

Moderator's Report

Moderator Rev Steve Francis

I. **JUMPING JEHOSHAPHAT, WHISPERING JOB AND WEeping JEREMIAH.**

In this report I want share with the Synod the joys, hopes, struggles and disappointments that I have witnessed in the life of the Uniting Church within the WA Synod. I also want to comment on the theme for the next triennium "Deep and Wide" (Ephesians 3 v17,18).

There have been times when I have felt like **jumping Jehoshaphat**, hardly able to contain the Hallelujah in my soul. There is much to celebrate about the Uniting Church as we mark forty years since we began, with God's grace, this adventure. I have had the privilege of visiting **many congregations and faith communities** in suburban, rural and remote areas. Frequently I have experienced the presence of God, the warmth of Christian fellowship and the encouragement of being church together. I have met so many wonderful and remarkable people. I have also found much joy and celebration in our Multi-cultural, cross cultural and migrant ethnic congregations. How blessed we are to have them. There have also been many hallelujah moments at special Synod or Presbytery services of induction, ordination, or recognition of ministers from other denominations. We need these times together to remember that we belong together.

I have also shared in moments of inspiration at School speech nights, the Good Samaritan Industries and UnitingCare West events and special services at the Perth Theological Hall. We have some brilliant people serving God and neighbour beyond the bounds of our congregations and as we reminded ourselves in our forty year celebration "**All of this is us**". Praise God for the Uniting Church where ever it is found.

There have been other times when I have sensed **the whisper of God** or as Job put it "And these are but the outer fringe of God's works, how faint the whisper we hear of God (Job 26;14). I have intentionally been involved in the **ministers retreat movement** at New Norcia, where a number of ministers take time out to listen for the prompting of the Spirit in prayer. I prayed and fasted for forty hours with other Moderators and General Secretaries to be more accessible to God and God's whispers. I have tried to frequently ask the question, where is God working? Occasionally I have asked the reverse question too, where is the devil at work? We need to embrace the good and challenge the bad. Our journey with the First Peoples remains a high priority. As co-chair of the Covenanting Commission I have sought to listen deeply to the struggles and hopes of the first Australians. I have also really valued meeting with other **heads of churches** (WAHOCS) and participating at inductions installations and enthronements of their leaders. I continued to highly prize the Council of Christians and Jews. I want to pay tribute to **Rabbi David Freilich** from whom I have often heard the whisper of God. I have also appreciated meetings with the Premier, other parliamentarians and the Governor, representing the Uniting Church and hopefully being a voice for justice and the common good. I was also pleased to attend the **Iftar** dinner at Parliament house to mark the end of Ramadan and seek to build better relationships with our Islamic friends. May we never be too rushed and noisy to hear the whisper of God.

Finally I have also had moments when I felt like **weeping Jeremiah**, bent over, struggling, feeling like we are losing the battle. The results of the National Church Life Survey and National Census data, do not paint a rosy picture of the Christian church in Australia. We are all familiar with the reality

of shrinking and aging congregations. Occasionally I lament that on my watch the church has got older and greyer with less and less children and young people finding a home with us. I have felt like weeping when I have heard the tragic stories from the Royal Commission of survivors who have been so badly treated by the church and her institutions. We must make every effort to ensure it never happens again. I am also very concerned about our **current shortage of Ministry agents** (Ministers of the Word and Deacons). We do not have enough competent ministers to go round and in the next decade it will get worse as those in their sixties retire. We urgently need to think deeply about why there are so few candidates for ministry and how we can be much more flexible in the pathways to ministry. We also are still living with structural ambiguity about our Synod and Presbytery structures. We are a church that operates like a **DC3 in an age of Dreamliners**. The Royal Commission people, for example, were genuinely baffled by how complex our structure is and how too often we seem to duplicate decision making. We must work hard to downsize and simplify our system in the name of the mission of God. I am also conscious that we have difficult conversations ahead over marriage and same gender marriage, and Treaty and Sovereignty with our First Peoples. We must continue to listen respectfully to each other, learn from each other and discern where God is calling us.

I want to end with a word of thanks to my wife Kim for her tireless support of me during some demanding and even dark days. I have also been mentored wonderfully and wisely by my colleague, Rev Ken Williams. I have met twice a year with ex Moderators in order to glean their wisdom. I have also received great support from the General Secretary, Rev David de Kock and the church office staff. Despite occasional rumours to the contrary, the church office is a great place to work.

Having served for three years I have made mistakes and learnt much. I am asking the Synod Standing Committee to set up a **Moderator's Review group**, to give me guidance for the next three years. What a

great privilege and how deeply humbling it is to serve Christ and the Uniting Church.

As we face the challenges and the opportunities of the next three years I have chosen the theme "**Deep and Wide**" based on the prayer from Ephesians 3 v 17,18. My hope and prayer is that our faith in Christ and our appreciation of what it means to be part of the body of Christ and the mission of God will deepen and broaden. As Richard Foster once wrote, superficiality is the curse of our age. Please work, serve and pray with me that over the next three years we will go deeper and further than ever before in living out the love of Christ in word and deed.

To God be the glory.

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