity convention centre in Adelaide. We will also have face to face hubs of 8-12 people hosted in various locations around Australia. All of the sessions will be livestreamed into these hubs. Individuals can also sign up online, and they will be connected in to the Conference via livestreaming, and will be part of small groups through Zoom, hosted by Assembly staff.

Developing young adult leaders – National Young Adult Leaders Conference (NYALC) will be held from January 22-24, 2021 at Nunyara, Adelaide. I have been meeting with Rob Floyd, Charissa Suli and the General Secretary regarding planning for NYALC and monitoring the COVID19 safety measures, and travel possibilities across State borders.

Concluding remarks:

There are significant conversations in our Church and other churches, about how we go forward into the new situations we face in the spectre of the COVID19 pandemic. We have lamented and grieved the loss of life, the distress caused to many by the spread of the disease, the loss of work, social connection and certainty. We have also seen, that while in a sense we are “in this together”, the pandemic has highlighted the inequities across our world and within Australia. We are called as a Church to continue to advocate for justice and voice for the vulnerable and marginalized.

I have heard from various people engaged in ministry, about the weariness they are feeling, as the COVID 19 safety measures continue, and they adapt to the changing landscape, that can vary from day to day. We are also concerned as a Church with the mental health of our communities.

It is important that we continue to build on our strength of our connection with one another across Australia, and support one another in moving forward. There will be financial stresses that we all face, and it will be important that we respond to the crises unfolding, with a whole of Church response, focused on the vision of who we are called to be as the Body of Christ and our participation in God’s mission in the world.

This time has highlighted a need to focus on what matters and what we value most:

- Our connection with God and our following of Christ’s way.
- Our worship, which draws us into communion with God and one another, reminds us who we are, and empowers us for Christ’s mission in the world.
- Our every member ministry, all of us using our gifts.
- Our community, our care toward one another, our love for our neighbours, our hospitality to strangers.
- Our shaping of a world and society, that reflects God’s justice, peace and abundance.

I hope that we will be generous toward each other, patient and open to the possibilities of transformation and new creation, that may lie before us. We will not get it right all the time, but we are sent by Christ who goes with us and gives us companions for the journey. And as our Basis of Union reminds us, God “gives us the gift of the Spirit in order that we may not lose the way.”
(*Basis of Union Paragraph 3*)

Regulation 3.6.4.2 Duties of the President: “The duties of the President shall be to give spiritual leadership and encouragement to the Church generally, to represent the Church as appropriate, to give counsel as occasion requires and to do such other things as may be requested or advised by the Assembly”

Regulation 3.7.5.1 Assembly Standing Committee Responsibilities

(k) (iii) Offer guidance to the President on priorities to be pursued, and the way in which the responsibilities named in Regulation 3.6.4.2 may be exercised, taking into account the particular gifts and graces of the President.