

Retiring President

THANKS TO GOD AND TO GOD'S CHURCH

With thanks to God and with thanks to the church I offer this brief report and reflection on three years of extraordinary experience and privilege. During my term as President my faith has grown in many ways, my knowledge of the church and the church's contribution to people near and far has increased enormously, and my confidence in the future of the Uniting Church has been strongly confirmed.

I praise God for all the ways I've seen God at work throughout the church - in the faithful worship and service of thousands and thousands of church members in congregations in every corner of Australia; in the inspiring hard work of many congregations as they draw new members to Christ and grow the church; in the church's willingness to turn aside from heavy disputation and controversy and turn towards acceptance of our diversity of viewpoints and to get on with worshipping and serving as Christians together; in the self-giving service of our congregational leaders, our ministers, and our leaders in Presbyteries, Synods and Assembly.

I praise God too for all the ways I've seen God at work throughout the world - wherever there is suffering and need, offering compassion and comfort; in the movements for the stewardship of creation, for an end to world poverty, for peace and disarmament, for human rights; in the many community organisations which form our civil society; and in the work of many individuals who work for justice and peace and the wellbeing of people.

I owe a great debt of thanks to many people:

- First I thank the church for its depth of care for my wife Alison and myself and our family, when Alison was diagnosed in November 2006 with terminal cancer. Over the months of her illness, and in the months after her death in June 2007, the love and the peace of God was conveyed to us every day through the prayers and the support of the church. Thank you.
- Second, I thank the members of the Canberra Central Parish, where I am one of the ministers in placement. I thought that during my three years as President they would receive something like 25% of my time and energy, but the presidency has consumed more than that. I am deeply grateful for their patience with me and their unflinching care. The Assembly's decision to move to a fulltime presidency is undoubtedly correct.
- Third, I thank Caroline Fletcher, my hard-working part-time assistant in Canberra, who kept the presidential communications flowing, looked after my diary and ensured I was in the right place at the right time, and who gave many extra hours of volunteer service, particularly when we were arranging the three national ministers conferences in 2008.

- Fourth, I thank the Assembly staff, members of the Assembly Standing Committee, and Synod moderators and secretaries. The church is exceptionally well served by its leaders.
- And lastly I thank all those who have upheld me in prayer through my term as President. That constant spiritual support has resourced me with energy, wisdom and blessing from God.

THE ROLE OF PRESIDENT

The job description for the President is brief. It's found in Regulation 3.6.13 - "The responsibilities 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 requested or advised by the Assembly." I now report under the four sections of that statement.

Spiritual leadership and encouragement

I have visited many congregations and church groups over the past three years. I've preached in something like 80 of our congregations, spoken at scores of conferences and rallies, participated in several "whistle-stop tours" through presbyteries, officiated at the opening of a few new church buildings, participated in lots of anniversaries including in June 2009 the 200th anniversary of Australia's oldest church (Ebenezer UC in NSW), and addressed dozens and dozens of church gatherings. Wherever I've been present, I have sought to share with people information and challenge about the life of our church and my discernment as to how God is leading this part of God's church.

In addition, with support from various Assembly staff members, I have written Christmas and Easter messages, responded to thousands of communications, conversed in person with hundreds of church members, and tried always to do so in ways that encourage the church to be faithful and bold followers of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I have often been asked "is the church growing?" Sometimes it's put more bluntly - "is the church dying?" I am hugely encouraged by seeing firsthand many congregations that are growing - usually because of their commitment to relate closely with their local community or the energy and insight they're putting in to children's ministry or their attention to cross-cultural ministry as they welcome people from diverse backgrounds. But our best estimates tell us that only about 30% of our congregations are growing - a figure thought to be better than several years ago, but one that still leaves us with a church whose numerical decline is not yet finished. Over the next years quite a number of our ageing congregations will inevitably merge or close. But the faith and life I have seen in many congregations, and the next generation of leadership which is visible amongst us, guarantee that the Uniting Church's future is well assured.

Representing the church

A large part of a President's time is occupied with representing the church. At ecumenical meetings and events, with community groups such as those

of the National Civil Society Dialogue, in advocacy with the Federal Government, at conferences on all sorts of topics, at public rallies, visiting overseas partner churches, increasingly at inter-faith events. And within the church representing our national and international life at Synod or Presbytery meetings or at multicultural gatherings or seminars on doctrinal matters or ecumenism or international relationships.

One of the joys of being President is to experience time and again how community and government leaders have a high regard for the Uniting Church. Our commitment to community service - represented particularly of course through UnitingCare agencies and Frontier Services, our willingness to bring fresh thought to bear on sensitive and difficult issues, and our commitment to inclusiveness and to social justice are the chief reasons for our high community credibility.

The national "heads of churches" meet twice a year. This informal gathering comprises the national "heads" of over 20 churches in Australia, with the regular agenda being to share news of each other's churches, to discuss common issues faced by Christians in Australia, and to pray together. For me it has been a regular source of stimulus and support, with acceptance of our differences but also with great joy in our shared faith and discipleship. Relationships among the national leaders of Australian churches are in good shape.

I believe there is a growing presidential role in advocacy with government and community leaders. And increasingly that advocacy can and should be ecumenical where possible and even inter-faith where possible. I have found that if one or more church leaders take a well-planned initiative for ecumenical or inter-faith action on a particular issue - on Palestine and Israel for instance, or on the ABC's religious programming, or on human rights in the Philippines - then many others are willing to sign on in support. And understandably it seems to be easier to obtain appointments with government ministers if the delegation comprises more than just one church.

Let me note in passing the strength of our overseas church partnerships and of the non-Anglo congregations of our church in Australia. I have visited several of our partner churches in Asia and the Pacific and have been impressed every time by the desire of our partners to maintain close relationships with us. One of the opportunities we need to take as a largely Western church located in the Asia-Pacific region is to learn from our own non-Anglo congregations and from our Asian and Pacific partners how to be effective in our local mission and evangelism, in our standing up for religious freedom and for human rights, and how to be faithful and courageous in the face of harassment from local authorities.

Counsel as occasion requires

There are few formal occasions when the President is called upon to give counsel. The most obvious are Presidential Rulings. I have had to issue two such Rulings, details of which can be found in the Standing Committee report.

Sadly, I've also received a number of requests for intervention in matters of complaint or grievance in the life of the church. Almost invariably these requests have to be referred to others in the church, for a President actually has no formal authority to intervene. Mostly the referral is to Synod Moderators who do have the authority to address such matters. It has been helpful in some situations, however, that I've been able to ask a question or raise a pastoral concern with the appropriate people in the church, and in that way to "give counsel".

Informally, of course, a President receives lots of requests for information and advice about the life of the church and the procedures of the councils of the church. Question times after a presentation to a congregational gathering can be relied upon to raise issues of the future of the church and the government of the church, and about our ecumenical and overseas involvements. I'm glad to say that seldom in the past three years have I received questions about the church's stance on sexuality and leadership.

I regret that some correspondents who've written, faxed or e-mailed have had to be very patient in awaiting my response. Thank you for your tolerance of my busyness.

Other things as requested or advised

The 11th Assembly asked me to lead a delegation to Port Augusta. A report on the visit can be found in the Standing Committee report.

Before I was installed as President I consulted Assembly and Synod leaders and our theological teachers as to the wisdom of convening national ministers conferences during my term, to bring together ministers from different synods to learn from each other, to remind ourselves of the basic commitments and ethos of the Uniting Church, to affirm the leadership roles of our ministers, and to consider specific matters of church ministry and leadership.

The idea was welcomed, and so in 2008 three conferences were held. Half the program of each conference was identical - with input on the vision and ethos of the Uniting Church from Andrew Dutney. Our facilitator at each conference was Jenny Byrnes. Their leadership meant that each of the conferences received great affirmation from the 260 ministers who participated.

In addition the Bali conference addressed the international life of the church, learnt of the positive initiatives on inter-faith relationships in Indonesia, and enabled a number of ministers to take exposure tours to other parts of Indonesia. The Darwin conference was enriched greatly by leaders of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress teaching us Indigenous theology and spirituality, and exposure trips to Arnhem Land communities brought extra benefit to more than half the participants. The Sunshine Coast conference added sessions on excellence in local ministry, with expertise provided by church leaders from across the country.

Feedback from participants in these conferences confirmed that it was an idea whose time had come,

and there is ongoing interest in further similar national events in the future.

The only other major initiative I was able to take was for Australian ecumenical action in relation to Palestine and Israel. I have served for over 10 years now on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, and have heard many appeals from the churches of Jerusalem and Palestine of their need to receive worldwide solidarity and support. As President, I was able to arrange for an Australian Church Leaders Visit to Palestine-Israel in December 2007, hosted by the Jerusalem Inter-Church Center, a body supported by the Jerusalem heads of churches, the Middle East Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Nine of us, including Terence Corkin and myself, spent 9 days in Palestine and Israel, meeting with church leaders, Jewish and Muslim faith leaders, Israeli and Palestinian government representatives and community groups, and visiting firsthand communities in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

On our return the National Council of Churches in Australia adopted a set of policy resolutions on Israel and Palestine for the first time, and these were affirmed also by our Assembly Standing Committee. Ecumenical representations to the Australian Government, the Embassy of Israel and the Palestinian Representative in Canberra followed. Then in mid-2008 12 heads of churches signed a statement on Palestine and Israel which was launched in Parliament House and which again led to further representations to the Government.

One outcome of the Visit is agreement in principle by the Christian, Jewish and Muslim peak bodies in Australia for a three-faiths joint visit to Palestine and Israel sometime in the next year or two. I am convener of the 3 x 3 planning group which is about to commence its work towards this visit, which also has the support of the Israeli ambassador, the Palestinian representative, and the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs. I will continue to be involved in advocacy for peace with justice for the people of Palestine and Israel in the years to come, for the ongoing conflict in the Middle East is a source of conflict and instability across the world and a major issue for interfaith relationships.

Once again I thank the members of the Uniting Church for their support of me as President over these three years, and I thank God for the enormous privilege and honour of serving in this role. The remaining years of my ministry will be hugely enriched by the experience and inspiration I have received in seeing God's action in so many ways in the life of our church. In the fellowship of Christ, thank you.

Rev Gregor Henderson
11th President of the Assembly