

# Walking Together in Covenant Committee, Lutruwita/Tasmania

*A reflection by Tim Molineux, Social Justice Officer, eLm*

I can now say that I have a much-needed deeper appreciation for Alison and the Tasmanian Congress in lutruwita. An understanding for the work that has happened, is happening, and is hoped to happen in the future. It is time the church also made adequate acknowledgement, and reflect this recognition through love and practical support for the very real contribution that the Tassie Congress has to the community it serves, and for the gift that is the Tasmanian Congress' presence in the life of the Uniting Church. The Uniting Church cannot afford to take the Tasmanian Congress, its leaders and recognised emerging leaders, for granted. And, until this trip, perhaps that is exactly what I had been doing myself without realising it. We, as communities of faith across Victoria and Tasmania, have a culture that needs to change, not only in the way we see Congress, but the way in which Congress is understood. To understanding something, rather than just seeing it, is a much higher threshold that we need to hold ourselves accountable to.

The sheer diversity of ways that communities can worship is beautiful, and the Walking Together in Covenanting Committee (WTiCC) trip to Tasmania/lutruwita has reminded me how to find Christ when communities gather, especially within the relationships that tie community and people together. In my time working for the church across Australia, the story of Tasmania Congress is a familiar story I've seen in Congresses elsewhere; perseverance, resilience, and speaking truth to power, often in spite of us rather than because of us, and we are all better for it. The renewing Spirit that allows the mission and ministry of Congress to generationally adapt, and change according to the needs of the community is alive and well. For Congress, the community is the Church lived out in full. For me, Congress continues to be my best teacher of what ministry truly means to an Australian Christian, in his mid-30's, who just so happens to be a member of the Uniting Church in Australia (for now). If we truly are a pilgrim people, called to the margins to be with the reconciling Christ, then who does this better than Congress itself? In my view, Congress is more Uniting Church than the Uniting Church itself in living out the hope-filled call found within the Basis of Union.

While I sat on the floor at Leprena listening to the Uncles sing before we had lunch together, I was reminded once again of the importance of healing in the ministry of Congress when communities gather. I've missed it more than I realised, but I haven't been able to participate in a worshipping Congress community again since I arrived in Victoria in 2019, and I've been lesser for it. These moments have been too infrequent, and perhaps because of that, all the more sacred to me when they occur. In the songs I heard I felt pain and sorrow, but also the hope and joy in being able to share the rawness of unfinished and sorry business amongst family, community and welcomed strangers. Experiencing that again forced me to reflect on why I attend church myself; is it to worship or to heal? While I won't be going out of my way to reflect my own pain and personal need for healing here, I concluded that worship and healing are indistinguishable within my own relationship with God. And, through that realisation, I've decided that from now on, the Walking Together that we talk about within the Covenanting relationship between First and Second People's must also mean Healing Together. This too, on further reflection, I have encountered before in the giving of the Covenanting Statements by Jill Tabart and Uncle Bill Hollingsworth, and also in the revised preamble to the Uniting Church Constitution. These foundational creeds within the life of the church came from a place of hurt between, and within First and Second people communities, and these covenanting milestones breathed new life into living out the gospel through the healing of wounds we, ourselves, inflicted on one another. We have walked this path before, and after the 2023 referendum, in 2024 it's time to take pilgrimage down that same path again to remind ourselves of what we are here to do as a uniquely Australian Church on the lands we now call Victoria and Tasmania.

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I was also privileged to spend time with Uncle Will and Aunty Carley Pickett as we drove in and around Hobart together. From our conversations, I was able to reflect privately on my own connection to Covenanting over my decade working for 2 Synods, and with 3 State Congresses, National Congress, and Assembly. Truthfully, I can say that I wouldn't even be a member of the Uniting Church but for the impact that Congress had, and continues to have, on the Uniting Church through its holistic ministry in pursuit of truth, living faith, and justice, both inside and outside of the Church. Within my own personal discipleship and ministry, Covenanting is the litmus test for my sense of belonging to this non-denominational denomination we call the Uniting Church, and I have found that sense of belonging tested more than once since moving to Victoria and this Synod, but gratefully, if partially, renewed through this gathering of the WTICC in lutruwita.

But now, as a Synod, we are at a turning point. The re-constituting of the Victorian Congress Regional Council in June 2024 allowed for the Victorian and Tasmanian Congresses to finally come together through this gathering, and that gave me a true sense that a time of good and right change is upon us. But I was disappointed to have not seen more Presbyteries represented at the gathering. There are good people with a heart for Covenanting in our congregations across this Synod, I know because I have met them. If you are one of them, then I sincerely encourage you to listen to your heart and join the WTICC to witness and participate in the revival of the Congresses, and breathe life into the Covenant with us as one community under God.

I see real potential for the WTICC that is yet to be realized since its formation at the end of 2021, and the commitment of the Moderator along this journey is good and important to see, especially while we are still in view of the Synod's recent engagement with the Yoorrook Truth-Telling Commission in Victoria during May of this year. While I myself opt for a conciliation over reconciliation framing within First and Second people relationships, as a church, as Christians, and as Australian Second Peoples, we still need to reconcile ourselves with our own truths of unfishiness business, and the part we are to play within our fractured society. I see a meaningful role for the WTICC within this, and also within the life of the Synod to not only grow the Covenanting literacy of its members, but also to support the work of the two Congresses we are blessed to be in fellowship with.

Under the leadership of Uncle Rev. Will Pickett and Aunty Alison Overeem, along with the family and communities that support them, I hope to be a witness and participant to this spirit-led revival in the lives of the two Congresses. However, and it's the same with a large part of Australia, I fear this movement of the spirit has not been embraced by the church at a time when it is needed most. I have found the same movement of the Spirit within the prophetic call to action while reading the Uluru Statement from the Heart. What a shame it would be if the dream of a vibrant and sustainable Congress ministry was not achieved because we failed to see what was right in front of us all along; a call to be the people of God, and to confess it at the margins, all the while being offered an open invitation for fellowship with an outstretched hand for peace.

