**Victorian Council of Churches**

**Annual General Meeting**

**11th May 2024**

**Minutes**

1. Welcome and opening remarks Rev Deacon Joseph Leach

Acknowledgement of country

1. Opening worship
Rev Deacon Joseph Leach read from Ephesians and offered a prayer.
2. Attendance record – see list of members and churches at end of the minutes

*\* indicates there is a written report in the Annual Report and Financial Report for the AGM*

1. \*President’s report Rev Deacon Joseph Leach p 4
2. \*Executive Officer’s report Rev Deacon Sandy Boyce p.5-13
3. \*Financials Mr Ashok Jacob, Treasurer
Treasurer’s Report

Financial Statement 2023

Budget 2024
Member Contributions

Ashok noted that there has been an increased distribution from investments. He also asked Member Churches to continue their contributions for the work of the Victorian Council of Churches. The VCC President thanked Ashok for his work.

1. Elections No elections are required this year
A second Deputy President will be appointed, with the intention of that person being available to proceed to be President in 2025. The President noted that a preferred practice is to alternate the election of a President from a larger Member Church with a President appointed from a smaller Member Church. The current President is from the Catholic Church and the immediate past President is from the Anglican Church. It is hoped someone from a smaller Member Church will be available to offer leadership as the next VCC President (2025-27).
2. VCC events 2024 Rev Deacon Sandy Boyce
Sandy noted significant events including the visit of the WCC General Secretary, Rev Prof Dr Jerry Pillay in June (in collaboration with the National Council of Churches in Australia), the special events for the VCC’s 75th planned for August 9th and 10th, and the Christmas Bowl celebration of 75 years in November (in collaboration with Act for Peace). Promotional materials are available for events planned for 2024.
3. Membership - no new Member Churches this year
4. Reports
a) Financial Grants
i) World Parliament of Religions Adrian Dass

Adrian (young adult, Anglican Church) expressed thanks for the opportunity to attend the World Parliament of Religions in August 2023 in Chicago. He said it was an eye-opening experience and noted the importance of seeking peace and harmony in a world with so much turmoil. He emphasised the imperative to work together to achieve a common goal for the betterment of society.

ii) Children’s & Family Ministry Chris Barnett (Intergen)
Chris is in the USA attending conferences, and will report at a later time.

iii) Raising our Tribal Voices Conference Rev Dr Satvasheela Pandhare
Sheela spoke her appreciation of being able to attend the conference and how valuable that experience was.

b) \*Reports from affiliate groups are in the Annual Report including:

1. Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM)
2. Ministry Renewal Retreats Victoria
3. Australian Church Library Association, Victorian Chapter
4. Intergen
5. Palestine Israel Ecumenical Network
6. World Day of Prayer Australia – Victorian Committee
7. Korus Connect
8. VCC EM report Mr Edmund Murphy, CEO
Ed outlined recent staff changes, and activations in the first 4 months of 2024.
Ed’s work as CEO since his appointment in December 2023 was affirmed, as was Sandy’s work as the Chair of VCCEM navigating through a difficult period.
9. CCYP Ms Liana Buchanan, Principal Commissioner
*(The Commissioner will provide some further documentation from her presentation)*

The Commissioner recognises that it was a painful time for religious communities during and following the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The learnings are evident in all institutions including religious institutions. The outcomes are now legislated, and mandated, with a whole raft of requirements in relation to the Child Safe Standards and the reportable conduct scheme.
The Commissioner acknowledged the incredible collaboration at the outset with the then VCC Executive Officer, Rev Ian Smith.

The Commissioner expressed pride in the regulatory schemes that protect children, and is confident that the schemes are doing what they were designed to do. They are nation leading, with Victoria being the first jurisdiction to have these systems in place. They are also being adopted in Tasmania and Queensland. She acknowledged that there is a real risk that the momentum will slow down.
The Commissioner is encouraged by the work religious organisations have done. She recognised the large number of small independent churches; some of them staffed only be volunteers, with no paid staff or clergy. The Commissioner recognises the amount of work required to ensure child-safe church practices and protocols, and to look at the implications of every aspect of shared life in congregations that may need to be addressed by the requirements of the Child Safe Standards.
She invited continued collaboration between faith organisations, and especially those who do not have some infrastructure in place to guide building child safe organisations. Need to continue to work together, to share ideas and good practice, to help one another.

The ***reportable conduct scheme*** receives hundreds of reports each month. There have been 20,000 cases since 2017, with just under a third substantiated. Of concern is that there is a higher proportion of offences in religious institutions and that 40% of reports are substantiated. This is very high compared to other sectors. There is a clear need for child safeguarding.
The Commissioner also reported under-reporting from religious organisations when the Commission would be expecting to see a slightly higher proportion of notifications. Religious institutions need to be clear about reporting obligations. She also recognised that there may be no suspicious conditions to be notified.
A much higher proportion of notifications from religious organisations relate to historical conduct. Many are coming from redress claims.

It is very clear that there is good awareness of sexual/sexualised behaviour in relation to child safekeeping, but there may be more vigilance required to recognise boundary issues and grooming practices. The Commission will keep working on this with religious and other organisations.

Child safeguarding is not a ‘tick a box’ exercise, nor a ‘set and forget’ exercise. It requires ongoing changes in attitudes, practice and systems. Every new activity or initiative needs to connect to Child Safe Standards. Child safety needs to be a regular topic in church meetings.

The Commissioner encouraged churches to actively engage children’s viewpoints and take disclosures seriously. Leaders should be open to feedback and actively seek out resources, advice and guidance.

Strategies are needed that will motivate and engage others, some of whom may still remain skeptical in the first instance.
The Commission is ready to help congregations and churches, and to share ideas and good practice as needed.
Children deserve to be safe. They deserve our unwavering vigilance and commitment to child safety. We can’t afford to become complacent.

Archbishop Peter Comensoli noted that the reportable conduct scheme and child safe standards serve to protect children from adults. Organisations also need to ensure children are kept safe from each other. This is an area that is becoming better understood and more visible.
The Commissioner noted all the practices of child safe standards re risk assessment relate to this matter. There is growing knowledge and therapeutic services for intervention for children using harmful sexual behaviours against others. There are a growing number of organisations that have knowledge and capacity and can provide advice to organisations. These organisations are a good place for referrals when a child needs therapeutic interventions.

Gisela Rankin – Springvale St John’s , thanked the Commissioner for her presentation. Gisela is a policy writer, but finds the task of documenting and implementing the Child Safe Standards is an overwhelming task in a very small congregation currently without a pastor. She is fully aware of regulatory obligations but is struggling to meet the requirements. Given that there is not much offered in the congregation for children, can requirements be reduced?
The Commissioner clarified that if there are no children and no prospect of children being involved, then there is a blanket exemption. If there is a possibility, or the congregation is open to children being involved, that blanket exemption won’t apply. The policies and codes of conduct etc do need to be attended to. But there is flexibility to adjust effort and work according to the extent of risk. If there are very limited child focussed activities, that should reduce some of the Standards. The Commissioner encouraged smaller congregations to look at the Standards in a practical way to meet the intent of the Standards. She encouraged churches not to reinvent the wheel on policies and procedures and not to put all their efforts on writing up documents, but rather implement the Child Safe Standards and focus on attitudinal change.
Jeff Wild raised the point that the Child Safe Standards need to be embedded within the broader context of ministry with children.

1. **News and updates from Member Churches**
Rev Dr Sandy Yule noted that [Rev Brendan Byrne](https://crosslight.org.au/2022/12/22/on-the-side-of-the-underdog/) is about to commence as an ecumenical chaplain at Melbourne University and will also join the ministry team at Wesley UC. Prayer was invited as Brendan commences these two ministries.

**Domestic Violence Prevention Committee pilot project: Shining the Light**
Rev Deacon Mark Kelly is a member of Catholic Social Services Victoria Council (CSSV) and also the Domestic Violence Prevention Committee. Working on a project to raise awareness in congregations and across the Dioceses in Victoria. Read about the Shining the Light project [here](https://css.org.au/publications/shining-a-light-pilot-program-evaluation-report/). Government funding was received for this project.
Sr Nicole Rotaru RSM had a leadership role in this project and there has been input from the Anglican Church and Uniting Church as well. Working closely with clergy to raise awareness, pastoral support people, and congregations.

**Lord’s Prayer**
Archbishop Peter Comensoli has been advised that the question of dropping the Lord’s Prayer before each day’s Parliamentary sittings will be debated very soon. The Archdiocese had prepared letters to all politicians and this week sent them out, in anticipation of the discussion of the matter in Parliament. The Lord's Prayer's place in the Victorian Parliament has been the source of [ongoing debate](https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/the-lords-prayer-could-be-dumped-from-victorias-parliament-heres-how/smjidwxv1) for many years. Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan has supported calls to axe the Lord’s Prayer from the Victorian Parliament. Reciting of the Lord’s Prayer is consistent with the Australian Constitution which says in its preamble that we are a people ‘who humbly rely on the blessings of almighty God’.

**Hospital Chaplaincy**
Government funding for hospital chaplaincy has now ceased. There was a hope that there would be a reprieve in the 2024 Budget, but it will now fall back to the churches to see if they can financially support hospital chaplaincy.

**Yoorrook Commission**The Yoorrook Commission was set up by the Victorian Government and the First People’s Assembly but operates independently of both. Its focus is to investigate justice for First Nations People, and is the first formal truth-telling process in historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria. This year the Yoorrook Justice Commission commenced its inquiry into land, sky and waters, health, housing and education and economic prosperity as the third part of the truth-telling process in Victoria. The Uniting Church in Australia Vic/Tas, The Catholic Church and the Anglican Church were invited to present to a hearing of the Commission on May 1st. Archbishop Peter Comensoli, Moderator Rev David Fotheringham, Bishop Richard Treloar, and Bishop Genieve Blackwell spoke at the hearing and responded to questions raised by the Commissioners. While it was a privilege to be part of these proceedings, it was also a challenging time in terms of preparing submissions and also appearing before the Commission. While the specifics of the written submissions from the churches varied in content, there was also a lot of resonance between them.

1. AOB
2. Closing prayer Lord’s Prayer

**ATTENDANCE**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Bruce Charles | Anglican Diocese of Gippsland |
| Rev Dr Satvasheela Pandhare | Anglican Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Bishop Paul Barker | Anglican Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Timothy Anderson | Anglican Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Dr Graeme Blackman | Anglican Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Bishop Genieve Blackwell | Anglican Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Bishop Richard Treloar | Anglican Diocese of Gippsland |
|  |  |
| Rev Dr Sandy Yule | Uniting Church in Australia (Vic/Tas) |
| Rev David Fotheringham | Uniting Church in Australia (Vic/Tas) |
| Rev Gospel Ralte | Uniting Church in Australia (Vic/Tas) |
| Lisa Carey | Uniting Church in Australia (Vic/Tas) |
| Dr Jill Tabart | Uniting Church in Australia (Vic/Tas) |
| Joan McRae | Uniting Church in Australia (Vic/Tas) |
| Isabel Thomas Dobson | Uniting Church in Australia (Vic/Tas) |
| Gavin Faichney | Uniting Church in Australia (Vic/Tas) |
| Diane Wookey | UCA/World Day of Prayer |
|  |  |
| Rev Deacon Mark Kelly | Catholic Diocese of Sale, CSSV |
| Caesar D'Mello | Catholic, Pax Christi |
| Dr Nasir Butrous | Chaldean Catholic |
| Archbishop Peter Comensoli | Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Penny Badwal | Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Jeff Wild | Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Rev Gregory Tait | Catholic Diocese of Ballarat |
| Rev Dr Kevin Lenehan | Catholic Theological College |
| Fr Denis Stanley | Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Bishop Shane Mackinlay | Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst |
| Fr Andriy Mykytyuk | Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy |
| Rev Deacon Joseph Leach | Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne |
| Ray Brindle | RSOF Quakers |
| Aileen Britton | RSOF Quakers |
| Sieneke Martin | RSOF Quakers |
| Beverley Polzin | RSOF Quakers |
| Captain Star Conliffe | The Salvation Army |
| Major Simon Damen | The Salvation Army |
| Rev Dr Ian Allsop | Churches of Christ Vic/Tas |
| Joanne Antoni | Churches of Christ Vic/Tas |
| Pastor Peter Ghalayini | Lutheran Church in Australia LCANZ |
| Fr Noor Noori | Syrian Orthodox Church |
| Adibeh abdo Attia | Syrian Orthodox Church |
| Fr Dr Jacob Joseph | Syrian Orthodox Church |
| Revd Bijumon Joseph | Melbourne Church of South India |
| Ashok Varkey | Melbourne Church of South India |
| Fr Shenouda Boutros | Coptic Orthodox Church |
| Ashok Jacob | Mar Thoma Church |
| Rev Sajin Baby | Melbourne Immanuel MTC |
| Heiko Koenig | German Lutheran Trinity Church |
|  |  |
| EX-OFFICIO |  |
| Rev Deacon Sandy Boyce | Executive Officer, VCC |

**Guests**: Commissioner Liana Buchanan (CCYP), Adrian Dass, Edmund Murphy (VCCEM), Elinor Porat (CCYP), Gisela Rankin (St John’s German Lutheran Church Springvale), Liz Stone (National Council of Churches in Australia)

**Apologies**: Dr Rob Nyhuis