

# The Global Church

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 12 November 2023

A Reflection by Dr Sureka Goringe

Pentecost 24A

Psalm 78: 1-9; Matthew 25: 1-13

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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Thank you for the invitation to speak to you today.

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation.

Who is UnitingWorld?

An agency of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia. It was set up to collaborate in mission with overseas churches. We offer our resources to aid their ministry and we seek their prophetic voice to speak truth to us.

UnitingWorld is not just any NGO or aid organisation. We work on behalf of the people of the Uniting Church, and we work only with and through church partners overseas. We support the mission and ministry of our partner churches. The local communities see the local church witnessing to God's love, doing acts of love and service.

I bear witness to you of the amazing things that God is doing across the world, through God's people. I'm here to remind you that we are part of something so much bigger, more beautiful and more powerful than we imagined. Let me tell you some stories.

At the start of the pandemic I emailed Rev John Yor, the then General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, sending him electronic copies of posters on hand-washing, isolating and other health messages. John wrote back to me, thanked me for the posters and added *'How can I tell them to wash their hands, when I know they have no clean water? How can I tell them to stay home, when I know that if they don't go out and work, they have no food? Even I don't own a fridge; I have no food unless I buy it every day from the market'*.

Over the rest of 2020-21, John Yor and the church staff worked tirelessly, taking soap, face-masks and dry food packs to people in their homes, checking to see who needed help, fighting to get water delivered. Already crippled by conflict, food shortages, drought and a locust infestation, COVID-19 was almost the last straw for South Sudan. And yet, John and his team didn't despair. He quoted Ecclesiastes *'For everything there is a season'*.

*"I don't know when peace will come to South Sudan" he says, "but I love my people and I will be here when it does"*.

In South Sudan, we see God, in the face of unbearable suffering, give people the courage to care for each other, to hope and to build peace. In the light of their witness, we think about the things that we complain about, or bicker and fall out about. We think about all that we take for granted, and wonder how good we are at sharing God's blessings.

About the same time in India, millions of suddenly jobless migrant workers were walking across the vast countryside from the locked down cities to their villages, carrying no money or food, but only the virus with them. In Amritsar, near the Kashmiri border in the northwest of India, COVID ripped through the population, making it one of the worst hotspots in India. Christians make up less than 1% of the population of India and are mostly people from the Dalit or 'Untouchable' caste, singularly disadvantaged in access to education and health and social mobility, facing increasing opposition as Hindu fundamentalism is on the rise.

I spoke to Om Prakash, one of the church staff in Amritsar, who chose not to join his family in the relative COVID-safety of their village, but stayed in the city, so he could take rice and lentils to the multitudes of day-labourers who were quietly starving in their homes during lockdown. The Bishop, a man in his sixties went as well, refusing to let his staff take risks that he didn't. And O P tells me of a Hindu woman who asked for a blessing from the Bishop when they dropped off some food, exclaiming "*we had no one to turn to, but in my heart I thought maybe the Christians would come, today your God is my God.*" Bishop Bunu and his wife Lily caught COVID from these trips, and were gravely ill for a while, but have recovered and continue their relentless service to this day.

In Australia, we live surrounded by people who live as if Christianity has been tried and found wanting. I am frequently dismayed and disappointed by a society that doesn't care for God. But the Indian Christians I met worked on the basis that people just didn't know that God loved them, and that it was their job to fix that. They remembered how abruptly and miraculously God can hijack your life and set you on a different path, and they just took it for granted that that's what God wanted for everyone.

In Bali, the tiny 12,000 strong Protestant Church kicked off an initiative to grow and give away seedlings of vegetable plants, desperate to keep the people they had helped lift out of poverty - from starving or selling their few precious belongings. They opened up their church facilities to act as isolation centres when the hospitals were over-flowing. In non-COVID times, this church runs an ambitious program to address poverty in Bali, mostly in Hindu villages. Balinese identity is inextricably bound up with being Hindu and being Christian definitely puts you on the outside. But the tiny Protestant Christian Church in Bali has won the trust of a sceptical majority, by selfless love and service to those outside their own. So much so, that they are a sought after partner in local and provincial government.

In Bali we see how God uses a grain of salt - a tiny church of 12,000 people - to season a province of 4.2M people. As Christianity loses its dominance in Australia, can the Bali church teach us how to live as a minority, to recognise the image of God in others, to cross boundaries to work together to bless others?

In the years before COVID, I met this minister in China who told me of growing up in the cultural revolution, when every single vestige of religion was suppressed. How his mother had a handwritten copy of John's gospel, kept hidden under the floorboards in their house. Once a week, she would get it out and they would read it together as a family and pray. But even before he turned 10 years old, he knew that he wanted to serve God all his life.

He told me of the day the church building where he now pastors was first re-opened for worship – it had been a printing press for almost 20 years. People from the neighbourhood walked to church on their knees – so great was their joy at being allowed to worship together. People came from all over the town– people who for almost a generation had kept their faith hidden – no ministers, no music, no worship. But faith kept alive by the Holy Spirit. Public evangelism is still illegal in China – but it is also the home of the fastest growing church in the world – with 3 congregations starting up every single day.

In China we see the power of the Gospel that holds people close without money, institutions or leaders. We see the church grow without strategic plans, mission programs or religious freedom laws - through the sheer power of personal testimony – of seeing a neighbour transformed and asking why. What is God saying to us through this – with our traditions, our heritage, our facilities and our privileged position in society?

This is Agnella, she's from Zimbabwe. She was born one of 9 children in her family, she married and had a child. But by her mid-thirties, she was completely alone – the aids epidemic in Zimbabwe had killed every single one of her siblings and her husband. But rather than despair, she dedicated her life to the care of those with HIV/AIDS and the task of preventing its spread. Now she works in a village in the remote highlands of West Papua, she is doctor, nurse, community health worker, all rolled into one. She has a big laugh, a wicked sense of humour and breaks into song at the drop of a hat.

When she told me her story, I couldn't help but think – if that had happened to me, I would have just curled up and died. I cannot imagine life without my family. Let alone a life of purpose. But God makes beautiful things from broken things.

Kina Somare was wanted throughout the Highlands of Papua New Guinea on numerous counts of violence. Leader of a well-known gang that frequently clashed with others in the region, his face was both known and feared. So when he walked into a peace workshop one still afternoon in October last year, amidst the rubble of Hela Province's worst earthquake since 1922, everyone in the church stood very still. The Bishop of the United Church in PNG (UCPNG), who was taking part that day, found Somare's presence particularly unnerving. He'd been held up by this man at knife point not so long ago.

On that day, Somare gave his life to Christ and walked out a changed man. He went home, got his money and gave it to the earthquake recovery effort. He spoke with local police. He decided to become an ambassador for peace, to influence other young people to bring healing to the community. His transformation was staggering.

PNG is complicated and messy as well as beautiful. It's one of the hardest places we work. But amidst the poverty, the violence and the mess - we see God act - the sheer mind-blowing power of the gospel to change lives. That God can reach into your soul, and light a flame inside you, that changes absolutely everything!

You might remember Paul telling that Christians all over the world are part of one body – like eyes and hands and feet. We belong together, we need each other, and we should care for each other.

I think that if the global church is the body of Christ, then the stories of what God is doing in all the different places, is the lifeblood of that body. The stories nourish and connect, sharing pleasure, caring for pain, helping the different parts work better together.

We need each other; we are incomplete without each other.

When we get too caught up in our own picture of God, when we try and box God up into something we understand – we need to hear these stories. Stories that blow our minds with the unfathomable grace and radical generosity of God.

When we are close to despair, when suffering and pain has worn down our faith– then we need these stories. Stories that assure us of God with us, remind us of hope and point to the dawn to come.

When we are stuck with old solutions to new problems. When we are out of ideas, and all our strategies and mission plans aren't working – we need to hear these stories. Stories that teach us new ways to think, new ways to imagine, new ways to connect.

When we are feeling tired and lost, that we haven't seen God at work recently, when the service we offer God feels like it makes no difference – we need to hear these stories. Stories that remind us of the power and faithfulness of God.

God calls us to work for justice in the world. And God calls us to live in mutual respectful relationship with Christians across the world. But a world struggling to fight injustice, is like a sick person in hospital – they need the technical skills of doctors and nurses – but they also need their friends and family to rally round and encourage them.

At UnitingWorld, we bring the development skills, the ability to design solid programs that deliver sustainable transformation. We help them plan and deliver great projects, and to grow their leadership, and strengthen their governance and management. We raise money for them from the Australian government.

But what our partners also need desperately is to know that they have friends in Australia who care about them. They love it when we tell them of how our congregations rally round to hear their stories, who speak their names in prayer, who do raffles and potlucks to raise money. For our partners, your gifts and support are far more precious than any government grant we can get for them. They love it when we can take supporters with us to visit them. They worry about us and take up collections for us when they hear of bush-fires and floods.

Every story I told you today was part of a collaboration with our partner churches, supported by the good people of the UCA.

My invitation, and challenge, to you is to step deeper into these stories. Get connected and own your identity as a citizen of God's Kingdom across the world. UnitingWorld is not just any aid charity – we are the people of the Uniting Church, committing to witness to the unity of Christ by joining hands with churches overseas to fight poverty, injustice and violence.

Commit to praying for these amazing churches that we're connected with. Advocate for the issues that affect them. Put aside something every month to contribute to their ministry. Maybe work as a congregation to commit to sponsoring the work in one particular place, building a special connection to them.

Our partners are the local church, helping communities unlock their God-given potential to set themselves free from poverty and injustice. They need us to stand with them. And we need to be challenged and inspired by their prophetic witness. So I invite you to lean in to this amazing movement of God's people that is your inheritance as a child of God.