

**Address by Tarlee Leondaris**

Greetings in the name of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ!

My name is Tarlee Leondaris. I am the Covenanting and International Mission Officer for the Synod of South Australia.

I would like to begin by paying respect to the traditional custodians of the land in which this recording is taking place.

As we gather, we give thanks for the Kaurna People. We acknowledge the commitment their ancestors made, across the generations, to nurturing this land. Together, may we walk into the future, recognising the sacred footsteps that continue to lead us to the promise of heaven.

When commencing an address to a congregation I acknowledge First Peoples and land as a sign of respect. It is amazing to think that the land we live on, the land that we only know as our own has a rich cultural history. This is same land sustained First People for thousands of years. First People gathered on this land to pass down traditional knowledge. On this same land, First People celebrated and lamented. No doubt if you are in your home, you have used that same land in a similar way. You have passed down knowledge to your children and possibly even grandchildren on that land. You may have held celebrations, such as birthdays and anniversaries on the same land. The same land may have been a place where you have lamented after receiving bad news or feeling in a dark space. The land retains our stories. For these reasons, it is important to acknowledge traditional custodians took care of the land that we now utilise. Throughout time long before creation, God's Spirit dwelled on this same land. For our Lord is the God of First and Second Peoples. By honoring Traditional Custodians, we honour God's mission on Earth.

It is deeply important for me to acknowledge this history, as I am a person of Aboriginal heritage. My mother was a child of the Stolen Generation. She was born in the 1960s to an Aboriginal mother and non-Aboriginal father. Authorities removed my mother at birth for being a 'half-caste' child. As a baby, Methodist Missionaries adopted my mother. She spent much of her childhood on the Methodist Mission in West Arnhemland before relocating to Adelaide. My mother enjoyed her time growing up in Arnhemland. She felt a true connection to Country and culture. Relocating to metropolitan Adelaide in the 1970s was challenging for her. She lacked the previous connections she had to the land, people and culture. The urban environment was foreign, and she experienced appalling racism.

My mother's history is a significant factor that led me to apply for the role as the Synod's Covenanting and International Mission Officer. I have a heart for reconciliation. Specifically, encouraging First and Second Peoples to work together. Unfortunately, to progress these relationships there is a truth-telling aspect. This can be confronting and difficult to hear. Martin Luther King, Jr once said "We are not makers of history, we are made by history." To open hearts to reconciliation we need to share history in order to overcome ongoing systemic issues. For me, this involves sharing my mother's history with people just like you. In many ways, I feel like I am giving a voice to the voiceless. Especially for my biological grandmother who as an Aboriginal person in the 1960s had little rights. Even the most basic right such as to keep her own child was not hers to make. I feel blessed as the Covenanting Officer to have an opportunity to share the voices of the past.

The Covenant relationship with First Peoples is really a part of the DNA of the Uniting Church in Australia. It is a commitment to stand with First Nations brothers and sisters in Christ in the struggle for justice and improved equality.

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The paramount function of my role as the Covenanting Officer is to support Uniting Church congregations to engage in the Covenant. I have worked out that if I visited a different congregation every Sunday to talk about Covenanting it would take me over three years to get to each congregation. This is not a viable approach. Subsequently, I have to widely resource congregations to engage with covenanting. So far this year I produced the Reconciliation Sunday Worship Resource. This resource encouraged all congregations to celebrate Reconciliation Sunday on 31st May. It contained information to support congregations learn about First Peoples. Including a perspective on how the scripture readings of the day were relative to First Peoples culture. I have commenced working closely with a couple congregations on specific covenanting activities. I am hopeful the result of these will be useful as templates for other congregations to engage in covenanting. I also work with members of the UAICC and UCA leaders for advocacy. This year we have made two parliamentary submissions standing in solidarity with First Peoples. One was in relation to the Nuclear Waste site near Kimba. We encouraged government to listen to the concerns of the Traditional Custodians. Secondly was for the Inquiry into Aboriginal Housing. I collated opinions from various First Peoples of the UAICC and submitted these to the inquiry to support better housing for First Peoples. In particular First People who were living off Country to attend medical appointments in Adelaide. Covenanting and in a broader sense reconciliation is an ongoing journey. The Chief Executive Officer of Reconciliation Australia Karen Mundine often writes, "Reconciliation is hard work—it's a long, winding and corrugated road, not a broad, paved highway. Determination and effort at all levels of government and in all sections of the community will be essential to make reconciliation a reality." This is very much the reality for covenanting. We as a community of Christ have to keep working towards relationship building and creating open hearts to covenanting. I highly encourage you to keep praying for reconciliation between First and Second Peoples.

Since commencing this role in October last year, it has been a challenging time. There has been the restructure of presbyteries, bushfires, the death of George Floyd and the public outcry including the Black Lives Matter movement and of course a global pandemic. What a time to commence in a brand-new role as the Covenanting and International Mission Officer! I must admit it has been a perplexing time; however, I am a person of great faith. I truly believe in believing in God's plan. This includes accepting that it is not our timing that matters, it is God's timing that matters. Especially when it comes to mission!

I am now going to shift to talking about the second part of my job, which is as the Synod's International Mission Officer. It was pleasing to learn that Morialta Uniting Church has been devoutly involved in the partnership with the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK). Many of you may know that this year is the 30th anniversary of the partnership between the Uniting Church Synod of SA and the PROK Iksan Presbytery. To celebrate the anniversary the PROK Iksan Presbytery invited members of the Uniting Church SA to South Korea. The anticipated partnership trip was due to take place between October and November 2020. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic makes such international travel not viable for the near future.

It was a difficult decision not to do international mission the way we previously had. Of more concern was the alarming rates of COVID-19 cases in South Korea between February and March. We were truly concerned for those in our partner churches. News from PROK was that in person worship was suspended. Subsequently, church moved online. Receiving this news in Australia early on was a foreign concept. Little were we to know at the time it would also become our fate in Australia.

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In April on behalf of the Uniting Church PROK Support Group, the Moderator and I wrote to our partners in South Korea. We expressed our heavy hearts for South Korea. We affirmed that the Uniting Church SA stood in solidarity with PROK. The Vice-Chairperson of the Iksan Presbytery returned a wonderful response affirming the importance of praying for one another. This response consolidated the true importance of our partnership to be reconciled through Christ.

I have shared a similar experience with the Synod's second international mission partnership with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP). I have been communicating with UCCP church leaders. We have shared our respective experiences during COVID-19. They explained being in Enhance Community Quarantine (ECQ). Under these regulations, all were required to stay home. It was lawful for individuals to be out of the house once a week to go to the market. When outside of the house individuals had to carry a home quarantine pass issued by the authorities. To me sharing our stories and praying for each other during this global pandemic embodied true meaning of partnership. God was in Christ reconciling the world. It is our place as Christians to contribute to this mission, even if we have to find new ways to do this. Recently I received a request on behalf of UCCP to stand in solidarity with them against new legislation to be introduced in the Philippines. The legislation concerns terrorism offences; however, the definition of terrorist in the legislation is vague. This leaves Filipino Christians susceptible to being labeled as terrorists. The Uniting Church's Philippines support group created video to stand in solidarity with our international partners against this legislation. I believe without the recent surge in using online conferencing we would not have thought to record such a message. We have resorted to previous methods such as letter writing. I am not saying that letter writing in solidarity is not good; however, creating a video was a new and effective way to do mission.

Today's Gospel reading is one that many of us have heard countless times. Now more than ever it seems truly relevant to our lives. Except for the mass gathering part. That is not relevant unless it is at the football! The passage encourages us to listen to and trust in Jesus. Those who gathered in mass to see Jesus were desperate to hear his message and receive healing. Today many, communities globally are crying out for healing. Especially to eradicate this awful illness. The debate between saving life and saving the economy lingers above many communities. The account of Jesus feeding 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish is a powerful message. It is a symbolic of our need to trust that Jesus will satisfy our needs. In particularly at this time of ever growing anxiety and uncertainty. This is certainly how I feel personally as well as for my ministries in covenanting and international mission.

The 'new normal' that we are entering can certainly bring changes to how we as church do mission. This does not have to burden us. Instead, it should encourage reflection on the importance of partnerships, solidarity for social justice issues and ecumenical sharing. Likewise, it opens possibilities for all Christians to do mission. Not just those who are fortunate enough to travel to far destinations or host international guests. I encourage all to pray and discern how you may be able to contribute your personal gifts to mission.

Thank you and wishing you God's Grace at this time.

Tarlee Leondaris

Covenanting & International Mission Officer