

# VIEWPOINT

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## *Transforming Spirit*

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### Indigenous Recognition

Canberra Region Presbytery of the Uniting Church acknowledges the Indigenous communities who have lived on these lands since time immemorial. We express our respect for Indigenous Elders past, present and emerging, for their complex ancient cultures in harmony with the Earth. We express our support for the Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

### From the Editor

*Transforming Spirit* is the theme of the Uniting Church Synod of NSW and the ACT for 2023. In this issue of Viewpoint, Rev Andrew Smith, Rev Karyl Davison and Rev Dr John Squires reflect on how the Synod’s theme of transformation of spirit raises questions that can enable us to grow. We report on our Presbytery discussion of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament,

with a particular focus on disrupting entrenched ways of thinking in ways that engage the whole community with respect. This issue also has articles on property, and on climate change.

Part of our mission as church is to engage in dialogue and listening, especially where consensus is challenging. In this way we can help to define the issues that go to the core of the purpose of existence of the church. How should we integrate advocacy for change with recognition of the value of continuity? This issue of Viewpoint Magazine reflects on these questions. I hope you find it interesting and thought provoking.

I recently had the honour to represent the Uniting Church at a celebration of the 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Parliament House, an ecumenical and interfaith highlight. Here is the [link](#).

Viewpoint Magazine is issued quarterly. If you would like to contribute or comment, please write to [secretary@cruc.org.au](mailto:secretary@cruc.org.au)

In Christ

Robbie Tulip  
CRP Secretary and Viewpoint Editor

### **From Assimilation to Accommodation - From Transactional to Relational**

Rev Andrew Smith, Presbytery Minister Congregation Futures

The theme for the upcoming meeting of Synod in September is about the transforming Spirit shaping how we think about God at work, and shaping our mission across Presbyteries and Congregations. In the context of this theme, we are asked:

- *How is God calling us to disrupt the status quo?*
- *How is God calling us to discard an entrenched way of thinking?*

The affirmations and commitments in the recently approved Canberra Region Presbytery Mission Plan 2023-26 hold some seeds for disrupting our status quo and leading us on to discard aspects of entrenched ways of thinking. It does this by prodding us to move away from church models of assimilation to church models of accommodation, and to move from transactional engagement to relational engagement.

#### **From Assimilation to Accommodation**

Often our default model of church involves an expectation that for people to connect with faith in Christ through our congregations, they will need to change to fit in with how we like to be church. They will need to assimilate to become like us. For example, in this assimilation model, we expect people to fit in with our main gatherings for worship on Sunday mornings. These Sunday morning worship services are at times and places that suit us, and are in a form that we like and with which we are comfortable, and that we would like to see continue. Often that form necessitates any children sitting quietly in the pews with their care givers – we like them to be seen and not heard. That form may also include standing in rows to sing the hymns we love, and listening to a 20 minute monologue (sermon) with no opportunity for discussion or asking questions.

All of this is what we are familiar with and love. It is part of our way of being church. In fact, we are so familiar with this way of being church that we may find it hard to imagine any

other way of being church. So, it seems natural to us that anyone who wants to connect with faith in Christ through our congregations will need to assimilate to fit in with us.

One of the Biblical narratives that is part of the Presbytery mission plan is the account of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-39. Part of the beauty of this account for me is how it shows Philip accommodating to the Eunuch. When the Eunuch expresses interest in exploring faith in God, Philip does not resort to an assimilation model in which the Eunuch would need to turn up to Philip's "house church", fitting in with the time and place and form of that gathering. Instead of such an assimilation model, Philip practises an accommodation model in which he goes to where the Eunuch is on his journey home; Philip accepts the invitation to join the Eunuch in his chariot; Philip engages in conversation with the Eunuch about the passage the Eunuch is reading; and Philip responds to the Eunuch's desire to be baptised.

Much of this encounter between Philip and the Eunuch is on the terms and turf of the Eunuch. The Eunuch is not required to change to fit in or assimilate with Philip, rather Philip changes to accommodate the Eunuch. I hear in this Biblical narrative a call to disrupt the status quo, and to discard an entrenched way of thinking, so that people who want to connect with faith in Christ through our congregations have more options than just assimilating into what suits us. As in the affirmations in the mission plan, I hear God calling us outward to be present and engaged in our local communities. I hear a call to be accommodating.

One of the five commitments in the mission plan prods us to move from a model of church that is only assimilation to a model of church that includes accommodation. Through this accommodation we will create new communities of faith that fit the local context. Here is the commitment:

*Helping each other grow connections with our local communities – Expressing what we do in different ways to push into new territory in connecting with people in our local communities, as spaces to express and share our faith, and to discern and create new communities of faith that fit the local context. This is bound to be uncomfortable for us.*

May the same Spirit who transformed Philip, sending him to the Eunuch and prompting him to be accommodating to the Eunuch, also transform us from an assimilation model of church to an accommodation model of church.

### **From Transactional to Relational**

One of the spaces for us to grow connections with our local communities is with the local community groups that rent our church buildings. We already have connections with these community groups through their use of our properties. These groups already know where we are, and they are already walking through our doors during the week and spending hours in the buildings we share.

However, if I were to ask you whether you consider your congregation's connection with building hirers to be more transactional or more relational, I anticipate that you would say it is more transactional. Its transactional nature is probably evident from the likelihood that the main encounter community groups have with your congregation is through setting up the hire arrangement and making the hire payments. Their connection with the congregation is classed as a property matter to be managed by the property committee or by someone carrying out an administration role. Essentially, it is a transaction that provides

a needed space for the community groups and a needed income for the congregation. Often this is the status quo and our entrenched way of thinking. What if we took a new approach that included our congregation pastoral team and/or mission team joining with the property committee in building the relationships with hirers?

The Presbytery Mission Plan prods us to move from this transactional engagement with our hirers to relational engagement. Arising from the commitment in the mission plan about using property to resource God's mission, a group in our Presbytery (very open to additional participants!) is making a quick start to living out this commitment by encouraging use of property to grow connections with local communities through missional relationships rather than simply landlord-tenant relationships. Key to these missional relationships is the shift from transactional engagement with hirers to relational engagement with hirers. You can see some ideas and examples of this shift in the separate article in this issue of Viewpoint by the quick start group.

This shift from transactional engagement to relational engagement is also important for at least two other commitments in the mission plan. These commitments are:

Being church together – Building deeper connections across the Presbytery and wider Uniting Church – *Becoming more cohesive, while valuing our diversity, and growing from each other's experiences*

Being part of each other's lives – friendly and supportive – *Having Presbytery members, committees and staff very much part of the life of congregations, faith communities and agencies as a supportive source of vitality, inspiration, fellowship, and practical resourceful assistance*

Often it is too easy for our engagements with each other across the church to be more transactional than relational. We have an agenda or a task to be done, and we engage to get it done, often spurred on by the desire to be efficient and not to waste time, and by the frustration of the hoops we need to jump through to get it done. In this way we end up treating each other more like objects than people. More like servants and bosses than Christian sisters, brothers and siblings.

As a counter to all of this, I have noticed over time how one of my colleagues in the Synod Office engages with me on the phone or over zoom. When he calls, he pauses after the initial hellos. Rather than heading straight into the matters that he has on his agenda for our conversation, he pauses to ask how I am going. The way he asks this leaves me feeling open to describing to him how my work is going or how my family is going, or any other manner of things. After a couple of minutes of me responding, I reciprocate with the same question for him. In time we move on to the agenda items for our conversation. We engage in the rest of the conversation out of this strong base of relationship. There is no sense of "us and them", rather we are in it together (as Christian brothers in this case).

His example encourages me to take time to be relational, rather than transactional, in my engagements across the church.

Along with the Canberra Region Mission Plan 2023-26, I encourage you to respond to the call of God to disrupt the status quo and discard entrenched ways of thinking by shifting away from church models of assimilation to church models of accommodation, and moving from transactional engagement to relational engagement.

## Where is the Spirit leading us? Are we courageous enough to follow?

Rev Karyl Davison, Kippax Uniting Church

I'd like you to imagine a group of congregations in a geographical region. A number of those congregations are small and unable to sustain leadership and ministry. And imagine those congregations getting together to discern what the Spirit might be up to in the region. You might imagine that they speak courageously (or defensively) about continuing to keep the doors open for worship on Sunday even though they only have 1 or 2 regular attenders.



Into the mix someone speaks up about a new suburb in the region, a housing development that will eventually house over 400 families. This person speaks about there not being a church presence in this new suburb and dreams of starting a church there. One of the church leaders suggests that between them they hold a lot of property, some of it severely underutilized. And so, the dream of a church presences began its work, eventually becoming a reality.

I don't have to imagine this, because I was privileged to be part of the dream. Let me tell you some more about it.

The group of congregations were all part of the Wellington Regional Mission in Western Australia, which had congregations (and property) in Bunbury, Collie, Harvey, Donnybrook and Waterloo. In order to fund the establishment of a fresh expression of church in the new suburb of Millbridge, it was agreed to sell all the underutilised property across the region. That included a couple of churches and halls, plus several manses. Worship continued to be held: in one case in the congregation gathered monthly in each other's homes, in another in a local Anglican church. Together the sale of church buildings and manses raised enough capital to fund the Eaton/Millbridge Community Project (Project) for 10 years.

The Project began by holding an Easter Egg Hunt in the park across the road from the manse. Our primary aim to begin with was to get people out of their houses; to meet their neighbours; to start making connections with us and each other; and to experience some generous (incarnational) hospitality. In other words, to make a start in building a relational community in our physical community. Whilst providing an opportunity to gather as community and make neighbourly connections are of themselves important aims, hospitality is doubly significant because its practice conveys the gospel of Jesus.



From this relatively small start (about 150 people turned up) the Project grew and grew. We held a Christmas and Easter event every year (eventually with over 500 people participating), Movies by Midnight during the summer school holidays, ran a Breakfast Club in the local primary school (feeding about 100 children twice a week), held a monthly meal at the manse, and a school holiday program. We also had over 2000 followers on our Facebook page which we used to advertise events but also introduce some spirituality/faith based content. When the local Shire Council put a chunk of the park up for sale for housing, we successfully lobbied and petitioned the Council to gift the land to the community.



As a result of all this the community began to trust us and regard us as a positive contributor to the community's life. The Council began to support our community events financially. I was asked to provide pastoral care at the school, including conducting the funeral for one of the parents. And there were many, many faith conversations.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because the way we've been doing church is no longer working for the majority of the Australian population. So if we are to follow Jesus' call to share the good news, we need to disrupt the status quo, even if it makes us uncomfortable, and follow the Spirit into our communities to be the church there. And that might mean letting go of things we hold dear.

Do we have the courage?

If you want to read more you can find a chapter called "But is it church?" in *We Are Pilgrims: From, in and with the margins of our diverse world*, edited by Rosemary Dewerse and Darren Cronshaw or contact Karyl at [Karyl@kippax.org.au](mailto:Karyl@kippax.org.au)



## Indigenous Voice to Parliament – Presbytery Discussion

Discussion at Canberra Region Presbytery Meeting 25 March

Mr Nathan Tyson, Director, First Peoples Strategy and Engagement, NSW-ACT Synod, attended the meeting of Canberra Region Presbytery on 25 March 2023 to lead a discussion on the Referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament. After an introduction from Rev Ivan Roberts, recalling the extensive Uniting Church support for Indigenous people, Nathan spoke and answered questions. A recording of the discussion is at this [link](#).



The Presbytery agreed the following motion:

That Canberra Region Presbytery of the Uniting Church

1. Thank Nathan Tyson for his clear and illuminating presentation to Presbytery on the Voice;
2. Note the consistent and strong commitment of the Uniting Church, over decades, to shaping a destiny together with the people of the First Nations of this country;
3. Note the support for a YES vote in the upcoming referendum that has been expressed by the UCA Assembly and the Synod of NSW and ACT, as well as the Board of Uniting in this Synod;
4. Support advocacy for a YES vote in the referendum in the coming months;
5. Encourage Church Councils to consider the issues involved in the Voice, to facilitate local conversations about this issue, and, noting the support of Assembly and Synod, encourage all members of the church to give serious consideration to the way they vote in the Referendum.

### **Summary of Nathan Tyson's Address**

**Themes** for discussion are Voice, Treaty and Truth, what the Voice is, concerns, and why we should support the Yes vote in the referendum. The Voice proposal emerged from twelve regional dialogues held before the Statement from the Heart, with focus on constitutional recognition. Ongoing since 2010, committees and proposals had bipartisan support, done broadly, with all sorts of people invited. These discussions culminated in the Constitutional Convention at Yulara Resort near Uluru. It is important to acknowledge Indigenous support is not unanimous – for example during the delegate discussion at Yulara, a group left and held a media conference to express their concern.

**Truth:** A Makarrata Commission, similar to Canada's Truth and Justice Commission, would recognise impacts of colonisation to guide reparations and healing. A Truth Commission could oversee curriculum so when people talk of history they are not whitewashed or mythological. Acknowledge good and ugly, massacres, oppression, slavery. Not about

feeling guilty. Impacts, legacy, disadvantage, reflected in Closing Gap reports, dispossession, grief, trauma, stolen generation, ongoing impacts – are all part of the ‘truth bit’. Acknowledging historical truth will help negotiate the Treaty process.

**Treaty:** Australia is the only Commonwealth country that does not have a treaty with its native people. A Treaty is nothing to be scared about, addressing sovereignty, land rights, restorative justice and past wrongs to heal and move forward.

**Voice, Treaty, Truth:** - The Uniting Church supports the Statement from the Heart and engagement with Statement. We support all three, with none more important than the other. Yes for the Voice does not mean we do not support Treaty and Truth. The Referendum question as agreed is straightforward. Work by Tony McAvooy SC underpins principles for Voice legislation.

**Diverse views:** A Survival Day rally in Belmore Park in Sydney protested deaths in custody, expressing Indigenous anti-voice views. Three concerns raised there can be countered. Concerns about ceding of first people’s sovereignty should understand that law doesn’t work that way. Ceding would need to involve sovereign parties in a formally agreed outcome. Free prior and informed consent is an essential principle that the referendum can’t override. For comparison, if Australia gave New Zealand a voice to provide advice on relations that would not mean NZ cedes sovereignty. Fear and wariness are understandable, given history. People should read more and think through implications of calls for Treaty first, rather than a non-binding Voice. Terra Nullius pretended no one was here, a legal fiction unlawfully applied.

The New Zealand Treaty of Waitangi involved amicable instruction, recognising people, law and custom, overlaying a new relation on top of the old situation. New Zealand has dual language schooling and a dual language anthem, reflecting closer and more amicable racial relationships. Australia never had that. Aboriginal people have always been other, on the margins, pretending they were not there. There was never the opportunity to cede sovereignty. We need discussion about what the relationship looks like.

**Scepticism about government.** Indigenous people don’t trust governments, and have been shafted many times. The Stolen Nations were told government was taking children to a better place, but that didn’t happen. The current government is genuine, with PM Anthony Albanese wanting to move forward with a once in a lifetime opportunity to get something right. As Noel Pearson asks, if not now when? How long do we wait? Many people lack information or have misinformed sources. Respect right for people to have their own opinion.

**Wording:** The Voice will make representations, while parliament has power to make laws on composition, function, powers and procedures. We have a straightforward broad referendum question. Constitutional recognition is of high value. Mechanisms of funding processes will require legislation. Disingenuous calls for more detail are coming from the same politicians who will be responsible for creating the detail. The 273-page [Calma-Langton report](#) gives a lot of detail.

**Principles** underpinning the Voice legislation include:

- Providing independent advice to parliament and government through representations on matters relating to Indigenous people;



- Ability to be proactive, responsive and independent, with its own resources;
- Government should seek views early;
- Chosen by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people based on wishes of local communities, not appointed by government;
- Fixed terms to be accountable;
- Cultural legitimacy in the process for members to be chosen;
- Representative, with gender and youth balance;
- Using the ATSI three part identity test – descent, recognition, self-identify – that has worked well since 1983. (Often people say they are Aboriginal and are not. That is fraud, often to get a benefit.)
- Members chosen from each state, territory, TI, remote areas;

Claims the Voice will be an elite from the eastern states are not true. It will be representative, empowering, community-led, inclusive and informed, reflecting wishes of communities, consulting to ensure its views reflect wishes, including people who historically have been excluded by government and society.

**Are there already voices?** We already have the status quo. The Voice will give people and organisations permanent seats at the table. It will help to champion and raise loudly voices with a direct line to people who need to hear them.

**Governance:** The Voice will be accountable and transparent, subject to governance requirements. Members will be within scope of the national anti-corruption commission, with sanctions for misconduct. It will operate alongside traditional organisations, not to deliver programs but only to provide advice and guidance. Up to government and organisations on how it is developed and managed. No veto power. Turnbull ‘third chamber’ comment was withdrawn and apologised. Cannot dictate or tell parliament what to do. Only recommend paths, policy actions. Government can disagree. Frustrating, concern that non-binding work is token. UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People article 19 gives the right to not consent to legislation that will impact indigenous people. With the NT intervention, people could have used the UN article to not consent. Advice to government and responses will be public and accountable to electorates and people. The power of the Voice will be to inform government and public, influencing elections.

**Lobbying:** The ACTU, farmers, business, etc have powerful lobby groups, giving advice and guidance to government. The Voice is like an ATSI lobby group, advocating for interests of members, with the right to lobby on what will work best.

**Uniting Church View:** The UCA Assembly supports a Yes vote. The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress supports a Yes vote, acknowledging diverse voices. Uniting supports a Yes vote. All other synods support yes, with Queensland yet to decide.

**Rationale:** The Voice proposal has been well thought through. It presents the Voice as a first step toward Treaty and Truth. Not that Voice is most important, all three are equal. Indigenous people want to be able to talk to government about jobs and services. When an Indigenous advancement strategy made the application process for funding more streamlined and complex, many small local organisations lost out to big NGOs who took

over service delivery, but without trust relations. Local employees lost jobs, causing frustration, anger and concern. The Voice can provide a means for such concerns to be heard. The Statement from the Heart at Uluru was given to all Australian people, not to government. The Burunga Statement and the Yrrkala bark petition sit in cabinets as art works. The Statement is addressed to the Australian people, as a call and invitation to join in work and move forward. Voters in referendum and elections have power.

**Conclusion: Encourage all to vote Yes.**

### Dialogue with Presbytery attendees

How to answer people who say church and politics don't mix?

- Jesus would disagree. Daily life is political.
- Wellbeing depends on actions of politicians, how we are treated.
- UCA is a church on the way. Social justice-oriented beliefs.
- Jesus was originally a social justice warrior, concerned about weak and oppressed, impact of authority.
- Good Samaritan is political. About social justice and doing what is right.
- Sheep and goats – how we treat the least in our society is what we will ultimately be judged on.
- ATSI stats show disadvantage, fight to survive on the margins, not seen and heard.
- Not about politics, about faith.

What does sovereignty mean and what are its legal ramifications?

- English sense of monarchy, head of state, sovereign power controls land.
- ATSI custodianship and care for country, mutually beneficial relationship survived and sustained over 65,000 years presents a different perspective on sovereignty.
- The recent Menindee fish kill would never have happened under Indigenous sovereignty.
- Land is part of law, culture and spirituality, intrinsically part of who we are.
- Different cultural worldviews - land as asset for income versus land about sustainability and respect.
- If people don't own land is there sovereignty? Taking land breaks connection to country, ceremony, law and culture. Grief and trauma over loss.



“Representations to parliament and executive government” - Why are those words included?

- Executive is the Albanese government party in power. Parliament is the lower and upper houses. Government does some things that do not need to go to parliament.

Will the truth telling process be similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa?

- The Referendum is not a done deal, and should be the immediate priority.
- Aborigines are used to a raw deal, and are resilient, used to fighting and getting back up.
- Want good outcome to move forward.
- Treaty discussion should address UNDRIP Article 19, sovereignty and return of land, with focus on crown land not private land.
- Return of land under Native Title has not taken backyards since the Mabo High Court decision.
- Start discussion and dialogue on treaty, over ten years.
- Hundreds of Aboriginal nations are involved.
- Need overarching treaty and sub treaties on needs, aspirations and restorative justice.

How is Recognition in the Constitution the basis for treaty and justice?

- It is now important to recognise Indigenous people, as that recognition did not occur originally after the British arrived.
- Constitutional recognition is a respectful no-brainer, making up for the past lack.
- A seat at the table is a more genuine form of respectful recognition.

How to best support the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress?

- Synod has a good relationship with UAICC, based on respect for the right to self-determination on needs and aspirations.
- An agreement with Congress defines responsibilities, including operational financial support from Synod for ministry centres and in-kind support.
- Often congregations have a local focus, not broader, providing pastoral care and ministry.
- UCA has a lot of expertise when Congress reaches out – business strategy, etc, with a lot of good resources to help.
- Congress held a national conference in Darwin in April.
- We are in a new era for the church. The Royal Commission on responses to child sexual abuse has changed the landscape, with stronger focus on safe church, risk management and good governance.
- Congregations, presbyteries, synods and assembly can lend moral support, and should take every opportunity to assist.

Voice resources, study guides etc?

- Synod first nation resources website <https://www.nswact.uca.org.au/social-impact/first-nations-resources/> has a range of guidance, building relationships.

- Comprehensive list will be on website.
- Yes 23 <https://yes23.com.au/> is the from the heart campaign site, and includes template for email to local MP. Synod site will link to those.
- Will write article in Insights.
- Uniting will put together hard copy information pack, will send to every congregation and presbytery.
- Tee shirts are at suppliers such as <https://www.etsy.com/au/listing/1410176282/the-voice-to-parliament-shirt-vote-yes-t>

Conservatives argue inclusion of Executive will give rise to legal problems.

- A significant level of racism still exists in Australia. Including in parliamentarians who won't support Aboriginal rights in any sense.
- High court challenges – how long is a piece of string, HC could throw out, won't get bogged down.
- Power of voice is limited. Parliament can legislate.

Robbie Tulip, Presbytery Secretary, thanked Nathan for his presentation and moved the motion of thanks.



### **The Disruptive, Transforming Spirit**

Rev Dr John Squires

Whenever Christians think about the Spirit—and specifically about the dynamic force that is displayed by the Holy Spirit—our attention goes most immediately to the story of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. That's when the coming of the Spirit was experienced as “a sound like the rush of a violent wind which filled the entire house where they were sitting”, followed by “tongues, as of fire ... resting on each of them” (vv.2–3). And, of course, the chaos that resulted—“all of them ... began to speak in other languages” meant that the crowd that heard them were bewildered, amazed, astonished, and thought that they were drunk!

That's a disruptive event initiated and impelled by the Spirit right there. The story of Pentecost is a story about God intervening, overturning, and reshaping the people of God. The Spirit certainly was active at Pentecost; but this was not the first time that Jewish people had experienced the Spirit. Pentecost was far from being the first time that the Spirit came and caused upheaval!

Hebrew Scripture refers to the actions of the spirit at many places throughout the story of Israel. In the Exodus from Egypt, the foundational story of Israel—an incredibly disruptive and disturbing experience, to be sure!—the Spirit was at work. “You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst” is how Ezra recounts the story (Neh 9:20–22). It was the work of the Spirit to release the captives from Egypt, lead them through the challenges of the wilderness, and then bring them into the land promised to them.

The Spirit which had guided Moses and was then gifted to chosen elders (Num 11:16–25) was subsequently imparted to Joshua (Num 27:18; Deut 34:9) and then to a string of Judges: Othniel (Judg 3:10), Gideon (6:34), Jephthah (11:29), and Samson (13:24–25; 14:6,19; 15:14). Each of these men led their people through dangerous, challenging, and turbulent experiences, as they sought to impose Israelite domination on the peoples already living in Canaan.

We might justifiably have a different ethical assessment of this process today—invasion, colonisation, and massacre are familiar dynamics, unfortunately, in the Australian context—but for our present purposes we can note that the Spirit was the energising force in this long and disruptive process. It was disruptive for the inhabitants of the land, as they lost homes, families, and cultural heritage. It was disruptive for the invading Israelites, as they followed the call of their leaders to enter and inhabit the land that they believed God had long promised to them.

The Spirit was also active during the period of kingship in Israel. Saul, after he was anointed as king, was possessed by the Spirit and fell into “a prophetic frenzy” (1 Sam 10:6, 10). During his reign, the Spirit continued to operate through David (1 Sam 16:13; 2 Sam 23:2) and presumably gifted Solomon with “his very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore” (1 Ki 4:29–34; and see Prov 2:6–11). Perhaps Solomon was the model for the spirit-gifted wisdom exhibited by Joseph (Gen 41:33, 38–39), when the ancestral sagas were collected and compiled into the book of Genesis?

It was the Spirit seen in the first three kings who would be seen as the agent for God to be at work in subsequent rulers (Isaiah 11:2). In addition, the prophetic frenzy manifested by Saul might well be regarded as the prototype for later prophetic activity. It signals just how powerfully the work of the Spirit can disrupt and disturb an individual.

The clearest example of this personally disruptive impact is found in the story of the priest Ezekiel, son of Buzi, who was dramatically called to be a prophet. After Ezekiel saw a striking and bizarre vision of a winged chariot, bearing four winged figures (Ezek 1:4–28), he fell on his face; but the Spirit grabbed hold of Ezekiel, entering into him and raising him up onto his feet (Ezek 2:2). Ezekiel has the same visceral experience many more times (Ezek 3:12, 14, 24; 8:3; 11:1, 24; 37:1; 43:5). The work of the Spirit was anything but calm and measured for Ezekiel.

In his prophecies, Ezekiel notes that the Lord God promised to mete out the same dramatic treatment to the Israelites during their exile (Ezek 11:19; 36:26–27; 37:14). Being seized by the Spirit would reorient the hearts and refashion the lives of the exiles, as they look to a return to the land. That is thoroughly disruptive!

Other prophets also look to the activity of the Spirit to be both disruptive and also transformative. The Spirit would inspire prophecies amidst dramatic portents (Joel 2:28–42); the Spirit would declare the way of justice in the midst of the injustices perpetrated by the people, which presages ruin for the land (Micah 3:8–12); and the Spirit would equip leadership during the return to the land, ahead of the tumult of God “shaking the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land” (Haggai 1:14–2:9).

The book of Isaiah contains various exilic oracles which point to the Spirit as the agent of declaring justice to the people (Isa 42:1–9; 61:1–11) and wreaking revenge on the enemies of Israel (Isa 48:14–16). Once again, the disruptive dimension of the Spirit's work is evident.

In later texts in Hebrew Scripture, there are indications that the spirit inhabits human beings simply through the fact that they exist as the creations of God (Job 27:3; 32:18; 33:4; Zech 12:1). Indeed, all of creation came into being through the spirit of God (Ps 104:30). The act of creation itself was a fracturing of an existing state, a breaking-open of what was for it to become something other than what it had been. Creative activity is disruptive activity.

So the last thing to note about the Spirit in Hebrew Scripture is the first thing that is said about it in the opening chapter of Genesis—the post-exilic priestly document which recounts the foundational creation myth of the Israelite peoples. As the story of creation is placed at the very beginning of the first scroll in the Hebrew Scriptures (Gen 1:1–2:4a), it is explicitly noted that it was by the spirit of God that the creation came into being (Gen 1:1–3).

That creative act began with complete chaos, and shaped and formed the “formless void and darkness” of the very beginning, to become an ordered, cohesive, complex system of inter-relating parts. The status quo of formless nothingness was disrupted, as the wondrously beautiful creation was shaped by “a wind from God [which] swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2). Interpreters over the centuries have assumed that this wind was in fact the Spirit of God, active from the very beginning of God’s creative act.

The Holy Spirit was already integral to the faith of the ancient Israelites. The Holy Spirit continued to play a key role for the early Christians. The Holy Spirit remains a force to be reckoned with in our own times, today. The Spirit may well be how God is calling us to disrupt the status quo of the church today!

### **A reflection on where my faith is at**

Carolyn McAllister, Member of O'Connor Congregation

For years I have reflected on O'Connor congregation's 1994 split and my decision to remain in the Uniting Church.

In 1994, most of O'Connor's members felt called to leave the Uniting Church denomination. For me and probably anyone deciding to stay, the status quo had been well and truly disrupted.

Following the huge loss of meaningful ministry connection and belonging, I read the Basis of Union to find out if it said anything that resonated with what had been so transforming in my own life through O'Connor. The following passages gave me hope and I held on to their promise.

*"... the one Spirit has endowed the members of Christ's Church with a diversity of gifts, and there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ...."*

*"Since the Church lives by the power of the Word, it is assured that God, who has never failed to provide witness to that word, will, through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, call and set apart members of the Church to be ministers of the Word. These will preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and **exercise pastoral care so that all may be equipped for their particular ministries**, thus maintaining the apostolic witness to Christ in the Church."* (Bold type is mine)

Over the years my faith in this assurance has been challenged. For some time O'Connor congregation has been without the ministry of the Word at its centre and we are not the only ones. There is a shortage of Uniting Church ministers of the Word. In the light of the passages above, I can only assume such a shortage leads to people and ministries in congregations "falling through the cracks" – a domino effect.

My faith now rests on God's mercy in providing what once sustained, motivated and equipped me and others as promised in the Basis of Union; where there's a special love for the ministry of the Holy Spirit expressed in multiple ways.

### Using Property To Connect With The Community

From Presbytery Quick Start Property Group

*How does your church rate in using the hire of its premises to build connections with the community and missional relationships, eg:*

- Is your church building an inviting place for those using the premises or is it off-putting or threatening?*
- Do local people and hirers see it as a community facility as well as a church?*
- Does your church make efforts to cater for the needs of different sectors of the community?*
- Does your church use the hiring of its premises to facilitate contact between church members and hirers, and between different groups of hirers?*
- Does your church offer a range of activities that provide opportunities for people to be progressively involved in the life of the church? Have members of your church become involved in the activities of any of your hirers?*

- Does your church advertise and promote the opportunities for contact and involvement, eg through notices, welcomers and events such as open days with stalls displaying the activities available?
- Is the hiring out of premises actively managed or is it just left to the church administrative officer / seen as a property or revenue issue?

If you would like to comment, tell us about your church or be involved in the Presbytery Working Group for this aim from the Mission Plan please email the Presbytery Office:

[office@cruc.org.au](mailto:office@cruc.org.au)

*Using property to grow connections with our local communities through missional relationships rather than simply landlord-tenant relationships is an aim in the new Presbytery Mission Plan. Read below for some exciting examples of how this is being done.*

### **Iftar Feast at Kippax Uniting Church**

On Saturday 15 April 2023 Kippax Uniting Church hosted an Iftar dinner for more than 160 people, in collaboration with Helping ACT (a community service organisation helping homeless and vulnerable Canberrans) and the managers of the new Ginninderry suburb in West Belconnen. The Iftar, or breaking of the fast, is one of the most significant points in the day during Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar. Observing Muslims will abstain from all food and water — yes, even water — from the crack of dawn all the way until sunset, every day of this month. Iftar is the main meal of the fasting day, which occurs at sunset every day of Ramadan.

This was the second of two Iftar meals hosted by Kippax Uniting, the other was held in Ginninderry 2 weeks earlier.



“This is a historic moment for Canberra,” declared Mohammed Ali, founder of Helping ACT and leader in the Muslim community here in Canberra. Historic because to his knowledge this was the first time an Iftar was held in a church.

It was a joyous occasion and a wonderful example of shared hospitality and respect across the faiths. Our Presbytery was well represented by Co-Chair Janet and Presbytery Minister



Liz as well as people from a number of congregations in Canberra. Also present were a leader of the Hindu community, the Deputy High Commissioner for Pakistan and ACT Deputy Chief Minister, Yvette Berry.

Subsequent comment by a local community member who was at the Iftar and who has some Christian background from earlier in life: "I was thinking as I looked through [photos from the Iftar], that this reminded me of what the bible says Jesus said, to wash one another's feet. I always wondered what that was supposed to look like in practice, and I think it looks like the Iftar at Kippax Uniting."

### **The Sai Organisation and Woden Valley Uniting Church**

For the past two years the local branch of the Sai Organisation in Australia has met for Sunday afternoon prayers in the rooms of Woden Valley Uniting Church (WVUC) in Curtin. Sai is a spiritual organisation with a firm faith in all religions promoting selfless service to the humanity. Other than promoting spiritual growth, Sai also conducts Sunday classes for children with an aim to teach them basic human values at a very young age. It has centres all over the world, in around 170 countries. Its guru or teacher is Sri Sathya Sai Baba (1926 – 2011). The followers of Sri Sathya Sai Baba are predominantly Hindus, but the organisation teaches respect for other faiths and celebrates some of their religious festivals, including Christmas.

It was in that connection that the local Sai group invited members of WVUC to join the celebration of Christmas at their Sunday afternoon prayers, first in 2021 and then, again, this past Christmas. As well as joining in with the singing of carols (to an accompaniment provided by sitar and tabla) on each occasion church members shared with the group their understanding of the meaning of Christmas. Last year the church invited the President of the local Sai branch to its Lessons and Carols service where he spoke about the Sai Organisation and why and how they celebrate Christmas. The words of Heather Price's carol, Australian Light, which was sung immediately after the President's talk, captured the feeling of the service:

*Home to many different faiths,*

*Take another's hand,*

*A sacred thread to link us all,*

*Our ancient, wide brown land.*

The Sai group has invited people from the church to other events as well – to its end of year celebrations and, this Easter, to Sunday afternoon prayers to talk about the meaning of the resurrection.

WVUC's experience of the past couple of years has shown it that while the beginnings of a relationship might be the need and availability of rented space, there is potential for this relationship to be much richer than normally applies in the case of landlord and tenant. With Sai and WVUC it is an inter-faith relationship from which both parties can learn and benefit. For the Uniting Church, founded as it is around the idea of ecumenism, this should come naturally.

## Wesley Forrest

John Sutton

Wesley Forrest has an array of buildings and rooms. All rooms receive considerable use over each week. This use involves both commercial hire and Church-related activities. A number of the Church activities are also attended by people who are not members of the Wesley Congregation.

**Forrest Men's Shed** meets weekly. Nearly half the members are from outside Wesley, although some attend other churches. It has received funds from Uniting Care and the ACT Government. There is a small workshop with a range of woodwork power tools. Members have built toys for sale at the church fair, made items in response to requests from community groups, and built and repaired items for themselves. There is larger attendance at weekly gatherings for morning tea, fellowship/mateship, general discussion and guest speakers/travelogues/outings.

The **Thursday Friendship Group** is for retired people. Perhaps a third are not members of the church. Ages range from 60 up to 99. It meets weekly with a programme of morning tea, devotions, speaker/entertainment/activity, lunch. For some it is an alternative to going to church – the seats are more comfortable. For some it is the high point of their week – it gives them something to look forward to. Some have to be encouraged to leave at the end of each session.

Wesley has two tennis courts and the **Wesley Tennis Club** plays weekly and sometimes twice a week. Again, some of the players are not members of the church.

The **Wesley Music Centre** exists in conjunction with the Church but is operated separately. There are strong connections in personnel and the use of facilities. Weekly recitals are held as well as regular performances, with audiences attending from across the ACT for differing instrumental and vocal musical presentations.

## Faith and climate change

Robbie Tulip, Presbytery Secretary

The questions raised by the NSW and ACT Synod of the Uniting Church about how God is calling us to disrupt the status quo and discard entrenched ways of thinking are directly relevant to climate change. One way to think about these questions is to imagine what God would want for the world. My view is that God loves complexity, and is calling us to do what we can to ensure our complex global system continues to flourish in a state of grace.

A complex system is a highly interconnected and diverse physical structure that is stable and durable. Examples include natural ecosystems, human societies and the global climate. The beauty of flourishing old systems is that they continually grow more complex, evolving to adapt to their situation, becoming ever more intricate and robust, as long as they have no external shock or internal destructive force. The intricacy of old complex systems is something we should see as sacred, blessed by God. This is one reason why Indigenous Australian culture has such profound spiritual depth and dignity, grounded in tens of thousands of years of adapting to the physical circumstances of life on our continent.

The root of human complexity is language, enabling us to describe reality and adapt to our needs. Language is central to why the Bible tells us that we are made in the image of God, with distinctive responsibilities to steward and sustain the natural creation.

Theologically, complex adaptive systems exist in a state of grace, sustained by the enduring love of God, in harmony with the almighty eternal divine power that rules the universe. Natural systems continually optimise their conditions. Existence in a state of grace is a free gift of God and a condition of right relationship, as Saint Paul explains in Ephesians 2.

As far as we can tell, our global civilization with its extraordinary technology is the most complex system that has ever existed. The evolution of life on Earth over the last four billion years has seen successive increases in complex equilibrium, punctuated by planetary catastrophes when each complex system has 'fallen from grace'. A state of grace is always fragile and sensitive, liable to fall apart. Scientists describe our current world situation as the sixth extinction, with human activity destabilising earth systems in ways that are bringing about collapse.

The problem the Bible describes is that our human system has fallen from grace, as worldly corruption imagines that humanity has no need for connection to God. The observation that our world system is no longer in a state of grace means it has features that will bring about collapse unless we hear the call from God to disrupt the status quo and discard entrenched ways of thinking. As indicators, the Biblical image of the four horsemen of the apocalypse – death, war, famine and plague – are on the march around the world.

Our planet can be compared to a person, made up of intricate complex connected systems that are highly sensitive and fragile. When a person has a fever above one degree they usually have to rest to fight off the infection. Our planet is now more than one degree hotter than any time in the last million years, and is on track toward an emergency-level fever above four degrees. Direct treatment is needed to cool things down.

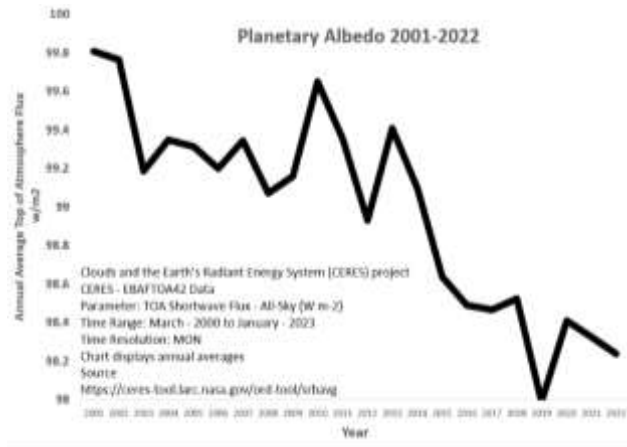
The dominant status quo assumptions wrongly assume either that business as usual is sustainable, or that cutting emissions could be enough. Emerging scientific knowledge shows a deeper transformation of the human presence on our planet is needed. Defining the transformation of spirit needed to challenge unsustainable assumptions should be a central concern for Christian theology, integrated with scientific understanding.

The transformation needed to step back from the climate precipice of chaotic system change is that we must learn to think globally. Our planet is approaching a series of cascading tipping points, likely to disrupt stable climate systems in dramatic ways. However, cutting emissions as a main response is too small, slow, costly and contested to stop these looming changes. We need new global thinking to cool the planet.

A key theme for global cooling is planetary albedo, the measure of how much sunlight the Earth reflects back to space. A brighter planet would be more reflective, smarter and happier, with prospect of sustaining our complex human systems., as we seek to identify and promote everything that is good. The key idea is that warming effects of climate change can be offset with equal and opposite cooling measures, with far greater and quicker effect on temperature than cutting emissions. Albedo is a significant factor in global warming due to the growth of darker surfaces that retain more heat. The loss of albedo increases the imbalance known as radiative forcing. Due to human influence, the excess of incoming sunlight over outgoing radiation is heating up the planet.

The world is darkening due to the loss of snow and ice, increased soot pollution and decreased ocean cloud cover. Satellite data shown in this chart reveals our planet has darkened by nearly 2% this century. This physical darkening trend sits alongside the metaphorical darkening from war, ignorance and autocracy.

New technologies to enhance albedo include a range of possible ways to improve atmospheric chemistry and remove heat from earth systems, aiming to mitigate climate impacts such as sea level rise, biodiversity loss and extreme weather. Much discussion is now occurring about how such methods could be well-governed to ensure they are safe and equitable. A brighter world could avoid climate tipping points, while promoting international cooperation and peace.



While there is no question that the world has to transition away from fossil fuels, part of the entrenched thinking that needs to be discarded is the view that cutting emissions by itself could be enough to stabilise the climate. As we learn to think globally, we must recognise that sustaining our global civilization will require new technologies to regulate the atmosphere. This is a paradigm shift in the relationship between humanity and our planet.

The IPCC is largely opposed to action to increase albedo, due to the popular view that brightening the planet would undermine efforts toward decarbonisation. This entrenched view must change, as it ignores the security risk that tipping points such as ice melt could cause sudden cascading warming feedbacks in the Earth system. The practical impact of neglecting albedo is highly risky, allowing ongoing warming while emissions continue. Action to cut CO<sub>2</sub> will take decades, whereas brightening the planet could have rapid cooling effects. A cooperative international agreement to refreeze the Arctic would have major benefits for political and climate stability.

Using technology to increase albedo appears to be the only feasible way to mitigate global warming in the short term. Unlike the current goal of Net Zero Emissions, a plan to achieve Net Zero Heating by enhancing albedo could stabilise the planetary climate system quickly and cheaply, by balancing the warming effects with equal and opposite cooling.

Christian faith can have a highly constructive role in these global debates by emphasising the centrality of justice, love, mercy, peace and truth as essential political principles. Churches can support the interests of the poor in the implementation of planetary cooling technology, helping to create the trust and cooperation needed for such a change. We are now in a time of crisis, what the Bible calls a Kairos moment, where God is working out transformative plans for our planet. God is creating the opportunity that we may learn to treat the least of the world as we would treat Jesus Christ. The prophet Isaiah spoke of a time of crisis in which God will shake the foundations of the earth, but also promised that this will be a time of opportunity for people of faith. The New Heaven and New Earth foretold in the Bible can only rest upon completely scientific foundations. As we learn to think globally about our climate, we can follow the teaching of Christ that new wine needs new wineskins, seeing the need to transform our spirit with new creative global thinking.