



PRESIDENT: Dr Deidre Palmer

GENERAL SECRETARY: Colleen Geyer

Pastoral Letter - Post Fifteenth Assembly Update

To all Congregations and Faith Communities

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Greetings in this new year, that brings fresh opportunities, as we serve Christ together as the Uniting Church in Australia. I am greatly encouraged by the ways the Uniting Church is engaging in mission and exercising ministry through our local churches, Presbyteries, Synods, our Agencies, schools and the Assembly.

On this Sunday the 13th of January, six months will have passed since the members of the Fifteenth Assembly gathered in Melbourne to discern prayerfully the national priorities and directions of our Church.

Decisions of the Assembly

During this time, members of Synods, Presbyteries, Congregations and Faith Communities have heard about and discussed the decisions we made in Melbourne. In many parts of our Church, our members are living out the hopes and vision that relate to our decisions on domestic and family violence, sovereignty of First Peoples, care for creation, access for people with disabilities, and support for seasonal workers.

Our Decision on Marriage

In respect to our recognition of two statements of belief on marriage, there have been a variety of responses. Across our Church, there are many people who have embraced the decision as a wise way of moving forward as a Church, respecting the different views we hold on marriage, and giving freedom to Ministers and Congregations to hold to a view of marriage, that they believe is faithful to the Gospel of Christ. Leaders in our Church have journeyed alongside those Uniting Church members, Congregations and Presbyteries, who have difficulty in living with the decision of the Assembly.

In 2009 an additional Clause 39 (b) was approved by the Assembly, which allows Presbyteries and Synods to ask the Assembly to reconsider a decision it has made.

Clause 39 (b) of the Uniting Church Constitution states:

(i) If within six months of a decision of the Assembly, or its Standing Committee, at least half the Presbyteries within the bounds of each of at least half the Synods, or at least half the Synods, notify the President that they have determined that in their opinion

- *a decision includes a matter vital to the life of the Church; and*
- *there was inadequate consultation prior to the decision*

the President shall notify the Church that the decision is suspended until the Assembly has undertaken further consultation.

Seven Presbyteries chose to exercise their right to notify me as President, that, in their opinion, the matter was “vital to the life of the Church and there was inadequate consultation prior to the decision.” There were five Presbyteries in Queensland, one Presbytery in the Northern Synod and one in the Synod of NSW and the ACT. On Saturday the 5th of January 2019, the Presbytery of South Australia met, and decided that the majority of members did not support the proposal that the Fifteenth Assembly marriage decision was a “matter vital to the life of the Church and there was inadequate consultation prior to the decision.”

This means that the threshold for the suspension of the Assembly decision has not been reached.

As a result, the Assembly decision on marriage stands, and will continue to be lived out in our Church, in various faithful expressions.

At this time, I would like to acknowledge with deep gratitude, the many Uniting Church members who have listened to one another with open hearts, and who have entered into challenging conversations, as you have responded to the Assembly decision and what it means for your particular community - and in many cases for your families and friends.

During this first six months as President, I have had many opportunities to meet with Uniting Church members, Congregations, Presbyteries and leaders of National Conferences and listen to their concerns and their hopes for our Church. Some of our conversations have focused on Assembly decisions, including our decision on marriage. Our broader focus has included the ways we can witness to God's reconciling love, which is beyond measure and has power to transform people's lives and the life of our society.

I know that there are Uniting Church members who have been hurt and have felt distress – either by the decision on marriage, or the possibility of the suspension of the decision. Let us remain conscious in the weeks and months ahead that this is a time for us as a Church to pastorally support one another, to act compassionately toward one another, and to hear Christ's invitation to love each other, as Christ loves us, with grace, healing and hope. This call for us to love as Christ loves is at the heart of God's mission.

A Prayerful and Loving Community

After the Fifteenth Assembly, I noted that I was proud of the way our Assembly members modelled a loving Christian community, by holding together and caring for each other as they exchanged strongly and faithfully held views from different theological and cultural perspectives.

In the months ahead, I pray that we will reflect the marks of the Christian community that Paul speaks of in his letter to the church in Philippi: "encouragement in Christ, consolation from love, sharing in the Spirit, compassion and sympathy." (*Philippians 2:1-3*).

I invite you to pray for the Uniting Church, and for each other, that we may faithfully embody the Gospel of Christ in all we do and say. I have included a prayer for our Church, that I invite you to pray in your congregations and faith communities.

May we all know God's abundant grace and liberating hope as we seek to journey together, shaped by God's reconciling love.

Grace and peace.



Dr Deidre Palmer
President
Uniting Church in Australia Assembly

11 January 2019