

MEDIA RELEASE

To: Editor
From: Uniting Church WA

13 September 2021

Uniting Church WA calls to end deaths in custody

The Uniting Church WA calls on the Western Australian Government to commit to ending preventable deaths in custody, noting the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in WA's justice system, particularly among young people.

The church also calls on the government to implement the recommendations of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*; embed culturally appropriate mental health support in police lockups, prisons and places of detention; broaden cultural awareness training for police, juvenile justice and prison officers; and work with Aboriginal Elders, community leaders and organisations to co-design an Aboriginal Justice Agreement.

At least 475 Aboriginal people have died in custody in the 30 years since the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*. The Uniting Church WA believes the best way to reduce the number of deaths in custody is to reduce the number of people entering the justice system in the first place. For this reason, the church works with Social Reinvestment WA to advocate for investment in preventative and diversionary approaches to justice.

Further steps were called for to help build greater trust and better outcomes among Aboriginal communities and the police, including the expansion of non-police emergency response options and an independent police complaints process.

Rev Robert Jetta, Chair of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress WA, said, "We have got to have better way. We are a proud people with strong culture.

"Why is the main response of Western culture to lock us up? Aren't there better ways to deal with issues?"

"For too many, jail has become a death sentence. That shows that something is not right, not healthy – something has got to change.

"We've got to have more input, we need to be at the table to determine what is best for our people who come into contact with the justice system."

Susy Thomas, Moderator of the Uniting Church WA, said she is proud of the long-term work of the church in this area, and is calling on the WA Government to act on this issue.

"We need our WA Government to act in the best interests of our community by enacting changes and programs which support people in, and at risk of entering, our justice system," she said.

Members of the church agreed to make the call at the 45th Annual Meeting of the Synod of WA, held over the weekend. This follows on from the previous Synod meetings calling for the WA Government to raise the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years of age – something that is still to occur.

The church has also agreed to encourage Uniting Church WA congregations, schools and agencies to continue to improve and expand cultural awareness of First Peoples, address implicit and explicit racism, and make its places of worship, learning and service culturally safe and inclusive.



Uniting Church in Australia
Western Australia



A CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITY
FOR EVERYONE

Uniting Church WA
85-89 Edward St, Perth WA 6000
Ph 08 9260 9800
unitingchurchwa.org.au

More than 100 lay and ordained members elected from Uniting Church WA congregations, Good Sammy's, Juniper, Uniting WA, MLC, Penrhos College, PLC, Scotch College, St Stephen's School, Tranby College, Wesley College and Trinity Residential College came together over the weekend for fellowship and to discuss issues of importance in the life of the church and the wider community at the 45th Annual Meeting of the Synod of WA.

Ends

For media enquiries and interviews, please contact Marketing and Communications Manager, Maggie Johns on 0419 831 576.



Uniting Church in Australia
Western Australia



**A CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITY
FOR EVERYONE**

Uniting Church WA
85-89 Edward St, Perth WA 6000
Ph 08 9260 9800
unitingchurchwa.org.au