

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

As I reflect on the time since our last meeting in what has been a very full diary with constant travel there are some clear foci for my ministry. I address these below however they are not in order of their priority to either the Assembly or me.

Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse

Together with my attendance at most National Task Group meetings and staying (to the best of my ability) abreast of the latest developments nationally and initiatives taken by each Synod, I have continued to facilitate an Ecumenical National Church Leaders/Senior RC officers group seeking to reach an agreed position for a way forward for Redress.

With other 100 prominent Australian leaders of NGO's, medical professionals and business people I signed a letter to the PM seeking a National Redress Scheme to be established by the Federal Government in the best interests of survivors. This was auspice by the Blue Knott Foundation, a survivor representative group. I have taken the time to meet personally with the Blue Knott Chair and one of their Directors. You will be aware that Minister Christian Porter announced a National Redress Scheme recently, and whilst some aspects require further clarification this is a very positive development welcomed by the UCA and survivor groups.

You will also be aware now that Shalom Christian College was part of a RC hearing in late October. For me this has involved various meetings and legal briefings and importantly Assembly support for the Qld Synod and its officers and staff. Now we await the learnings and recommendations. Certainly some of the learnings about the harmful effects of child sexualised behaviours will be important for all Uniting Church schools. We now know that we will be part of hearings as a national Church reporting to the RC in February/March 2017.

National Church Leaders and Faith Leaders

Another focus for me which has come out of the ecumenical work mentioned above has been drawing together the National Church Leaders as a body able to speak into public issue where we have strong agreement e.g. A National Redress Scheme and our deep concern about the slow progress of the intake of refugees from the Syrian conflict, particularly Christian minorities. I am now the Chair the National Church Leaders group.

We met in late October and were able to write and sign a letter to the PM expressing our concern about the Syrian refugee intake processes.

Before the conversation with National Church Leaders about the displaced peoples from the Syrian crisis I met with the Grand Mufti of Australia, Dr Ibrahim and amongst other matter we discussed how to respectfully value our interfaith friendships with particularly the Islamic community and at the same time express our concern for Christian minorities in the Middle East. It was an important and helpful conversation for me, not surprisingly the women in our meeting expressed their very real concern for all women – the evil of power and violence regardless of faith is tragically perpetrated by men against women in war.

I appreciated very much participating in the interfaith Peace Day Service in Parramatta in September and then the insights I gain whilst attending the Relations with Other Faiths National Working Group annual Face2Face meeting. At this time globally and nationally the relationships we share with those of other faiths and with all the dimensions of the Christian faith, especially the orthodox communities are vital for tolerance, understanding and harmony and for the way of justice and peace.

UAICC

In line with the resolutions of the 14th Assembly 2015 and our existence as an authentically Australian movement with First Peoples at the centre/heart of our being, I have tried to be supportive of the National Executive (both individually and collectively) and its officers. Following up on the on the constitution, sovereignty, and treaty resolutions, we have a President's Minister's Conference in Darwin next June which will address this theme.

I attended a forum in Melbourne with several UAICC folk at Whittley College and then the UAICC National Justice and Theology Forum facilitated by Rev Ken Sumner at Narana in Geelong. Most recently Ken and I spoke at the Victorian Council of Churches evening Christianity Perspectives on Treaty, Sovereignty and the Constitution Forum in Melbourne.

I want to pay tribute to Rev Dorothy Harris-Gordon. Sometimes Aunty Dorrie has been referred to as our late brother Charles Harris' wife, and she was. However this faithful intercessor, pastor, prison chaplain and UAICC Elder is so much more. I was delighted to be with many others in Lismore recently to honour and celebrate her witness and ministry.

International and Ecumenical Partners

There has been much I've been privileged to be part of here and overseas. The King of Tonga's visit to Newington College (NSW), recognising the special relationship and long standing partnership with Tupou College in Tonga.

I was blessed to attend with Ros my wife, the Methodist Church in Fiji's Annual Meeting in Suva. Meeting the small passionate and committed Disaster Recovery team, seeing and hearing about the devastation and social dislocation resulting from cyclone Winston and discussing the ongoing work in restoring communities made a lasting impression upon us. I pay credit to Rev Dr Stephen Robinson the Assembly Disaster Recovery Consultant who seems to more and more be a vital part of our international solidarity with partners. The National Choir Festival held the same week as our meeting raised F\$250K for repairs to schools, education being a primary priority of our partner church. We also heard much about climate change together with equality for women and issues of domestic violence. Again a priority for our partners ably assisted by Uniting World through the work of Rev Dr Cliff Bird (Fiji based) and Rev Dr Sef Carroll (based here).

UAICC has a new minister at Napranum on the Western Cape from our partner and we look to further opportunities for UAICC and our pacific partners to be in theological and justice dialogues, for potential ministerial exchange and graduate and/or post graduate study opportunities.

With a group of 21 from the UCA I attended the World Methodist Conference in Houston Texas. The next conference is in 5 years and we ought to be preparing to ensure more than one young adult attends. Richard La'Brooy was a wonderful representative contributing to the gathering. However to enhance young adult leadership in our Church we must invest in them. Additionally it was a great sadness to me there were no First Peoples in our delegation. Again, investing in leadership is vital and if our unique nature, at our centre as Church, is our covenant with First Peoples then we have a lot more to do to make this a lived reality.

With Rob Floyd and Sureka Goringe I attended part of a conference in Sydney where many local Australian Zimbabwean "fellowships" were in attendance. Our partner the Methodist Church of Zimbabwe was represented by Bishop Molife, who we were able to have some discussions with about the partnership, the Australian Fellowships and the potential for closer relationships with UCA and local congregations.

Rob I also attended the United Church of PNG Annual Conference, where it was said they could not remember a President being in attendance before.

In my column in the National Update 6th October 2016 I have written about the amazing connections of our two Churches and the "songlines" which merged with my personal songline. I commend National Update to you if you are not already a subscriber to this weekly update you should be.

Uniting World has just convened an important international consultation on Papua here in Sydney which I was pleased to attend for part of the time. There were also representatives from most Synods in attendance.

Encouragement

I try to get to local expressions of our ministry and mission when I visit different Synods to encourage and learn about the heart of our Church. In this period I have visited several congregations, one young adult faith community, Parramatta Mission which will feature in the Christmas message, and the Medical Supervised Injecting Centre at Kings Cross where Dr Marianne Jauncey and her team are offering outstanding support which saves lives. I met a man who began as a client but also commenced a small artistic expression group which has now grown to the point where they hold exhibitions. Some clients now come not to use the normal facilities but to paint or draw. This is an amazing wonderful therapeutic life giving outlet begun by one whose life was saved through the mission.

Intercultural Community

Our culturally diverse communities are a priority for me as the rich and growing edge of our Church. So National Conferences have been an important place for me to learn, to encourage others and to be personally spiritually vitalised. I've participated in the Korean and the new Middle Eastern conferences in this past 4 months.

There was a significant gathering at St Stephens in Sydney to recognise the Armenian Genocide but particularly through the book 'Armenia Australia and The Great War' to honour the wonderful connection of our three founding Churches their members and other Aussie Christians who were vital to the Armenian Relief efforts. Stories were also shared of ANZACs who refused to turn a blind eye and instead supported Armenian people in their desperate struggle to survive. Only 2 weeks ago I was honoured to accept on behalf of our Church the Freedom Award of the Armenian National Committee for our consistent solidarity with respect to the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. I remarked that "we stood on the shoulders of giants", and humbly accepted the award on behalf of all those who from 1915 showed compassion, care and love for the Armenian people.

Synods and Assembly

Colleen and I have attended the WA and SA Synods. Attending, presenting our report together is about modelling shared leadership. Being present, if possible for the whole meeting, is for us, a wonderful opportunity to feel the pulse of the Church. I think that there is a lot more life in our Church then some might suggest. We also attended the Closure of Ministry Service for the NSW-ACT General Secretary, Rev Dr Andrew Williams who I have known since the early 80's and my call to the Northern Synod.

On the Assembly front the work which Colleen leads on "A New Way of Working", and the resultant transitions of structure and pastoral dimensions require my attention.

The "space for grace" for the respectful conversations about relationships and marriage has created controversy particularly given the broader community debate about a plebiscite. I have tried to faithfully honour the resolutions of the 14th Assembly 2015.

I've done an interview on the Done Dale Centre and the Royal Commission in the NT into Juvenile Detention. It's worth noting UAICC and others have concerns in all jurisdictions and our justice issue is certainly to reduce incarceration of First Peoples who are well overrepresented in the prison population and in many jurisdictions in juvenile justice. Further we advocate for restorative justice principles and alternatives to incarceration which are rehabilitative.

I'm now 15 months into my term as President it is an immense privilege and a great responsibility. A challenge made possible because of the wonderful people of God who serve in our Church and who walk alongside me every day and pray for me and our Church, including you. Thank you. A challenge made possible because of the commitment of my wife, Ros, my partner in life, and in the gospel. Bless her.