

Pilgrims of the Spirit: *Embracing Inclusivity, Diversity, and Unity*

Synod 2025 Opening Reflection

Moderator, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Acknowledgment of Country and Guests

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday today and forever. It is a deep honour and sacred responsibility to stand before you as the new Moderator. I do so with humility, with hope, and with deep gratitude – to those who have journeyed with me, to those who have gone before us in faith, and to the God who calls us always forward.

As I begin, I acknowledge the First Peoples of this land—the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, and the Palawa peoples of Lutruwita (Tasmania). We honour your custodianship of land, waters, story, and Spirit. We acknowledge your ongoing sovereignty and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recommit ourselves to walking together in covenant, not through symbolic gestures, but through truth-telling, shared leadership, and real power.

My immediate predecessor and former Moderators of the Vic/Tas Synod, who have faithfully carried the baton of which I now humbly hold.

The President and General Secretary of the Uniting Church in Australia, thank you for your national leadership and faithful witness.

Moderators from across our Synods, your presence is a sign of our shared hope and interconciliar unity;

To the Heads and representatives of our ecumenical partners, we honour your presence among us;

To all Synod members and associates: As we soon gather to meet, May the Spirit stir us to listen deeply, speak openly, and discern with grace and love.

I have often been asked, “where do I call home”. And my response has always been, “wherever my family is”. I was raised to understand that family is both by blood and relationships formed in and through God.

My late father whose robe I now am struggling to fit into, would feel uncomfortable about drawing attention to individual achievements particularly in ministry and instead prefer to emphasize the importance of relationship, for as he would put it, we are who we are not in isolation. My mother would drive that message further for us by making sure we understood that each relationship no matter how big or small was to be deeply appreciated and valued. Priceless was the measure of relationships according to mum, even if that meant we would have to go without, when giving.

So, allow me a moment to offer deep appreciation to the family and friends who have travelled from overseas and interstate to be here. I am overwhelmingly honoured by your presence and know deeply that it did not come without cost.

Pilgrims of the Spirit

Our theme of this year's Synod - reminds us that we are a people on the move — not wanderers without direction, but pilgrims following the Spirit's call. Pilgrims are not defined by what they protect, but by their willingness to trust God for what lies ahead.

And as pilgrims, we walk with a treasure entrusted to us: the gift of inclusivity, diversity, and unity. These are not slogans to admire from a distance. They are the very shape of God's household. They are gifts — because they show us the many ways Christ is revealed through different voices, cultures, and generations. But they are also responsibilities — because inclusivity must be lived, diversity must be honoured, and unity must be continually nurtured in love.

Listening to First Peoples

On this journey, we are called to listen more deeply — including to the voices of First Peoples among us. Their presence is itself a gift and a reminder that the Spirit speaks through those whose wisdom and experience has too often been set aside.

To honour these voices is to remember that inclusivity, diversity, and unity are not abstract principles but gospel imperatives. Reconciliation is not someone else's work. It is our shared discipleship; part of the covenant life God has bound us into.

A New Kind of Banquet (Luke 14)

Jesus once watched as guests at a banquet scrambled for the best seats. Then he said:

“When you give a banquet, do not invite those who can repay you, but invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind...”

This is Jesus' radical reminder that unity is not found in sameness or status, but in reshaping community so that those left outside are brought to the centre, or that the centre may very well be outside. To be *Pilgrims of the Spirit* is to keep asking: Who is missing from the table? Who is present but unheard? And what must we do — in our structures, our worship, and our witness — to ensure that God's feast is shared by all?

If Only My People Would Listen (Psalm 81)

Psalm 81 carries God's yearning:

“O that my people would listen to me... I would satisfy them with honey from the rock.”

The blessings of God are not withheld; they are waiting for us on the other side of listening. Renewal comes when we choose to listen to one another, especially to the voices that unsettle

us or reveal blind spots. It comes when we are willing to be reshaped by Christ, and by the Spirit who calls us into a future we do not yet see.

An Invitation for Synod

In the days ahead, we will discern proposals that speak to peace, justice, reconciliation, rural communities, and the life of our church. These are not simply matters of business. They are matters of witness. Each decision is an opportunity to show whether inclusivity, diversity, and unity are just words we affirm, or truths we are willing to embody.

So let us walk as pilgrims, accountable to Christ:

- Pilgrims who receive diversity as a gift, and guard it as a responsibility.
- Pilgrims who hold unity not as uniformity, but as the Spirit's weaving of many voices into one body.
- Pilgrims who measure our decisions by Christ's pattern of humility, justice, and love.
- Pilgrims who dare to listen, to share power, and to trust God with the cost.

Let us walk forward, not in fear but in faith — for the road is open, the table is wide, and the Spirit goes before us.

Amen.

Blessing and Benediction

Pilgrims of the Spirit,
we carry the treasures of faith, hope, and love.

May we welcome difference as a gift,
honour diversity as a blessing,
and nurture unity as Christ's own prayer for us all.

May the Spirit give us courage to listen deeply,
humility to share power,
and grace to walk with those at the edges.

And may the blessing of God
Creator, Christ, and Spirit
be upon us and remain with us,
guiding our steps, shaping our decisions,
and leading us always forward
into God's wide and wondrous future.

Go in peace, go in hope, go in love.
Amen.