

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

(with a focus on July – November 2020)

INTRODUCTION – What/who is sustaining you?

In this challenging time, I have had numerous conversations with members of the Uniting Church and the wider community on what is sustaining them through these tumultuous circumstances and seemingly never-ending surprises (both distressing and joyous).

Responses are varied and include: faith in Christ, the steadfast love of God, prayer, devotional practices, worship, connection with people – family, friends, local churches, neighbours, actions for justice, acts of kindness, the beauty of creation, music, art, photography, books, Scripture, podcasts, exercise, comedy, talking on the phone, re-discovering and discovering anew knitting, woodturning, baking, etc.... (you may add others to the list)

You may have also asked this question of yourself and others – what is sustaining you? In response, as people engaged in ministry, pastoral care and advocacy, we provide ways to discover those sustaining avenues for our life – that are meaningful, nourishing, long-term patterns and sources of life and hope.

Through some of the events and gatherings, that I have led or been part of over the past four months, I have witnessed those life-sustaining, hope-filled ways along which God leads us. I have listed here a number of these activities, and have chosen to particularly focus on the President's Conference online webinar.

“Spiritual leadership and encouragement to the Church” (Regulation 3.6.4.2)

President's Conference Online webinar and Worship - October 3 and 4

In an inspiring afternoon at the online President's Conference webinar, we heard 13 speakers on the themes of the President's Conference, “Called by God, Every Member Ministry and Living our Christian Vocation in Daily Life”. Participants included people from each State and territory.

Speakers shared personal stories of the ways God has called them and the processes of personal and communal discernment, that have guided them in living their Christian discipleship in daily life.

Participants engaged with the speakers through posting questions and comments.

The first session “Called by God” was a conversation with Rev Dr Ockert Meyer and Rev Dr Stephen Robinson. Ockert and Stephen both shared moving accounts of God's call in their own lives. Ockert reflected on the Biblical and historical foundations of ‘call’ and vocation, and Stephen shared ways we as a Church are able to respond in times of crisis.

In the second session, “Living our Christian Vocation” five speakers spoke on focus areas of the Conference.

Rev Mark Kickett shared his personal story of being called by God, set within the context of racism and policies of the Australian government, where he was not recognized as a citizen. Mark spoke about God's call to justice and walking together as First and Second Peoples.

Rev Al Macrae spoke about the processes of personal and communal discernment, as we seek to follow Christ in shaping and guiding our life and decision-making.

Ms Rhanee Tsetsakos shared how she has expressed her gifts of story-telling and writing. Rhanee shared a reflection on the Holy Spirit, that she had developed during her Period of Discernment.

Rev. Radhika Sukumar-White spoke about God's call to ordained ministry and the personal and communal discernment processes, that contributed to her decision-making.

Rev Charissa Suli, shared about her experience of God's call, and the importance of people expressing their Christian vocation through the Arts.

Ms. Catherine Pepper, shared the way she has discerned God's call on her life, and her vocation as an environmental engineer. She spoke of her passion for climate justice and the ways the Church is called to embody a "Vision for a Just Australia"

In the final session of the webinar, "Faith in Public life", we heard from people who are engaged in public life in a rich diversity of ways. In sharing their insights and wisdom, they encouraged participants to reflect on ways we are embodying God's justice, compassion, love and hope in our society and in the global community. Dr Lorna Hallahan, Mr Mark Henley, Dr Ian Olver, Dr Sureka Goringe and Rev Sandy Boyce encouraged us to be prophetic witnesses, advocates and bearers of God's light and hope, in partnership with our congregations, agencies, government and non-government bodies, and our global church partners.

It was a gift to be able to gather in this way in this time of crisis and uncertainty, where being connected and supporting one another is so important. The themes of the Conference are more important than ever for us personally and as a community woven together in Christ.

Participants commented on how encouraging it was to hear the input and to connect with and encourage one another in the online community. Over the coming months Uniting Church members will continue to engage in conversation around these important themes.

The three sessions of the webinar were recorded and the first two are now available online with the third being available in the next week. The recordings will be an excellent resource for discussion, and we intend to provide questions, to encourage local churches and larger groups to engage in conversation around the themes.

The online webinar was an entrée to the face to face President's Conference which has been rescheduled for Thursday, April 29 until Sunday May 2, 2021 in Adelaide.

Central Queensland Presbytery Retreat - July 27-28

It was a joy to be part of a retreat with members of the Central Queensland Presbytery, who were gathered at Emu Park in Queensland for their annual retreat. A time of rest and renewal and reflection on our ministry contexts at this challenging time. The retreat included Ministers of the Word in placement in congregations, in chaplaincy, Presbytery leaders and spouses of Ministers.

While I could not be with them face to face, we were able to share through the gift of technology and the expertise of members who ensured we could see and hear each other!

I led the group in four one hour sessions over two days

Session 1: Shaping our Christian Communities - Who are we as the Body of Christ, What defines us? (reflecting on our communal identity)

Session 2: What sustains us in our ministry and journey with Christ?

Session 3: Abundant Grace, Liberating Hope – embodying the reconciling love and hope of Christ

Session 4: Participating in God's mission – responding to our present context

We explored Biblical and theological foundations in each of the sessions, and shared personal stories of life and ministry. We reflected on the changes we were making in response to the safety measures for COVID19, and shared ways we were offering pastoral support to people in our communities in this challenging time.

We drew from recent documents that were a collaboration of the President and Moderators: Prayers for this Season, What sustains us, and what we are learning in response to COVID19. We also used the Assembly documents: "A Vision for a Just Australia" and "Build Back Better" to reflect on our participation in God's mission in the world.

Other events and gatherings:

- I preached at Leichhardt Uniting Church (August 9) – (online) at both services – morning and evening and joined them for a zoom conversation after both services. With a focus on the lectionary reading: "Take Heart, it is I, Do Not be Afraid." (Matthew 14: 22-33)
- I led a one hour session for the Methodist Church Zimbabwe Men's Christian Union at the invitation of Rev Johnson Makoti from the Synod of Queensland, on "Social Justice and Christianity: What is the Core mission of the Church?" It was great to connect with people from different parts of Australia and New Zealand
- I had a face to face meeting with representatives of Deacons and Standards for Ministry Committee Chair. This was followed up with an online conversation of Deacons, we heard about their experiences as Candidates, and reflected on formation for Deacons.
- I recently met with Ian Robinson and Glen Powell regarding an Evangelists' Conference at UTC in February next year.
- I was one of the speakers at the online International Day of Peace service September 21
- I spoke at the Assembly staff meeting, reflecting on the year, thanking staff for their ministry and offering a prayer of blessing.

Meeting with the Moderators

I have met with Moderators on three occasions since July.

These meetings included a farewell to Rev Steve Francis and Rev Dave Baker as they concluded their ministries as Moderator and a welcome to Ms Susy Thomas the Moderator of the Synod of WA. We are organizing another online gathering to welcome Rev Andrew Gunton, the Moderator of the Synod of Queensland.

Meeting with National Conference Chairs and National Conferences

I have had four gatherings with Chairs of National Conferences.

Two of these gatherings have included young leaders.

These meetings have included resourcing by Rev John Cox on the National Safe Church Unit and Tenille Fricker from UnitingCare on the Disability Royal Commission.

Two of our gatherings included a focus on 2nd Gen ministry and Rev Jason Kioa spoke about his learnings from the Tongan National Conference and mentoring of young leaders.

I attended the Filipino National Conference online, with Uniting Church members from across the country – "Community Blessing Community" October 30-31

Ecumenical gatherings and our global partnerships:

- I attended the first two days of the Virtual 2020 South East Asian Regional Workshop, hosted by Uniting World (SEARO) in Bali (September 28 – October 1). The workshop focused on: The COVID19 Pandemic: The socio-economic impact, increasing rates of violence against women and girls, and the response of Churches in South East Asia and Australia. It was a joy to see people online, who I met in 2018 in Bali at a previous SEARO.
- I attended online an international meeting re Korean Peace on July 23
- I have a Pacific leaders meeting that will meet online from December 1-4
- Advocacy on human rights abuses in the Philippines – working with the National Churches of Christ in the Philippines (NCCP), United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) and FNC, Uniting World
- Given our COVID19 restrictions, we have been invited to send greetings to a number of our partner churches, who are gathering either face to face or online for their Assemblies or Conferences. Along with Uniting World, I have sent greetings on behalf of the Assembly to:
 - the Church of South India (video greeting)
 - the Protestant Church in East Timor (video greeting)
 - the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan (letter)
 - the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka (letter)
- I was part of a zoom gathering of National Church leaders meeting - September 22
- 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. We met in October for lunch (face to face!). We discuss matters we share in common and ecumenical collaboration. We plan to meet again early next year.

Pastoral Notes/Matters

National Apology anniversary liturgy (October 22, 2020)

- A team of people including Sarah Lim, John Cox, Nina McKenzie, Matt Pulford and the Transforming Worship circle produced a liturgy to mark the 2nd anniversary of the National Apology to people who were sexually abused as children in institutions, including churches. I introduced the liturgy and preached a sermon on the Parable of the Persistent Widow.
- I attended online the memorial and funeral services of Rev Dorothy Harris Gordon. I sent a message of condolence on behalf of the Assembly to Auntie Dorrie's family.
- I attended online – Rev Dr Ji Zhang's mother's funeral

Expressing our Covenant relationship. Walking Together as First and Second Peoples

It has been wonderful to meet with Pastor Mark Kickett on a number of occasions. We are able to meet face to face at Uniting College, as we are both based in South Australia.

Mark and I have met recently to prepare for NAIDOC week (November 8-15) and for the Day of Mourning worship in January 2021

I attended a NCCA Reconciliation Event online on October 29

Advocacy areas:

- Domestic and Family Violence – Webinar with Being a Multicultural Church circle Working with Charissa Suli on resourcing in this area.
- Climate Justice (supporting the Global Climate Action)
July 29 NCCA Climate and Environmental Justice roundtable
Attended CSU Climate fest (online)
- 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 was an Interfaith service on the Anniversary (August) of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- October 21: ICAN webinar – briefing about 50 countries signing on to Nuclear Weapons ban treaty. The 50th country has now signed on to the treaty and in 90 days this will become international law
- Review of Community Support Program for refugees – Rob Floyd and I participated in a teleconference meeting with the government about this program. We prepared for the meeting by gathering in a videoconference with various non-government agencies and churches involved with supporting refugees.

Connection to Assembly Agencies and National organisations

- A Direct Personal Response (DPR) training session with Sarah Lim
- UCA National History Society AGM at 3.30pm (September 1)
- National History Society's Annual lecture at 7 EST (on National Redress)
- November 2 – UnitingCare Australia CEO Forum
- UnitingWorld – meetings regarding partner churches and connections to our National Conferences
- Regular meetings with Rob Floyd on Advocacy. I also meet with members of the Assembly Resourcing Unit on ministry and advocacy.
- National Task Group – Disability Royal Commission – August 28

The Religious Discrimination Bill

There has not been a lot of activity on this Bill. However, we have been approached by the Shadow Attorney General to meet with him on our response to the 2nd Draft of the Bill. I have had three meetings related to this Bill.

- A local church group in Adelaide (NOMADS) invited me to speak about the Bill. This was a very helpful gathering.
- Webinar on a Human Rights Act – with Ed Santow and Victorian Commissioner (Sept 2)
- Meeting with the Shadow Attorney General, Mark Dreyfus November 4

Meetings with President-elect

I have enjoyed meeting regularly (albeit online) with the President-elect, Rev Sharon Hollis. This is both a supportive meeting of colleagues and friends, and an important part of transition from President to President.

Developing young adult leaders

This is an important focus for the Assembly and other councils of our Church. My contribution to this key priority of our Church has included: the President's Roundtable. I have hosted five of these across the country and will be holding one face to face in Adelaide in November

National Young Adult Leaders Conference (NYALC) Online – Rev Charissa Suli and I have hosted three of these meetings and four more are planned until the end of the year.

Synod Meetings

The General Secretary and I have reported to two Synods, both through video reports – slightly adjusted for specific references to each Synod.

I attended online the Opening of the WA Synod and Installation of their Moderator, Ms Susy Thomas (September 11) and the WA Synod Service of thanksgiving and tribute (September 12)

I attended the Synod of Queensland Online (October 23-25) Our video report was played and then questions were asked of the General Secretary and I. I will report verbally to the ASC on this meeting.

Concluding remarks:

In recent weeks, I have encountered the highs and lows of being in leadership in our Church. Each day there are moments, encounters, emails, text messages, readings, prayers, that bring me into a joyous space of blessing that is so often God's gift to us. There are occasions where I am saddened by our responses to each other as the beloved community of God's people.

I have felt anguish for those who were sexually abused in our Church, as we sought to respond on the 2nd anniversary of the National Apology with prayers, liturgy and commitment to best practices of safety for our children and other vulnerable people.

I have felt, like others in our community, deep sadness and outrage at what is unfolding around us in global contexts of horrendous violence, discrimination, injustice, political unrest, disease and death.

I pray often that God will fill me with love, care and wisdom so that I can offer my best self to this fulfilling and challenging role as President.

I pray that as the Uniting Church we might continue to bear witness to the hope and reconciling love of Christ that is so greatly needed in our world.

*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.