

# 1. Moderator

Moderator     Rev Steve Francis

Sometimes it is fun seeking to follow the way of Christ. As Nehemiah once wrote, “The joy of the Lord is our strength”. Being part of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) often entails laughter and celebration, as well as times of struggle and disappointment. Worship at its best is not an expression of solemnity and ritual formality, but a time to enter into the joy of God’s presence and delight in God’s word. Thankfully, you don’t have to look very far to find joy in the UCA. At many of our Sunday morning worship services I have loved the warmth of the hospitality and the genuine affection that people have for each other. When there is unity, strong community and heartfelt praise, I sense that God may be smiling too. Being in a different congregation most Sundays gives me a special privilege to experience the diversity of the Uniting Church. I am struck again and again, not just by the wonder of worship, but also by the loyalty and amazing faithfulness of some of our members. Sometimes I ask a worshipper, how long have you been coming here? In many cases the answer is not in single years, but in decades. I praise God for their example of Godly faithfulness through the good times and the hard times. If you are reading this report and have been faithfully serving Christ and his mission for since before union (1977), you are a legend, pat yourself on the back. You deserve our thanks. Praise God for your fidelity. Having said that, healthy churches are often characterised not only by the loyalty of members, but also by the ability of the congregation to reach out to the newcomer and the stranger. The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) tells us that attracting and retaining new people is one of the marks of a mission oriented church. Our future largely depends on this.

During the past year, along with the laughter and the signs of extraordinary faithfulness, there have been times when our love for each other and God’s mission in the world has been tested. I felt really privileged along with twenty others from WA to attend the 15<sup>th</sup> Triennial Assembly meeting in July in Melbourne. I found the worship and Bible studies very inspiring, the various discussions very stimulating and the cold weather stirring. (I vote that the next Assembly be in Broome in July). The decisions about domestic violence, Aboriginal sovereignty and climate change draw us closer to each other and our neighbour. The decisions about same gender marriage test our ability to live and love each other, when our differences of opinion are sharp. I remain hopeful that our unity in Christ will remain strong. To this end, I held two Moderators Forums in the metropolitan area and two in country areas. I have also spent time listening to concerns of those who felt aggrieved by the decisions and with those who believe this is a positive step forward. I am praying that we will avoid some of the divisions that are evident on the other side of Australia.

The last twelve months have also been a time of adjustment and re-alignment as the Synod and newly separated Presbytery are learning to live together in a new way. I think we did not think through very carefully the implications of the separation, in terms of separate staffing, finance and regulations. I remain hopeful that we can keep moving forward together and avoid the twin sins of duplication and rivalry. We need to continue to work in a collaborative and co-operative way being very careful that our frustrations don’t lead to personal attacks or exaggerated negativity. As you can see from your reports, we also face great financial challenges. We are living way beyond our means; we as a Synod must address our financial shortfalls with great pastoral sensitivity and responsible fiscal restraint. We are called to be good stewards and live in the generosity of God while very carefully managing our limited resources.

We have also seen significant change in the development of how we provide for education for lay and ordained people. We have begun a new era in the work of the Commission for Education for Discipleship and Leadership (CEDAL) to oversee, stimulate and provide the kind of training and resourcing that will equip the church in its worship, witness and service. The severing of ties with Murdoch University and Perth College of Divinity (PCD) were part of a process that Presbytery

entered into. Their motive was always to seek to provide theological education that is relevant, flexible and of the highest standard for the church in this time of change. I acknowledge the emotional cost that these discussions and decisions have been to those involved. I remain confident that we are moving in the right direction. Speaking of moving in the right direction, I have felt encouraged that as a member and co-chair of the Covenanting Commission, we seem to be making real progress and building stronger relationships with our First Peoples as we seek to close the gap and walk together.

I also feel we are continuing to grow in our relationships with our schools, university, college and agencies. One school Principal commented that the Synod/Schools relationship is continuing to improve. We have great school councils, chaplains, principals and students and their work has sometimes been unappreciated. Our agencies never stand still. Again, we are well served by their leaders, councils and staff. Good Samaritan Industries (GSI) and UnitingCare West are organisations that we can be rightly proud of. I stand in awe of the contribution of Mr Vaughan Harding, who has just retired from Juniper as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) after 29 years of outstanding leadership. Juniper has grown in size and stature remarkably under Vaughan's visionary leadership and we wish him well in retirement.

In my role as Moderator, I have the special privilege of representing the Uniting Church in a variety of forums. I have been elected chair of the WA Heads of Churches and I continue to value working closely with church leaders from other denominations. We meet with the Premier twice-a-year for discussions about some of the key social challenges of our time. I also am co-President of the Council for Christian and Jews and really appreciate the open dialogue and shared common ground that we have. I have been invited to represent you at Anzac Day services, Mandorla Art prize evening, Abrahamic Day (at Notre Dame), Rohingya rally on the steps of Parliament, Islamic College Dinner, St George's Cathedral services, to mention a few.

My final word is one of thanks for the countless expressions of love, prayer and encouragement over the past twelve months from so many across the Uniting Church. Apart from my role as your Moderator, I have also had to slowdown a little after open heart surgery and constant visits to the hospital during my daughter's serious illness. In particular, I want to thank Rev Ken Williams, acting ex-Moderator for his constant guidance and support, Rev David de Kock, General Secretary for his energy and tireless hard work and my wife, Kim for her patience with a partner who works long hours and travels.

It has been a joy and privilege to share with you all in the ministry of Christ.

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