



Reflections by Uniting Church Leaders

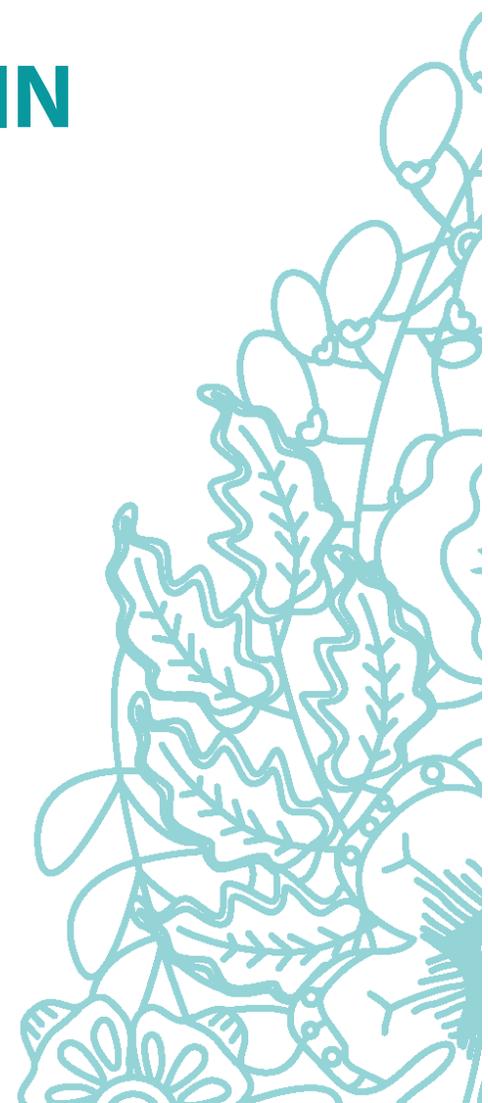
WHAT WE ARE LEARNING IN RESPONSE TO COVID19

July 2020

Dr Deidre Palmer,
Rev David Baker, Mr Bronte Wilson,
Rev Denise Liersch, Rev Simon Hansford,
Rev Steve Francis, Rev Thresi Mauboy.



**Uniting Church
in Australia**





INTRODUCTION

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

Around the country, we have been affected by COVID19 in different ways. Some of us are living in a place, where we have borders closed, and numbers of COVID19 cases are rising.

Some of us are living in places, where we are planning to return to face to face worship, or we have already begun worshipping this way. Some are looking to continue an online and face to face presence.

We join together to pray for one another, to consider what we can do to support Australians who are grieving, who are vulnerable and at risk, and to raise our voice to address injustices and inequities here and internationally.

During this time of responding to the global pandemic, the Moderators and I have shared in three collaborative projects:

- Prayers for this Season
- “What Sustains Us” in faith at this time
- And this collection of short reflections on our learnings as a Church, our hopes and challenges, and where we experience the Holy Spirit at work, as we witness to the Gospel of Christ.

In this collaborative project we asked ourselves as leaders the following questions:

- **What do you see us learning as a Church from this period of response to COVID19?**
- **What signs do you see of the Spirit at work?**
- **What challenges and hopes for the future do you see emerging?**

We hope these reflections might offer some insights to our Church as we move into the future, and you will share what you are learning, hoping for and finding challenging at this time.

While we don't know exactly how the future will unfold, we have the assurance that as the community of Christ, we go forward together in faith, that the steadfast love of God upholds us and the Holy Spirit will equip us with gifts and graces to respond to God's call to mission.

We pray that these reflections may invite us to see the signs of the Holy Spirit at work, liberating hope in us, and the world around us.

Yours in Christ,

Dr Deidre Palmer

**President
Uniting Church
in Australia Assembly**

DR DEIDRE PALMER, ASSEMBLY PRESIDENT

Some of our learnings in this time

Our best laid plans can be dramatically disrupted in the space of a few hours, days or weeks.

In times of crisis, we draw deeply from our relationship with God, our spiritual practices, and those things which bring meaning to our lives.

We have been reminded again of how much we need each other, and the need for generosity and kindness forming and transforming our world.

As I have listened to the stories of Uniting Church members responding to this pandemic crisis, I see even more incisively than before, that as communities of faith, we are creative, adaptable and flexible.

We are able to respond quickly to resource areas of our life that we see as important - our worship, pastoral care, prayer and personal spiritual practices, caring for our neighbours, and advocating for justice. We are developing new rhythms for sustaining faith, life and wellbeing.

As I have reflected on our calling as the Uniting Church, participated in worship online, and been part of conversations with leaders in Government, churches, local communities and with our global partners, I have been struck again by how timeless the Gospel of Christ is with narratives that bring hope and prophetic challenge to our present context.

We may be familiar with these narratives, but their familiarity doesn't diminish their power to continually transform our lives, the life of our Church and society:

- God in Christ reveals to us a God who loves us unconditionally and calls us to love God, our neighbours and ourselves.
- Christ's life and ministry, death and resurrection, bring a narrative of love triumphing over hate, and a reversal of powerful world orders toward justice for those who have been silenced, marginalised and oppressed, in the light of the reign of God.
- New life breaks through in the midst of suffering and death. Hope emerges in situations and lives where despair could have swallowed us up.
- A narrative of welcome, inclusion, and hospitality to strangers. A narrative that refuses to create 'them and us', but rather embraces God's vision of a reconciled community and renewed creation.
- In Christ, the barriers that divide us across race, gender, class, religion are overcome, and we are called to love our neighbours and live in peace with one another.

Signs of the Holy Spirit at work

The Holy Spirit, Giver of life, and creative, loving presence of Christ in our world is active in the world.

We see the activity of the Holy Spirit in every impetus for peace over violence, acts of kindness and love, and in people generously giving and advocating for the wellbeing and flourishing of all people. The Spirit is at work as health workers, teachers, government leaders, community workers and





neighbours offer their gifts, focused on service to the community and the protection and safety of our most vulnerable members.

Challenges and hopes for the future that are emerging

Many communities have found that people have connected in to worship and discussion groups online, who would be reluctant to come in to a church building to participate.

We are in conversation across the Uniting Church, ecumenically and globally about how we can build on this opportunity to include those who have connected with us online in ways that deepen this connection. We are looking at ways of resourcing our various online ministries, alongside our face to face ministry.

The Assembly Resourcing Unit have worked together with UnitingCare Australia and other Uniting Church leaders to identify challenges and key advocacy issues that we face now, and into the future.

The Assembly document, *"#BuildBackBetter – A Just Recovery Post-COVID19"* is a resource for our thoughtful engagement and action on these issues.

Many Congregations, Presbyteries and Synods have adapted well to ensure that pastoral networks are strengthened during this time of isolation.

We are particularly focused on issues of mental health, impacts of the loss of social connection and the effects

of the uncertainty of life. We are also concerned about the increase in domestic and family violence at this time, and the need for emergency relief, accommodation and ongoing support.

We are deeply concerned for communities and countries severely impacted by the pandemic – with loss of life, income and social connection.

We are aware that this pandemic has highlighted and intensified the inequalities across the world and within our country.

We have been involved in advocacy through Uniting World, our relief and development agency, and we are working with our partner churches to address the impacts of the global pandemic.

We are also conscious that there are still communities in Australia recovering from the impacts of bushfire, flood and drought, who need pastoral and practical support in recovery and rebuilding.

They are suffering further, with losses associated with the impacts of COVID19. Our disaster recovery chaplains and local churches are working to support these communities.

As the Church, we continue to abide in Christ's love, and discern carefully, where the Holy Spirit is guiding us personally and communally.

In this time of disaster, great loss, and an exacerbation of the inequities of our world, God calls

us to embody Christ's compassion and love, and to live God's vision of justice and flourishing for all people and the whole creation.

REV DAVID BAKER, MODERATOR, SYNOD OF QUEENSLAND

Niall Ferguson's book "The Square and the Tower" is a stimulating reflection on how a society is structured around formal institutions – the Towers; and informal networks – the Square.

These different forms of human community in a society inter-relate, co-habitate, and sometimes clash. I was reflecting on his insights as I journeyed with the UCA in Qld into the COVID19 crisis.

The UCA is a combination of both "tower" and "square".

We're a hierarchical entity -a tower – of formal, legal, and organisational responsibilities. The "tower" part of our life, represented in our councils, seeks to ensure that we have organisational integrity (as distinct, but not exclusive of, moral integrity), and that we are compliant with the laws of the land.

The "square" part of our life is where we collaborate together, seek and find resources, share those resources and generally live our life. More and more so, this is happening outside our formal entities.

As the COVID19 crisis played out in Qld, two major themes were occurring. Through our councils – synod, governing bodies, presbyteries, and church councils,

we were seeking to ensure that we had the relevant information and institutional support to be able to both protect our people, and sustain our ministry.

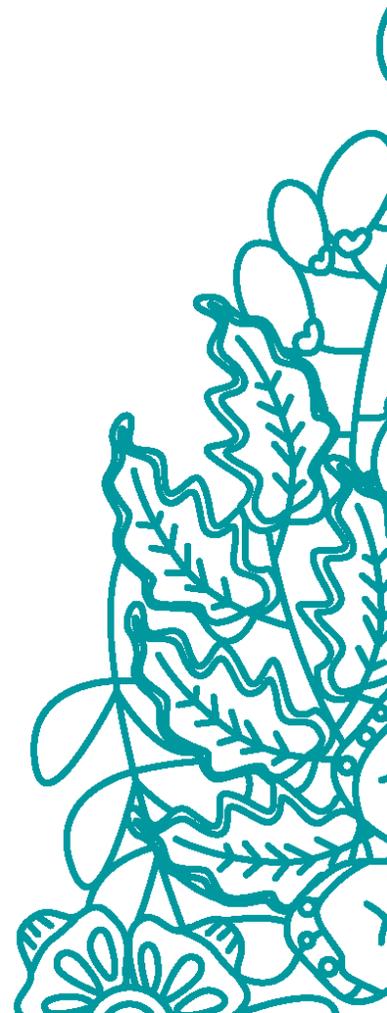
We had regular COVID19 updates by letter and online, collaborated with other organisations on industry plans, developed template resources, informed relevant bodies about all the government actions and coordinated our response to Jobkeeper, etc. it has been frenetic work, and we have seen some absolutely sterling work done by those holding office in all our councils. The "tower" went into over-drive!

We have also seen remarkable innovation and flexibility; across our state, with an alacrity unseen before, congregations everywhere got on-line in various ways, shapes and forms.

There was a flourishing of creativity and collaboration. The "square" came out to play!

It was fantastic to watch and be a part of. We also saw congregations stepping up to support local community based organisations supporting people through this crisis.

We saw networks of support form to help congregations be effective in an on-line environment. And the Synod and presbyteries supported this, but couldn't drive it; it had its own life. So where was the Spirit at work? In both expressions of our life! We seem, in the West, to have fallen into a lot of false dichotomies





and exclusivities in our public discourse and in our communal understandings.

A thoughtful reading of the biblical narrative challenges those assumptions. Exodus records the capability of working in silver, gold, or stone as gifts of the spirit, for instance.

So this COVID crisis has reinforced the diverse ways in which the spirit works, and has called us out of our comfortable categories to see we all need each other to flourish, to change, and to minister. Tower and square can compliment each other.

**BRONTE WILSON, MODERATOR,
SYNOD OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

The first half of 2020 has been a challenging time, both for the church and for society as a whole.

Many communities entered the year in the grip of sustained drought while others were affected by bushfires or floods. Some areas were affected by all three!

Before we had an opportunity to recover from those disasters, we came under the effects of COVID19.

For the church, this has resulted in a rapid and significant change in the ways we minister and worship as congregations, as well as the ways we conduct pastoral care and emergency relief.

After four months of these different circumstances, some of us find our social activities beginning to resume in some form, while for others there

are still significant restrictions and uncertainty.

Many feel tired, emotionally fragile, and unsure of what might be still to come.

A significant learning from this experience is that as a church we can adapt and change when we recognise the need to do so.

As one Minister put it, in the initial stages we implemented five years' change in two weeks.

I am continually amazed at how quickly leaders and congregations are learning new skills and adapting to new processes to continue to be effective in mission and ministry.

Many congregations report increased connection with their community through responses to letterbox drops and intentional pastoral care, more people engaging with online worship and in some congregations, increased financial giving.

God has truly worked through the words and actions of congregations and individuals who have ministered to those seeking connection.

Many, both within and outside the traditional church, are reflecting in a deeper way on their faith and spirituality, with an increased openness to talk about spiritual matters and even to engage with worship.

This has been a challenging time for church leaders. The initial scramble to adapt church activities away from

physical gatherings, the need to take care of the vulnerable in our midst while looking after ourselves and our families has taken its toll.

Many feel exhausted, and are uncertain as to how the current situation can be sustainable as we look how we will do things into the future.

In South Australia, as restrictions on physical gatherings start to be eased, there are added stresses but new opportunities arising.

We have missed the sense of communal spirituality and journeying together that make us God's people in gathered worship.

As restrictions ease we hope to find new ways of being church together, rather than simply going back to what was previously.

Discerning what to hold on to, and what to let go of, will hold challenges, alongside some perhaps surprising delights.

We are constantly reminded of the diversity of the Uniting Church and its congregations as we consider our continuing journey as a pilgrim people.

We pray that we might see this as an opportunity to carefully consider our priorities, to think about what we had once taken for granted, and to be challenged on how we understand and respond to our faith, our world, our relationships, and our church.

REV DENISE LIERSCH, MODERATOR, SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

The experience of living with COVID19 is incredibly mixed across VicTas.

While large areas are gathering together with much greater freedom, others are once again isolated and disconnected.

What are we learning as a Church?

We are learning that technological skill is not necessarily required to keep us connected as communities.

While some are discovering they are far more adaptable and able to learn more new skills in high-tech forms of communication than they ever thought possible, others have found the same thing through phone, printed prayer and worship sheets and letter box drops.

Where deeper and more significant connections are being formed, it seems to be through ministers, leaders and community members working together and caring for each other, moved by a heightened awareness that human connection with God and each other lies at the heart of faith.

The ministry of eldership is seeing a deep renewal in many communities.

Changed ways of gathering and caring for each other has opened up new relationships, including with people who had never before connected to the church.





There is a discovery of the generosity of wider community members.

Where older congregational volunteers have needed to step back, people with no previous connection to the Church have been stepping in to assist in mission.

Congregations are learning they don't have to do it all alone: they can work in partnership with the wider community, serving together where there is a shared sense of need.

Many communities are finding they are not as dependent on their buildings or traditional programs as they thought, and are reconsidering the focus and shape of their ministry and mission.

With increased sharing and collaboration, some congregations are seeing the possibilities of joining with other congregations, rather than seeking to return to their previous independent existence.

Awareness of our deep spiritual need for connection and community, has heightened our awareness of the disproportionate effect on those whose connection to the wider community is already tenuous through experiences of racism, disregard, prejudice or stigma.

We see how our humanity and the integrity of our whole Church is diminished wherever we are willing to live with marginalisation of others.

The Spirit is moving us toward a deeper commitment to change how we live as a multicultural Church, and especially as a Church

committed to justice as First and Second Peoples truly walking together.

And there is tiredness, sometimes exhaustion, and uncertainty about how long we can hold out and hold through these times.

We live in the tension of knowing we are sustained by grace and not by works, yet tempted to think that, if the Church is to survive, it's up to us to make that happen.

The constant surprise is finding it is God who is at work making that happen – often in the most unexpected ways.

As we learn how fragile we are as humans, how tenuous our hold on our mental and spiritual wellbeing, and how easily our plans and sense of security can be turned upside down, the Spirit is moving us to know how much we are upheld and sustained by each other in faith, how much prayer is the core of our life together as individuals and as communities of faith, and how little it sometimes takes to bring sustaining life to others.

The Spirit is moving us to know we are a family in faith, holding together and upholding each other in love, leaving no one behind.

In our ministry, mission and learning, the Spirit is drawing us into more collaboration and sharing as leaders, ministers, worshipping communities, and councils of the Church, upholding each other, praying with and for each other.

I pray that the Spirit of grace and graciousness with each other in these times of challenge and stress, may continue to grow.

Jesus said, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. Now remain in my love."*

John 15: 5,9b

**REV SIMON HANSFORD,
MODERATOR, SYNOD OF NSW &
ACT**

Crisis? Opportunity.

There's a café on the mezzanine floor of our Synod offices where you don't meet if you want to discuss anything confidential. People and their friends from across the Synod meet there; no gathering remains secret when you order a long black from George's.

Except for this season.

Like cafés and restaurants in every CBD across the world, it has sat, almost empty, since March. I was there with friends a week ago and we talked with the owner about the financial crisis for him and his staff, echoed in small businesses in Sydney and Melbourne, and London and Paris.

It focuses the mind. Does it focus our mission?

Like many of us, I have been on Zoom and other online events ad infinitum since the pandemic began - meetings and birthdays and morning teas and worship –

and the technology thrill has faded somewhat.

When I meet with people online, we have thoughtful conversations about hospitality and discipleship, about including those without internet access or ability, about how we will face this challenge.

Why are we only asking these vital questions now?

What might the Spirit be saying to the church as the pandemic labyrinth is unveiled?

All too hastily some of us have refused the risk, holding our collective breath, or cutting and pasting our worship onto various media, waiting for the virus to extinguish itself.

Many of us, however, have asked critical questions about our worship, witness and service; realising, perhaps, that we needed to be asking them each week for the last four decades.

Still others have embraced this time as opportunity, because that is how we understand our life in Christ.

How shall we bear witness to the risen, crucified One? What will flavour our hospitality, as we invite people into our community of faith?

Neither our faith in Jesus Christ, nor our identity as disciples in the Uniting Church invites us simply to survive.

If our first consideration is ourselves, we are neglecting the first call of our





discipleship, to love our God and love our neighbour as ourselves.

The rigorous challenges of our faith have not arisen due to COVID19, they are present always. It is only now, when our patterns of church and neighbourhood are comprehensively unsettled, that many of us dare to test the assertion that God will provide.

There are wonderful stories of creative, generous worship, thoughtful discipleship and gracious hospitality as we meet the opportunity of this coronavirus season.

I give thanks to God for faithful disciples and congregations, attending to the whisper and song of the Spirit.

Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist. [Basis of Union, para.4]

This is who we are called to be.

How will I care for my friend in his café?

How will we trust ourselves to the Holy Spirit, so that our words will articulate the hope which gives us life - and offer that hope to others?

Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and

renews them as his Church. [Basis of Union, para.4]

REV STEVE FRANCIS, MODERATOR, SYNOD OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

COVID19 and the relevance of the Christian gospel

The COVID19 pandemic felt at first like a spanner in the works. Major parts of normal life seemed to grind to a halt.

At times it all felt quite surreal, something out of a dystopian movie. This ugly virus has caused catastrophic medical, economic and social reverberations around the world.

The global scale of the suffering and upheaval has caused many to ask what it all means.

Is it more proof of the randomness and meaningless of life? Does this pandemic force us to conclude that either there is no God or if there is a God, God doesn't care? These are deep questions that do not have easy answers.

For my part, I have become more convinced of the truthfulness and relevance of the Christian faith in the face of this demanding time in our history. Let me expand.

Christian faith is a communal faith. Some eastern expressions of religion give great stress on the individual and do not call for communal expressions of faith.

Similarly our secular culture stresses the importance of the individual

and tends to see community life as an optional extra. Many of us no longer know our neighbour and talk over the back fence. Christian faith however is constantly reminding us of the importance of community.

Jesus made it very clear we are to love our neighbour; that means knowing and caring for the person next door and down the street and in our neighbourhood and beyond.

During this pandemic belonging to a caring community is a must. The Christian emphasis on life together has never been more pertinent.

Alongside community, the Christian faith stresses generosity and self-sacrifice. The Christian church has faced pandemics before and put faith into action. Lyman Stone, research fellow at the Institute for Family Studies writes *“historians tell us during the terrible Antonine plague of the 2nd century, which might have killed off a quarter of the Roman Empire, Christians cared for the sick”*.

A century later the pagan Emperor Julian complained how “the Galileans” would care for even the non-Christian sick people. This habit of sacrificial care reappears again and again throughout history.

The German Reformer Martin Luther refused the call to flee and protect himself from the bubonic plague.

He stayed and ministered to the sick and dying at some personal cost, the death of his daughter Elizabeth.

Stone’s article concludes that the early Christians created the first

hospitals in Europe as hygienic places during epidemics.

In many small ways across our nation Christian communities have found creative and compassionate ways to care for a wide variety of people, especially the elderly, the lonely and those battling to put bread on the table.

Behind these gospel values of community and care stands Jesus, the Galilean, founder of our faith.

When I first heard the word “corona” I learned that the word corona is the Latin word for crown. A crown is the symbol of authority and power.

Over the past six months we have seen the enormous power of this virus over humans. We are forced to face our own vulnerability and mortality.

This does not need to lead us to despair. There is another “corona” that points the way through the darkness and suffering. This corona is the crown of Christ.

The Crucifixion stories tell us that Jesus wore a crown of thorns. It is the Christian conviction that Jesus was God’s incarnate Son and took upon himself the evil and suffering of the world, “the Crucified God” as Moltmann put it.

Beyond community and compassion there is the living Christ, who in love bears our pain and loss. During this season of uncertainty and doubt, and the search for meaning, I have been upheld by a loving community of faith.





I have also been hope filled by Christ whose love reaches into the darkest places, bringing meaning and purpose to all who would come under His sway.

In this pandemic, with all its challenges, I have found my faith in Christ very relevant, it has given me a calm centre and a firm hope. May this be your experience too.

**REV THRESI MAUBOY,
MODERATOR, NORTHERN SYNOD**

What are we learning as a Church in this time of COVID19?

Since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID19 as a pandemic, we have been instructed, if possible, to work from home.

In accordance with new health protocols there has been greater emphasis in hand washing etiquette and physical distancing.

Offices have been forced to close, supermarkets implemented strict physical distancing measures, and places used for activities and sports were also closed.

This also affected places of worship, and regular Sunday services.

This pandemic has brought the church in to our homes where it is organised by family members.

The role of the pastors who had been acting as worship leaders transferred into more administrative ones, providing worship and devotions for homes.

Even though we had been told to maintain our distance almost all congregations connected through online worship via recordings, live streaming, Zoom, and Facebook Messenger.

We need to realise and receive what has happened as a lesson on how we as a church deal with a crisis, including pandemics.

We as a church must be able to apply the pastoral principles and remember that Christ is above all creation.

We believe that the creator God is a God who is full of love and cares for all His creation.

This pandemic does not reflect God's ignorance for His people, but a megaphone that is shouting to tell us to reflect on ourselves and to seek God's best will in suffering.

Prayer must be our personal encounter with God despite difficulties.

The God that we believe, and trust, is a God who is active not a God who is silent and mute.

Our God who cares about the struggles of His people, becomes a place of refuge in times of distress.

We understand his concern when he gave up his son Jesus Christ to die for us on a cross.

Another lesson we have learnt is when faced with a crisis, people will react quickly, asking when it will end.

In the Northern Synod, we have a familiarity with congregations, presbyteries, and the Synod which helps us to anticipate who or which communities need extra help and attention, and who can be involved in efforts to overcome the crisis.

Within the communities we must continue to explain and be willing to help without reservations.

On one hand, a crisis impedes many aspects of normal life.

But on the other, we are able to see signs that we are still passionately at work including: how to be more creative in finding solutions; actively conducting research on COVID19, both privately and in groups; how we maintain social distancing; how we are paying more attention to personal hygiene and the environment; and learning how to understand consoling people affected by COVID19.

The distribution of reliable information to the congregation is a cause for happiness.

The Northern Synod is regularly active in providing information every week.

The Moderator and General Secretary send a reflection and report containing the latest news from the Synod and government to all members.

We urge members not to be consumed by incorrect issues.

As well as continuing to develop a network of cooperation with

the government and the outside society, the frequency of meetings of both staff and executives has been increasing during the pandemic. Although we have learnt much during this pandemic, we have also faced great challenges.

First, during the first weeks of the pandemic, the online streams that took place were quite crowded with several members participating two to three times in one day.

But as we moved forward, one challenge became clear: there was a lack of stream hours and coverage for our brothers and sisters who were in the community.

Their need to gather is great because indeed the church is a community of believers.

Second, our duty as "ecclesia" is to get out of the building and serve God outside the church walls.

Serve Him, in those who are thirsty, hungry, imprisoned, displaced, and marginalised. Those who are unable to reach our worship buildings.

Search and find them, because God is with them, not just in the church building.

Third, Christians cannot live on their own, Christians need their neighbours. Rev. Dr Eben Nuban Timo in Learning from COVID19 quoted the words of Paul F. Knitter, *"My life, especially as a Christian and theologian, has been enriched, disturbed, redirected by them in relationships or influenced me with the differences they bring."*





This is the biggest challenge that churches are experiencing throughout the world as worshipping at home is a new concept for us.

Finally, we all hope through the information, experiences, and creativity we will be able to continue being church during this pandemic.

While continuing to learn and surrender to the Triune God, the owner of life and service.

May we remain of one heart, one mind in one love, one soul and one goal hand in hand in responding to any crisis while continuing to equip all members of our church in service for the glory of the name of the Lord of the church.

"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever."



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in Australia**