

A Pastoral Letter from the Moderator

29 September 2021

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

I have been reflecting on who we are as a people of God as we prepare for the resumption of public worship and service activities, and the reopening of church buildings. Along with the practical guidance you will receive from the Synod Office, I hope the following reflections might also be helpful in your planning for what lies ahead.

Firstly, as government restrictions gradually ease and we look forward to the prospect of being together again for conversations, meals, prayer, and worship, we are filled with hope. Yet alongside that joyful anticipation, we remember at the same time the immense sadness brought upon so many people and families by this pandemic. The loss of life around us and across the world has been heartbreaking. There is also the loss of work, livelihoods, opportunities, and dreams. The toll on the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of countless millions of people cannot be calculated. Very few have been untouched by some form of anguish.

The Hebrew word *shalom* is often translated as peace, yet the meaning of *shalom* embraces wholeness, health, and wellbeing. *Shalom* is also a covenantal word, linking us both to God and to each other. The deeper meaning here is found in relationship, and in actions we take to embody God's *shalom*. I ask you to pray with me each day, and especially when you gather again for public worship, that God will comfort and strengthen all who grieve. We lament the profound loss around us, among us, and within us. We long for, so let us also act for, the restoration of God's *shalom* within and among all people.

Secondly, as you make decisions in your settings about when and how to gather, please hold the following thoughts in mind. Discuss them, pray about them with each other, and then step out with faith that God will lead and guide you:

- We are called to be a people who embrace rather than exclude. Jesus reached out to and included among his disciples the rejected and the forgotten. He called those whom others had marginalized. Christ's example to his first followers was embraced by the earliest Christian communities, who were identified by their openness (Galatians 3:28). Who is my neighbour? (Luke 10:29). The church is called to answer that question anew every day, doing so in ways that seek to demonstrate the teaching of the Lord that 'the kingdom of God is among you' (Luke 17:20-21). Our neighbour is the one others walk past. Even during a pandemic, the Church is called to be a people who embrace rather than exclude.
- We are called to be a people who create community around the risen Christ. This call includes the need to provide a safe place for people to gather. All are welcome in the church that bears Christ's name. However, there may be times when it is not safe for us all to be in one place, or when the imperative of shielding the vulnerable will mean we gather with measures of protection.



All are welcome, yes, yet all should be safe. And so, we are called to offer forms of worship, hospitality, and pastoral care, within our walls and beyond them, that recognise this reality. New forms of Christian community have often developed from necessity, in times of upheaval, and those new forms have often become a way of being the people of God for the future. As we look ahead now, may we embrace the opportunity to be creative in how we form community, worship, and offer hospitality. It has been inspiring to see this creativity in action in so many places over the last two years.

- We are called to be a people of hope within a world of fear. We do this, among other ways, through personal and corporate discipleship that embodies the two points I have highlighted above. When we are a people identified by the desire to embrace all who wish to be included, a people who seek to make a place for everyone even if that means communities formed differently to ensure everyone is safe, we become a witness to the love of God in a world of fear (1 John 4:18). We become a sign of the hope that is in us, namely, that Christ is risen and the fullness of life he has promised is the reality in which we live, move, and have our being (John 10:10).

When people are confronted by so much division, as well as fearmongering, let's commit ourselves again to be a people among whom the light of God's love, and the hope we have in Jesus Christ, shine brightly through the darkness (John 1:5). This will be critical in the days ahead, as the consequences of opening up will not all be promising, as more people become infected and those who are not vaccinated, many through lack of proper access, will continue to have constraints on their lives.

Finally, please remember and be strengthened by the knowledge that we are not alone. This is not the first period of history during which Christians have been called to find ways to witness to the love of God in a time of widespread disease. The Antonine Plague caused the death of around 10% of the population of the Roman Empire during the 2nd century. As the wealthy retreated to their estates, Christians were known to have stayed in towns and cities to care for the sick because they believed all people were made in the image of God. The Black Death pandemic tested the Christian communities of Europe in the mid-15th century. During the 16th century, there were times when Martin Luther and John Calvin were known to have fostered worship and Bible study at home because smaller gatherings mitigated against the spread of plague; Calvin lived and ministered through five such outbreaks. And so we have a cloud of witnesses who know this road. We are joined to that communion of saints, and we have their example to inspire us.

Above all of course, we are not alone for God is with us. May I make that statement of faith very particular here: you are not alone, and your church community is not alone, for God is with you. We are a people to whom God in Jesus Christ has promised 'I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:16).

Please continue to pray, most especially for those who are working across our community at particular risk and for those who feel marginalised, for whatever reason, during this pandemic.



Uniting Church
SYNOD OF NSW & ACT

Draw on the resources you are receiving from the wider church, and please call on the Synod Office whenever we can be of help. And remember to pray, for God will not fail or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6). May I offer you this brief prayer and invite you to share in it with me during the coming days.

Yours in Christ,
Shalom,

Rev. Simon Hansford
Moderator
Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of NSW & ACT

*Holy God,
we are never alone
because once there was One who truly was alone,
Jesus Christ,
through whom you endured isolation and lost hopes,
and in whom you overcame an even greater darkness,
so that we may be assured that you are with us, always,
in the never-failing presence of your Holy Spirit,
through whom we name Jesus, alone and from the rooftops,
as our Lord and Saviour.
Amen.*

I note the many helpful contributions to this conversation from our Church and other churches, particularly the papers from Rev. Dr Rob McFarlane and Rev. Dr John Squires. I am thankful for the significant contributions for this Pastoral Letter, from Rev. Dr Peter Walker, Rev. Dr Ockert Meyer, Rev. Myung Hwa Park, Rev. Graham Perry and Rev. Dr Matagi Vilitama.