

The world fills with the beauty of diversity, whether in cultures, languages, or geographical locations. Uniting Church is also blessed with its own diversity in culture, language, tradition and theology. In Act2 Report, there are 1672 local communities in 6 synods and 33 presbyteries. There are more than 45 languages (including first people languages).

I believe Manningham UCA is also blessed with your own diversity.

Our reading this morning from Paul's letter to Corinthians, mentions the Church as the body of Christ, comprising local congregations and the global community of believers.

The imagery of the body and its parts reflects the body's unity and diversity. The human body metaphor illustrates the interconnectedness of believers in Christ.

Last May I participated at UnitingWorld Southeast Asia Region Workshop in Bali. Our partner churches from Indonesia and Timor Leste were there.

I would like to share two stories:

Rev. Debora Mambrasar from GKI-TP Sorong presbytery. In July 2022, Debora was invited by P3W GKI-TP to be one of some writers to write a book of reflections for P3W. The topic of the book is about the economic empowerment for church communities. She accepted the offer although it is not easy for her to write the book and being published. Debora realized this is an interesting topic and the specific topic is about the role of church in microfinance. Not many pastors raised this topics previously.

This task is challenging and important. It is not many pastors accept the participation of church in microfinance. This becomes crucial recently when the COVID-19 pandemic affected the economy condition of the communities. People not only listen to the motivation given through sermons in churches but asked concrete action to improve people's economic, recover from pandemic and improved condition from the poverty.

In Elim Tempat Garam congregation where Debora is ministering, the small mini market named "Mana Mandiri" had been established for 6 years. She said the existing of this mini market has supported the church to empower the economics of the community. She hopes in the future there will be more mini markets in this church and the community.

At the end, Debora thanked to P3W GKI-TP that brings the light of God's kingdom for the people during this difficult economic situation by having idea to print and publish this book.

Since March 2023, the Sagu Salempeng Foundation (SSF) has started to develop a kitchen garden program which was started by the SSF staff themselves. Due to the limited land available to each staff, it was agreed to focus on creating a demonstration plot in the Wringin Pintu area which was worked on jointly by all staff.

All SSF staff worked on 16 beds. The first types of crops planted were kale, then bitter fruits, pumpkin

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and eggplant. Especially for water spinach plants, 1.5 kg of seeds are used which are planted in 16 beds and it only takes 24 days, water spinach can be harvested.

When the Kangkung harvest arrived, all the staff were very happy because they did not expect that their efforts would produce up to 150 bundles of kale which were harvested together by the staff and their families, including Laurine (Ulla) with Yondri (husband) and Kindness (her son) who participate in the kale harvest with other staff and family.

My family and I have stock of vegetables for the next few days and my child (Kindness) is very excited to be participating in the kale harvest with us, said Ulla.

Meanwhile, Yondri (Ulla's husband) participated with other SSF staff and families and enjoyed being together during the harvest. He commented that this SSF activity would greatly help families to provide family food independently.

We get lessons about family food. Inspired by SSF activities and Pastor Jeny's initiative, my family and I will grow vegetables at home, even though the land is narrow but can use other media, said Yondri.

The Kitchen Garden activity, which was one of the activities carried out by YSS staff and CO in the demonstration plot, turned out to bring many benefits and lessons. All vegetables grown are organic vegetables. Besides being enjoyed by the staff/CO with their families, the kangkung harvest is also marketed at Frits Supermarkets in Ambon City and is even routinely ordered by the Sari Gurih Restaurant, which is a favorite restaurant for the people of Ambon City.

The lesson learned from this activity is the potential to independently procure family food and the potential to earn family income.

God's people are an amazing force in the world. We bear witness to what the God's church can be in a local congregation and global church. In Christ we can rise above despair and devastation. In Christ we can go where no one else will go and risk our lives to show compassion to those forgotten by others. In Christ we can share what we have with selfless generosity and overcome the flaws and failings of our own human weaknesses.

Going back to our reading, Paul emphasizes the importance of each local church's unique role, gifts, and calling within its community, and the principle of cooperation and partnership between churches globally.

It's highlight that regardless of differences in diversity, all believers are part of the same body; it's emphasizing the unity and mutual care.

At the start of the pandemic, UnitingWorld emailed Rev John Yor, the then General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan, sending him electronic copies of posters on handwashing, isolating and other health messages. John wrote back to me, thanking me for the posters. And then he added 'How can I tell them to wash their hands, when I know they have no clean water? How can

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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. I will share your information, but I don't know if it will help". Over the next few years, John Yor and the church staff worked tirelessly, taking soap, facemasks and dry food packs to people in their homes, checking to see who needed help, fighting to get water delivered. Already crippled by inter-tribal conflict, widespread 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".

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. They are singularly disadvantaged when it comes to access to education and health and social mobility and face increasing opposition as Hindu fundamentalism encroaches religious freedoms.

UnitingWorld spoke to Om Prakash, one of the church staff in Amritsar, who chose not to join his wife and children 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 OP 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 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.

What does it mean for you and me today?

Recognizing and valuing diversity within the body of Christ and the call to work together, using each church's unique gifts, for the peace and prosperity in the world. The significance of being part of a global community with a common purpose.

I encourage you to embrace your role in the local church, appreciate the impact of the global church, and actively engage in building partnerships with other churches (if it is possible with churches outside Australia)

The love of God that Jesus offers is not just a self-improvement program and a ticket to heaven, but the lived experience of peace, justice and freedom right here on earth.

In partnering with global church, we restore the dignity and humanity of those around us that has been destroyed by the imbalance of power and wealth. We must break down the systems that entrench privilege and trap generations of people in misery.

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The transformation we are offered, doesn't end with ourselves, it extends to the whole world.

This world full of complicated and messy people, 7 billion of them, all created in the image of God and loved beyond measure, just like us. We are to seek them out, meet them where they are, without judgement, and care for their practical needs, so they too can discover that they are a beloved child of God.

God's call to action is as radical, dangerous and inflammatory as the call to identity. Our identity as Jesus' disciples calls us to authentic life in relation not just to God, but to our fellow human beings.

And all over the world, we have powerful proof that God is faithful. Without power, without wealth, institutions, slick leadership, or clever programs, with only the faithful witness and the service of ordinary people who remember their extraordinary identity, through the sharing of personal stories from person to person, through life choices that so embody love that they draw attention, the Spirit moves to call people to work together.

Amen