

May 2023 Evening with The Winthrop Singers

The Council's 2023 collaboration with The Winthrop Singers was for the third time held at St Andrew's in Subiaco. Hosted on Thursday 11 May by the Reverend Peter Manuel, CCJWA members and guests were treated to glorious song under Ann Clarke's baton, organ voluntaries, and a shared dinner while listening to Mrs Susy Thomas reflecting on her Moderator role, in a traditional "fireside chat" with Reverend Marie Wilson, CCJWA chair.

The interfaith service began with Hongjie Shao playing Bach's Invention No 14, and Bronwen Herholdt playing Flute Piece by William Hine. Then followed the introit by The Winthrop Singers performing *Hinei Ma Tov* (arr. Malcolm Singer). Around the scripture readings (by Dr Judith Schneider and Dr Mary Marshall), The Winthrop Singers sang *Mizmòr letodà* (Salamone Rossi's setting of Psalm 100), and then *Richte mich, Gott* (Psalm 43 setting by Felix Mendelssohn). After the communal hymn *Praise to the Living God*, and prayers, the service concluded with Bronwen Herholdt playing Voluntary V by John Bennett.

Attendees and Singers crossed to the hall where dinner (prepared by parishioners Sue and Donald Coid) was served, facilitating interfaith dialogue and the traditional interview with a person of interest! In response to Marie Wilson's opening question, why did she, Susy, as Moderator, not wear a title of ordination, Susy replied that this role did not require it. The task was to represent a community of equal sharers in faith.

How was she equipped to handle this predominantly pastoral role? Her past 25 years involved working for Drug ARM (now Hope Community), an organisation concerned with aiding people suffering addiction. As CEO of this WA-based operative, and remaining involved in its current continuing form, Susy learned to value the contact she had with those who were aided; they taught her how to be 'real', on a number of levels. "I learned how to be humble, to reach out, and to love." She also developed tenacity in harnessing monetary favours from the government. This ability and her experiences led to an invitation to represent a political party, which she duly took up — temporarily. This she did, in spite of her preference to stay home with her grandchildren.

Born in Kerala, Susy was raised as a Christian in the Parish of St Thomas, in amongst a vibrant multifaith community, freely interacting with Jewish, Muslim, Syrian, and Catholic groups. While at university, she had an "encounter with Christ," and after meeting and marrying her husband Philip, emigrated initially to London, and then to Australia. Here, upon looking for a suitable school, she and Philip discovered the Uniting Church — an Australian phenomenon: an amalgam of Congregational, Presbyterian, and Methodist denominations — in Penrhos College.

Why choose to be Moderator? Susy outlined the path it took. When she was approached, she declined, but then came to the realisation, “whatever I’m asked, I should do.” After five persons questioned her initial refusal, and feeling challenged during a sermon, she agreed to become a candidate. In 2019 she was voted in, ahead of one other candidate. In retrospect, the highlights of this term were: meeting people, discovering how congregations function, and — not least — how chaplains function in their school communities.

A lively Q and A session followed. Some questions Susy addressed involved the following. What does a Moderator do? They attend meetings, and their primary task is to resolve issues of a pastoral nature, so, at a personal and relational level. What is Uniting theology? It is effectively an egalitarian Christianity, in contrast to a hierarchical form. The ‘-ing’ in Uniting represents its ongoing quality — a pilgrim people journeying between Christ’s leaving and Christ’s return, working to become one. Part of her role is weighing in on being ‘called’ to pastoral work. How did her work in Drug ARM equip her for this role? It taught her to walk justly and humbly, as per Micah 6:8. Other points included: a number of Perth private schools still bearing the names ‘Presbyterian’ or ‘Methodist’ were, in fact, now ‘Uniting’ — they were retained for continuity reasons; the Uniting Church allows a number of doctrines, which are combined through theological moderation. In all, the variety of questions put to Mrs Susy Thomas (and her candid replies) demonstrated a healthy interest in a faith group besides our own.

The combination of music, with its quality of uniting people despite a diversity of held views, and an interview, shedding light on the Uniting Church, a significant Australian denomination, proved to be a great complementary success.

Judith Schneider
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