

# WHAT SUSTAINS US

A week of devotions by leaders of  
the Uniting Church in Australia

May 1, 2020







## INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 crisis the Moderators and I have been meeting by videoconference to reflect on our pastoral ministry, and ways we are able to encourage the Church in its mission at this time.

We have spoken of struggles, challenges and signs of hope and new life that we see and hear in the life and mission of our Church and across our nation. We also support each other personally.

We have reflected on what is sustaining us, when usually we would be worshipping together with congregations, meeting face to face with the Councils of our Church and individual members, visiting agencies and schools, and having those informal conversations where people share their stories, their hopes and concerns about faith, life and the mission and direction of our Church.

These seven reflections highlight what sustains us, as followers of Christ. They are personal reflections and a word of encouragement for us as the Uniting Church.

The reflections include readings from Scripture, a personal word, and a prayer. Some of us have included a song that is significant for sustaining us.

We invite you to reflect on: what is sustaining you through this challenging time?

Yours in Christ,

**Deidre Palmer**  
President  
Uniting Church in Australia, Assembly



**Dr Deidre Palmer**  
**President, Uniting Church in Australia**  
**Assembly**

**Abiding in the love of Christ, You are not alone, Remember who you are**

Bible readings: John 14: 15-29 and John 15: 9-17

In this unfamiliar territory of a global pandemic, when we may be apart from people we love, when those things we hold so dear are not present, what sustains us? Where are the guideposts to get us through into a future we find hard to imagine?

There are a number of times over the past weeks, where I have felt out of place, as many of the familiar ways of being engaged in ministry are disrupted.

Reading Scripture reorients me when things are confusing or disorienting.

I love to read the Gospel of John, and its beautiful theology of incarnation – of an embodied Gospel of love, abundant life, and light that is never extinguished.

I love its accounts of the transforming encounters between Jesus and those he comes to call friends, his words of love and peace to his disciples in his farewell discourse (chapters 13-17), when they are so unsure of what lies before them.

The three key narratives that have been my guide from Scripture and in prayer are:

**Abide in Christ's Love**

**You are not alone**

**Remember who you are**

These are personal guides for me, and I offer them as narratives for us to hear as the community of the Uniting Church.

**Abide in Christ's Love**

In John's Gospel, Jesus calls his followers to abide in his love. The reassuring presence of Jesus and his constant and steadfast word and acts of love sustain me.

We are called as the community of Christ to be shaped by the love and grace of God.

We are drawn into a way of being and living, where we give our lives in loving service to others and for the sake of God's world.

**You are not alone**

Jesus promises that he will not leave the disciples 'orphaned' (John 14:18) but rather God will send the Holy Spirit, their advocate, who will empower them to follow Christ's commandments and to love as Christ has loved them.

As we engage in creatively responding to the COVID-19 safety measures, we know that we are not orphaned – the Holy Spirit is the one who walks alongside us, guiding us into faithful, life-giving and abundant ways of following Christ.

The Holy Spirit gifts us with courage and power to live out the call of God on our lives.

**Remember who you are**

While there is disaster, loss and an exacerbation of the inequities of our world, God calls us to see the world as God sees it – through compassion, and love, and a desire to see justice and flourishing for all people and the whole creation.

God calls us to remember who we are: the Body of Christ, a people of hope and liberation, witnesses to God's deep love for every person and for the whole creation.



We are not alone - God “gives us the gift of the Spirit in order that we may not lose the way.” (Basis of Union Paragraph 3) God’s abiding love takes away our fears and anxieties, brings healing and reconciliation and empowers us with courage to live the way of Jesus.

## **Prayer**

Gracious and loving God,  
We give you thanks for your constant love for all people and your whole creation.

Deepen our compassion, that we may see and reach out to all those who are suffering in this global pandemic.

Strengthen and guide us, through the wisdom of your Holy Spirit, that we may be bearers of your hope and light in our world.

Through Christ, our Risen, Crucified Lord, who bears our suffering, and leads us into fullness of life. Amen.

Song: “Come One, Come All” by Malcolm Gordon (New Zealand) (From the Album: Into the Deep)



**Rev Steve Francis**  
**Moderator of the Synod of Western Australia**

**What sustains us in our faith journey?**  
**How to beat the COVID-19 blues?**

Bible reading Romans 8:35-39.

"Almost anything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you," says Anne Lamott in her book "Almost Everything: Notes on Hope". I think she is right. Right now most of us feel unplugged, disconnected, even cut off. Social isolation is a cruel medicine to swallow in order to beat this horrid pandemic.

Yet our faith in Christ reminds us that nothing in the whole wide world can unplug us for the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35). Nothing can prohibit us from having access to the love of loves, the love of Christ. This amazing promise does not mean we are on a permanent high floating on a cloud over our stresses and problems.

We are human, some days we feel flattened, scared, exhausted, doomed, stunned and overcaffeinated. The dark news of the advance of COVID-19 around the world seems dystopian. Yet our hope lies in the ubiquitous love of Christ. A love that will never let us go, a love that is the basis of our hope for a better life and a better world. I read of a Sunday school teacher who asked a pupil if he believed that God was always with him. He thought for a moment and replied "maybe 40%

of the time". While the promise of Christ is that "I will never leave you" (Matthew 28:20) there are certainly moments when in isolation or dislocation the phone seems off the hook, and God is somehow not there or too busy to respond. That's where gratitude kicks in. I try and start the day with a long walk and lots of gratitude.

As I walk I remind myself again and again that I am loved and loved unconditionally and undeservedly. I thank God for all those who care about me and all those who God wants me to love and serve. I say the Lord's prayer slowly maybe five or more times and remember that I am cared for by "our Father in heaven", who despite all appearances, holds my life and the whole world in God's hand.

My walk and my prayers sustain me. And when I get home I read a passage of Scripture and Bible reading notes that nourish my soul for the day before the caffeine recharge. Through practicing gratitude, praying my stumbling prayers, opening up those Scriptures I get plugged in and recharged, and the COVID-19 blues don't claim me.

**Prayer**

Loving and holy God we thank you for who you are. You are the giver of life, the word of life, the love of life and the bread of life.

We praise and thank you for your care which goes beyond our wildest imaginings. You come to us, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we praise and worship you. O God you know our fears, anxieties and hopes more than we know them ourselves.

We bring to you our deepest concerns for all those dealing with COVID-19.

We pray for doctors, medical specialists and support staff. For everyone on the front line of this pandemic.

We pray comfort for all who have lost loved ones.

We pray for medical researchers that you will inspire them to find a vaccine.

We pray for all political leaders who have to make difficult choices. We pray for our families, friends, neighbours and colleagues, help us stay connected and compassionate. May your church be a sign of hope in this dark time.

Amen

Hymn: O Love that will not let me go (TIS 602)



**Rev David Baker**  
**Moderator of the Synod of Queensland**

**Genesis 32/33. The story of Jacob's new name and his reconciliation.**

So when the President asked us to reflect on what sustains us, and share a scripture passage that continues to feed, my mind went to this passage.

A bit of context. Jacob – Isaac's son; Abraham's grandson - has been on the run for some years. He had beguiled his older twin brother, the manly Esau, out of his birthright, and in connivance with his mother tricked his dying father, Isaac, to give him, not Esau, Isaac's deathbed blessing. Esau was ready to kill him, so he fled.

Twenty or so years later, he's been incredibly successful, but the fundamental deceit he's lived means he has to find reconciliation with his brother, so he sets out with all his wealth. Schemer that he is, he sends herds and gifts before him to win over Esau.

But he must reckon with the truth of his life, and the night before he's to meet Esau, he wrestles with God. He sees God face to face - and God blesses him and renames him "Israel", and gives him a sacred wound.

The next day, with all that is precious to him; his wives and children, he meets Esau.

And Esau says, what's with all this stuff you sent me? I don't need any of it, God has blessed me! It's great to see you!

And Jacob (Israel) says, "to see your face is to see the face of God".

The fascinating thing for me is that the tradition remembers Esau negatively – he was a poor steward of holy things – his birthright, his father's blessing; yet it also remembers this story; someone facing the truth about themselves, entering into vulnerability, finding reconciliation and grace – encountering the face of God, in the dark night of the soul, and also in the one who was supposed to be despised by God for his poor stewardship.

The face of God – reconciliation - is found in unexpected places. That's what the diverse memes of the Scriptural Tradition tell us.

Despite ourselves, and all our machinations, our ignorance of what is holy, God offers grace; but it's not cheap; it means being truthful; it means being vulnerable. Yet it's the most liberating thing we can know.

I encounter the face of God in prayer, particularly the prayers of relinquishment; and also in those with whom I journey; my family, my friends, my co-workers in the gospel.

Their love sustains me and gives me hope.

"Lord thank you that there is no place we can go that separates us from your abundant grace and liberating hope".



**Rev Thresi Mauboy**  
**Moderator of Northern Synod**

**“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11**

Since the WHO announced the coronavirus as a pandemic, there have been differences of opinion among church leaders.

There are those who rely on faith, people who have faith, but support the common sense approach of following the established health protocols, and people who pray alone trying to maintain their health.

We feel God’s hand sustaining us. We believe that God’s design is for us to give hope for the future.

The virus is a part of God’s creations, one of many that happen to be dangerous to humans. It is part of a family of pathogens.

Some may cause malaria or dengue fever, or might harm us face-to-face like scorpions and tigers. It’s just that this virus is new to us, and we need time to assess its dangers and learn how to deal with it.

As Disciples of Christ we must realise and believe that He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” Jesus is always present in every community of believers. He is always present in every time we talk and

exchange ideas about HIM. Jesus is always present to everyone who calls out His name.

He is even willing to walk along with us when happy or sad, as he said, “I am with you always to the end of the age.”(Matthew 28:20)

Jesus is not only a God of love, or almighty, but also omnipresent, He is present when the two disciples are conversing and exchanging ideas about Him, and not just being present but Jesus wants to walk with them (Luke 24:15) Jesus is always present to everyone who calls out His name.

He is even willing to walk along with us through difficulty time, fear, problem including what we experience today with the pandemic.

Be not dismayed whate’er betide  
God will take care of you  
Beneath His wings of love abide  
God will take care of you  
God will take care of you  
Through every day, o’er all the way  
He will take care of you  
God will take care of you  
No matter what may be the test  
God will take care of you  
Lean, weary one, upon His breast  
God will take care of you

Lyrics: Civilla Martin (1866-1948)  
Music: Walter Stillman Martin (1862-1935)





**Rev Simon Hansford**  
**Moderator of the Synod of New South Wales**  
**and Australian Capital Territory**

**But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul,  
“therefore I will hope in him.”**

**Lamentations 3.21-24**

When we sang “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases” in youth group days, it was a lovely simple chorus, the context of which I did not bother to explore until some time later.

This is a verse suggested by Uniting in Worship as suitable at the close of a funeral, and the words can be heard as words of comfort, the gentling love of a caring God.

There is profoundly more to be heard. It sits in the midst of lament, for the destruction and failure of Jerusalem, and perhaps even the perceived failure of God. The prophet – traditionally understood as Jeremiah – describes in graphic detail the extent of the suffering, leaving nothing to our imagination.

And this verse rises from the gravel, an assertion of hope against the chaos.

The prophet, starting with their own life and faith, reminds us of who God is, and what that means for us, in the midst of our lives.

The communities in which we live have not only been confronted with this pandemic, but many of us have been scourged by fire, while the drought maintained its grip.

This has been a season for lament, a valid act of faith in a God who is with us. But it is also a time to affirm, to assert, our hope in the living God.

As we wait to welcome friends with a handshake and embrace once again, as we Zoom and Skype till our eyeballs dry, as we wonder how long till this is all over, we remember the God who was, and is and will be. This is the perfect verse at the close of a funeral; death is not the final word.

As we live in this season dominated by an invisible oppressor, we can bear witness to those around us, by offering the mercies which echo the mercy of our God.

A conversation over the side fence, a phone call to a struggling friend, offering the final toilet roll to the person who could not reach the top shelf.

We are defined by Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, not by the world in which we live. As strugglesome as these days are, it is Christ in whom I trust.

And therefore I have hope.





**Rev Denise Liersch**  
**Moderator of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania**

**What sustains me in these times?**  
**A personal reflection.**

Over these last few weeks, amidst all the stresses and anxieties of the impact of the coronavirus, it has struck me that the trees and birds in my garden are completely oblivious to this virus. It does not affect them.

In fact, the air and waters are cleaner and purer than they have been for years, due to the downturn of human travel, consumption and industrial activity. The earth is breathing more freely in these times.

In recent weeks, I've been walking or cycling along the Yarra river. I breathe in the beauty of the air and trees, of the water, rocks and skies, and my spirit is renewed with them. The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

*" Yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. "*  
*(Ps 19: 1, 3-4)*

Since childhood, I have been fascinated by the wonder, complexity and interconnectedness of nature.

I encounter God here, infusing and breathing life through the landscape, waterways, air and forests.

I know my place here, one small part of a whole world God loves and fills and desires to restore and renew.

What is it that sustains me in these times of such anxiety and human suffering? It is God.

That might sound trite or simplistic. What I mean, is that the God I encounter in this world of beauty and terror, is the One who loves and desires the recreation of this world, whom I experience constantly at work bringing new life and wholeness.

There are no exclusions to the depth and breadth of this love. It includes us, it includes me... and it is pure gift, pure grace.

I hear the words of Jesus: "Not one sparrow falls to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid." (Matt 10: 29-31a)

In the ancient scriptures, I know of the God who enters our world to be known to us, of the self-emptying God who walks with us in the darkest and most dangerous of places to hold and keep us and fill us.

I hear the cries of prophets: that God's desire is for wholeness of the earth and all its peoples, for mercy and justice, especially for those most afflicted by life or the oppression of others.

It is in Jesus that I encounter this self-giving God most fully, as he proclaims 'I have come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly'.

I hear him proclaim 'good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

In Jesus, I encounter the God who shares our joy and our pain, who aches for us and weeps with us, lives with us and loves us.

I know in Christ the heart of God, as One who relentlessly pursues us with goodness and mercy, and who pulls us in and catches us up to be part of his being and way of living, constantly at work for the renewal of the earth and everything in it. At the end of each day, I pray.

I look back on the day, on my experiences, on my work, on my time shared with family, friends, colleagues and strangers, to see where I met Christ, to notice where Christ came to me, where God was at work, what God is calling me into. I live 'between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things' (Basis of Union Paragraph 3).

Yet as I breathe in the air, drink in the beauty of the forest and hear the earth groaning. As I share my life with family and friends and strangers. As I spend time each day reading the scriptures, I encounter the God who is at work in us and for us. It is this God who gives me hope and restores my soul.

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful  
and kindle in them the fire of your love.  
Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.  
And You shall renew the face of the earth.*







**Bronte Wilson**  
**Moderator of the Synod of South Australia**

**1 Peter 4:8-16 (NIV)**

**8 Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.**

**10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.**

**11 If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.**

As I am sure everybody knows, we are living in different and challenging times. Much of what we have taken for granted no longer holds true. Even some of the things we have considered the basic fabric of society are not happening at the moment. We find ourselves unable to meet with and comfort our extended families and friends.

Many who work in the hospitality, tourism and other sectors of the workforce have found their jobs lost as businesses shut down or had their operations severely curtailed overnight. What we considered quite legitimate activities became restricted with short notice. It leaves many of us

wondering what has happened to our society. This year, we have heard the story of Easter in a different context.

The story is the same, but for many of us our current situation brings new insight into what it might have been like for the early Christian church: meeting in small groups in homes, being isolated from each other, not really knowing what was going on.

The words from 1 Peter 4 help us focus on the important things of Jesus' teaching, which along with "the greatest commandment" guide us in the important aspects of being "Church" in these times. It comes down to being connected: with God, our church family, and the wider world. It is through our deep love for God and each other that we gain the strength to continue.

In these current times, our relationships and connections are expressed in different ways. We are unable to offer hospitality and care in the ways we are used to and prefer. There are things we cannot do, and we may feel helpless and confused as to what we can do. As we remember the words from 1 Peter 4:11, "...with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ."

These times bring with them new opportunities, as together we find new ways of serving and offering ministry to each other. We are forced to reassess our priorities, and to establish connections in new ways. As we do so, may we know that "To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen."

**Prayer**

Gracious and loving God, we give you thanks for your many and varied gifts.

Make us worthy stewards for you, that even in these strange times, we show your grace and your love in all we do.

In times of stress and difficulties, let us speak your words, not our own.

In times of change and uncertainty, let us offer hospitality and compassion.

May we find new ways of serving, in your strength, so that you might be praised and glorified in all things.

Amen



