



SYNOD 2023 REPORT

MODERATOR

REPORT

To Members of Synod and the wider Uniting Church Community of Western Australia.

Dear Sisters and Brothers, I bring you greetings in the name of Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Introduction

When I stood before you three years ago in the Wesley College Chapel for my Installation as Moderator of the Synod of Western Australia, I, least of anyone, was completely unaware of what a turbulent and uncertain triennium this was going to be, not only personally, but for the whole church and nation.

It would not be an understatement, as I outlined in my Christmas reflection last year, quoting Charles Dickens from *“The Tale of Two Cities”*, we have lived through *“the best of times and the worst of times”*, much of it framed by the Covid_19 pandemic that so affected our ability to “be” the church as we had previously known.

We were not able to meet face to face. We could not celebrate together in worship. The lack of physical interaction, as a community of faith, distressed many. Celebrations of births, deaths and all the important chapters of life in between, were put on hold. Many are still distressed having been denied the opportunity to say their “goodbyes” in manners fitting for the saints who have gone before us.

There is nothing we can do to change that, but through such pain and distress we have learnt much about ourselves, our communities and our church that will define *who* we are and *whose* we are in the days to come.

As a lay woman from an Asian background, relatively unskilled in the finer aspects of ecclesial governance, I was deeply humbled to be called to be your Moderator. I emphasise the concept of “Call”, because in every fibre of my being I believe God called me to this task and I have sought to acquit the responsibilities of such a high office to the best of my ability.

As I now hand over the baton to my successor in our Uniting Church tradition, it is appropriate for me to outline some of the highs and lows of my term as your Moderator, as well as making some observations as to how I see the future of our Uniting Church.

Observations

First and foremost, I could not have undertaken this task alone. I am deeply indebted to former moderators, general secretaries, and a number of active and retired ministers, who have been constant in their advice, generous with wise counsel, deft in offering cautionary wisdom in all manner of situations. They have been my strength and have sustained me in ways that I could not have imagined. To you all, too numerous to mention, I thank you.

None sought honour, recognition, or recompense. Their sole desire was to be of service to the church that they too were called to serve. It has made me realise, more than ever, that in a time of diminishing physical resources, our strength comes not from perceived power, wealth or position, but rather from our common engagement as servants of our Risen Saviour.

One thing that has clearly emerged from the pandemic is that our Australian society in the way it works and interacts has changed, possibly forever. Working from home was once regarded as a novelty, but now it has become the norm. From regular meetings to worship services, teleconferencing and webcasting have come into their own and have proved invaluable. However, as with every modern form of communication, those unfamiliar or without access to such media have sometimes expressed sadness and disappointment that they have felt left behind.

The Uniting Church, like every other denomination has seen significant changes in worship patterns and numbers attending worship. Many who were prevented by decree from attending public worship have adopted other patterns of interaction. Unfortunately, in this changing landscape some have been overlooked, particularly in care facilities, becoming “forgotten ones” as pastoral care programs have become more restricted in some congregations.

On the other hand, many congregations I have been able to visit since restrictions were lifted exude an air of vitality as they seek to triumph over difficulties placed before them,

particularly in the absence of ministry placement. It grieves me, both as Moderator and as lay person, the increasing tendency to concentrate our limited cohort of active ministry agents and the resources required to support them, in close proximity to the centre of Perth, while congregations further afield are largely left to fend for themselves. This is not healthy for the future life and witness of our Uniting Church and needs to be addressed.

When we lose perspective as to why we are here, all can soon be lost, but when we remain firm, focussed and resolute, as Paul in Romans 8:39 tells us: *“Nothing else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”*. Of this I am certain!

Engagement with Uniting Church Schools, Agencies and UAICC

An important responsibility of any moderator is regular engagement with our Uniting Church schools in the role of Visitor, in addition to meeting with the CEOs and boards of our Uniting Church agencies. In my experience these meetings, both collectively and individually, have been informative, enriching and on occasions, challenging.

Throughout the history our Uniting Church and the three former denominations that came into Union in 1977, the defining mark of our church has always been a conscious engagement in education, social justice, care for the less privileged and advocacy for the vulnerable; as a consequence of our declared commitment to the cause of the Gospel.

In more recent times there has additionally been an increased emphasis on the multi-cultural nature of our church, reflective of trends in the wider population of our society, allied to formal and committed engagement with our First Nations people through the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC).

In a time of detailed scrutiny and accountability, I firmly believe more rigorous attention needs to be given to proper adherence to the Uniting Church Regulations in regard of the responsibilities of school councils, agency boards and related entities. This is particularly so in respect of balance of representation, in addition to accountability in fiscal and property asset management. Much of our Synod's By-Laws are devoted to the importance of an appropriate percentage of Uniting Church members being appointed when councils or boards are elected by the Synod or Presbytery. The purpose has always been to maintain perspective and oversight, so as to avoid the experience of some other Uniting Church jurisdictions where the Uniting Church has effectively lost control of valuable resources or its distinctive voice through a lack of representation or adequate oversight.

Our Structures

In regard to church governance, in my view, increased attention needs to be given to the way in which the Synod and Presbytery of WA interact with each other. The decade from 2006 when the Synod and the then five presbyteries resolved to effectively become one entity, with the Moderator serving not only as Moderator to the Synod, but also being Chair of the new single Presbytery of WA; with the General Secretary performing the additional role of Secretary to the Presbytery, did not ultimately work as was intended. The creation in 2017 of a separate Presbytery and Synod, each with its own distinctive governance, has left lasting previous patterns of interaction inadequately resolved. Areas of responsibility and budget expectations have often overlapped, leading to tension and on occasions, conflict. I believe greater attention needs to be given to the Assembly Regulations which clearly outline how each entity has its own well-defined appropriate and distinctive responsibilities.

Having the opportunity to regularly interact with Assembly staff and other moderators and general secretaries, has highlighted for me how each synod and the various presbyteries attend to their responsibilities. In my experience as Moderator I have formed the view that the current structure of our Synod and Presbytery in Western Australia is a little at variance with the operational framework of other Uniting Church jurisdictions. This is not to say that one framework of governance is preferable to all others, but as a Synod and Presbytery we can learn from others those things that work best and the things requiring greater attention.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Gatherings

One of the privileges experienced by the Moderator as a head of church, is being offered the opportunity to interact ecumenically with other Christian denominations, particularly through the forum of the Heads of Churches of Western Australia. Despite differences, both theological and in structural governance, many valuable opportunities are made available to speak with a common voice, particularly at times of celebration, such as Christmas and Easter, where *"The West Australian"* has devoted significant space for the Heads of Churches to contribute articles, each announcing their own unique perspective on "The Good News".

As one who was nurtured in a multi-faith community, I have greatly valued the opportunities to attend the Council of Christians and Jews, in addition to interaction with the Islamic, Buddhist, Sikh and Hindu communities of faith, now so much part of the fabric of our life in

Western Australia. The welcomes I have received, representing the Uniting Church, have been, in the most positive way, quite overwhelming.

Our Resources

All organisations measure their wealth, not only in terms of their physical resources, such as buildings and capital, but also their human resource: ordinary people like you and me.

The Uniting Church in terms of its physical resources is a very wealthy church. However, much of this resource is tied up in buildings, often no longer fit for purpose, in addition to that which we hold in name, such as the assets of our schools and agencies. Such resources, however, do not naturally transition into working capital that can be devoted to what is our core purpose, as our former Methodist tradition had as the final agenda item at the conclusion of each church meeting: *“What more can be done to advance the Kingdom of God?”*

It is a sad reality that our worshipping congregations are declining at an alarming rate, both in number and composition. Yet for those who remain, their spirit is strong.

We have also had to face the reality of many assets being sold so as to recompense historic victims of child sexual abuse. The Uniting Church is being confronted by previous wrongdoing on the part of those who used their positions of authority to perpetuate evil.

When faced with budgetary restraint, I believe we have much to learn from the Parable of the Sower. We can bury our “talents”, our resources, including our own human capital, declaring it to be all too hard, with the attendant risk of descending into bitterness and acrimony; or in contrast, we can embrace the gift we have of each other, in order to increase the harvest many times over.

Our society at large is calling for more opportunities for those deemed to be of “retirement age” to return to the work force, if able, so as to continue to make a contribution to the greater good. I was one who was taken out of retirement in order to respond to the “Call of God”, as sustained by this Synod in choosing me to serve as your Moderator, to the best of my capability.

Over the past three years I have had the opportunity to observe at close quarters the sheer wealth of retired “talents” we have at our disposal, both lay and ordained, but have often overlooked this very resource we have within. Many retired ministers, for example, in the way that our governance is exercised, are effectively excluded from the life of Presbytery and Synod, simply as a result of moving from being “active” to “retired”, whereas no such

limitation applies to lay people, of whom I am but one example. This situation needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, so that those who wish to serve, can serve.

Conclusion

When I became Moderator in 2020, I chose as my overall theme for the triennium the verse from Romans 15, Verse 13: *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”*.

That still remains my prayer, as it will to the day when I last draw breath.

It has been a great privilege and honour to serve as your Moderator. I thank you all for the confidence you placed in me and wish those who follow after me God’s richest blessing.

Suzy Thomas, Moderator 2020-2023