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Opening Statement of Reverend David Fotheringham, Moderator of the Uniting Church in Australia – Synod of Victoria & Tasmania

I begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, on whose land we are gathered; I pay respect to their elders past and present; and I offer my respects to all First Peoples present in this room and online. I acknowledge that this land has not been ceded by First Peoples and that First Peoples' sovereignty continues, as eloquently described in the Statement from the Heart.

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this commission on behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. The Uniting Church supports the objectives of Yoorrook and the process of truth telling, record making, developing understanding, and making recommendations for healing and practical changes. This is certainly an historic moment for Victoria, and I trust and hope that this will be a significant step towards the development of Treaty.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that it is a beneficiary of the dispossession of land from First Peoples, and that historical Crown grants of land were made with no consideration of First People's sovereignty, connection to the land, or rights. We also acknowledge that churches which came to form the Uniting Church were involved in missions in ways that harmed or rejected First People's culture, language, spiritual wisdom, and connection with Country.

As part of our journey in truth-telling and understanding, we accepted an invitation into a Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress in 1994. With their leadership, in 2009 the Uniting Church in Australia adopted a revised Preamble to our Constitution. The Preamble expressly acknowledges that many in the churches which formed the Uniting Church shared the values of the emerging colonial society, including paternalism and racism towards First Peoples, and were complicit in the injustice that resulted in dispossession of land, language, culture and spirituality.

The change to the Preamble also reflects our commitment to praying and working for reconciliation, together with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Today, the Vision of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania is "Following Christ, walking together as First and Second Peoples, seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation". Accordingly, we look forward to Yoorrook's findings and recommendations and are committed to working cooperatively towards a more just future for First Peoples.

