



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

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Pastoral Letter re: Release of the Synod's Submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission

Dear friends in Christ,

In March this year, the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania was formally approached by the Yoorrook Justice Commission. The Yoorrook Justice Commission is a Victorian Royal Commission, established in May 2021, following agreement between the State of Victoria and the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria. Yoorrook is Australia's first formal truth-telling commission, tasked with inquiring into and reporting on historical and ongoing systemic injustices perpetrated by State and non-State entities against First Peoples within the State of Victoria since the start of colonisation.

The Synod was approached in relation to the Commission's inquiry into Land Injustice. In preparation for the appearance before the Commission, we were asked to respond to a number of specific questions. These included questions about the involvement of our predecessor churches¹ in Missions, Reserves and Institutions in Victoria; acknowledgement of land granted to those churches prior to 1871 for little or no financial consideration; programs and land transfers by the Uniting Church in support of Victorian First Peoples; the total landholdings with respect to Congregations and related sites; acknowledgments made by the Uniting Church with respect to systemic racism; and actions taken in support of justice, truth, treaty and reconciliation.

The Submission that we provided in response, on 4 April 2024, is substantial. On 8 August 2024 we received permission from the Commission to publish that Submission. In due course, at the discretion of the Commission, it may also be published on the Yoorrook website. That Submission can now be found [HERE](#), and a supplementary annexure that we provided to the Commission, dated 9 April 2024, can be found [HERE](#). I commend the Submission to you for your reading and reflection. I want to express my great appreciation to everyone in Synod Ministries and Operations who put in an enormous amount of effort to bring together this whole Submission in a very short time frame.

As reported through Synod eNews and in Crosslight earlier this year, on 1 May 2024 I appeared before the Commission on behalf of the Synod, in a panel along with representatives of the Anglican and Catholic Churches. The hearing can be viewed on the Yoorrook website [HERE](#).

In my opening remarks to the Commission, I acknowledged that the Uniting Church is a beneficiary of the dispossession of land from First Peoples. I spoke of the Uniting Church's Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. As is recognised in the Preamble to the Uniting Church in Australia Constitution, I acknowledged that many in the churches that were predecessors to the Uniting Church shared the values of the emerging colonial society, including paternalism and racism

¹ At the time of colonisation, there were approximately a dozen churches in the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational traditions which subsequently went through a series of unions. Details can be found in Appendix A of the Submission.

towards First Peoples, and were complicit in the injustice that resulted in dispossession of land, language, culture and spirituality. My full opening statement can be found [HERE](#).

During the hearing, some criticism was made regarding the Uniting Church's request for the Commission to consider whether certain figures, including the estimated value of all congregation-related land, not be made public. The Synod had anticipated a decision on that request being made prior to the hearing, but this did not eventuate. The Commission has since resolved that only aggregate figures may be released, and accepted accompanying statements that we provided to ensure that the figures are not misunderstood. An example of this can be viewed in the "reader's note" to the supplementary response linked above.

As far back as 1987, the (then) Synod of Victoria made resolutions supporting the design of "a treaty which recognises prior Aboriginal ownership of Australian land, and which will begin to address the continued dispossession and needs of Australian Aboriginal people"; and in 2019 this Synod resolved to support the 2017 *Statement from the Heart* as the preferred pathway towards reconciliation. With these commitments, I am glad that the Synod has had the opportunity to engage with the Yoorrook Justice Commission as a step in the work towards a more just future for First Peoples.

The Uniting Church has a Covenant Relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), the 30th anniversary of which was celebrated during the Assembly meeting in July 2024. Since the Yoorrook hearings, we have also celebrated the re-establishment of the Victorian Regional Council of the UAICC, now chaired by Rev Will Pickett; and the Synod's Walking Together in Covenant Committee has appreciated the hospitality of the Tasmanian UAICC Regional Committee when we met at Leprena and at the church of Fanny Cochrane Smith. To learn more about the Covenant, please check out the resources at uniting.church/covenanting.

I continue to be inspired and guided by the Synod's vision of *Following Christ, walking together as First and Second Peoples, seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation*, and I thank God for, and pray for, the many ways that this is being lived out in communities of faith across these lands.

Grace and peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "David Fotheringham". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Rev David Fotheringham
Moderator