

a la carte

Daily menu for the 10th Uniting Church Assembly, July 12-19 2003

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'Don't talk tough on North Korea, talk peace'

South Korean church leaders yesterday pleaded for a peaceful solution to the Korean crisis.

"Don't talk tough to North Korea – talk peace," Rev Choi Byung Gon, said in an interview.

"We have seen what happened in Iraq. We don't want that to happen to Korea.

Rev Choi Byung Gon is moderator of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea.

He spoke to the Assembly today on behalf of the overseas guests.

"John Howard has left open the option of going to war against North Korea," he said. "The headlines this morning said, 'Howard talks tough on North Korea.'

"I urge you, the Uniting Church, to pray for a peaceful resolution on the crisis in the Korean peninsula."

Later he said through an interpreter: "We don't want war. We have seen what war does. We want war never, never again. We don't want to tell your political leaders what to do. But we do call on the Christians of Australia to do everything they can to ensure that there is a peaceful settlement.

"The confrontational policy of the US towards North Korea must stop. The current nuclear crisis must be resolved by peaceful means.

"For the peace of the Korean peninsula, north-east Asia and the world, we support a Korea free of nuclear weapons of all kinds. This crisis must be solved by negotiation and diplomatic activity."

Fifty years ago, he said, there had been a tragic war on the peninsula.

"We must not allow another war," he said. "It could



Rev Choi Byung Gon (left) and Rev Dr Ok-Nam Kim

threaten the lives of the 70 million people of Korea."

Rev Dr Ok-Nam Kim, moderator-elect of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, supported Rev Choi Byung Gon's plea for a peaceful settlement.

"We ask you to stand against the power-oriented

diplomatic policy of the US, which is a threat to peace," he said.

"President Bush's 'axis of evil' speech caused enormous anger and resentment throughout our country."

He said the US must guarantee the survival of the North Korean regime.

"It seems North Korea is willing to give up nuclear weapons in return for a clear-cut promise from the US to guarantee its regime and give it economic support," he said.

"It is clear from the difficult economic situation of North Korea that the North does not want to be isolated from international society and from neighboring countries, such as South Korea, China and Russia.

"But it seems that the US is approaching the issue from the perspective of its military strategy in North East Asia."

It is doing this "to strengthen the military union of South Korea, Japan and the US, to restrain China through the missile defence system – and to strengthen US influence," he said.

Assembly recommences painful discussions

"There is pain associated with this proposal," were the opening remarks of Rev John Mavor as he brought the Assembly Standing Committee's proposal on sexuality before the 9th Assembly.

This proposal aims to make clear the Church's understanding of sexual ethics and the place of homosexual persons in the life of the Church.

John emphasised the proposal asked the Church to continue its acceptance of diversity.

He quoted the diversity in the early Church recorded in Acts and Galatians.

"When you worship in many different congregations, you soon discover the Uniting Church is not a stranger to diversity," he said.

"This proposal recognises people have different views,"

said Rev Terence Corkin. "It is not necessary for us to impose one view on the whole church."

"The Uniting Church has high expectations in the sexual behaviour of its ministers and members," said Rev Bev Fabb from Western Australia. "We all agree those standards enunciated in the minutes of the 8th Assembly and the Code of Ethics should be used when assessing a person's possible candidature."

"Membership is open to all who are baptised," said Heidi Stabb, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, "and yet people have been excluded from membership and from the sacrament of communion."

The proposals were considered by working groups yesterday afternoon and will come before the Assembly for discussion on Wednesday.

Church to 'initiate people in the reign of God'

The church's task in today's society was "nothing less than to initiate people in the reign of God", national director of Theology and Discipleship Rev Dr Robert Bos told the Assembly yesterday.

Dr Bos was introducing proposals arising from the 'Becoming Disciples' discussion paper. The discussion paper is intended to help congregations with the task of evangelism and forming disciples, and offers an eight-phase process for integrating new Christians into a life of faith.

Dr Bos said: "We can never be content with a vague, wishy-washy feel-good spirituality. Our task is not to be nice to people in the hope that they might accept our invitation to 'come to church'. Our task is nothing less than to initiate people in the reign of God."

The Becoming Disciples process would assist congregations with the "serious task and joyous responsibility" of evangelism.

"We live in a time when we cannot take for granted that most people know the basic stories and beliefs of the Christian faith. We need a process for initiating people into the reign of God. A number of other churches have been using this process and have found it useful."

The process emphasises participation in the life of a Christian community, learning from others and being mentored as the key elements: "Being a Christian is just as much a lifestyle as a set of beliefs or doctrines."

Dr Bos said: "A few people read the [Becoming Disciples] paper as either abandoning the practice of confirmation or downgrading its importance. We want to restore confirmation as a step in faith formation, rather than seeing it as a matter of participation in the councils of the church. We see this as a recovery of the meaning of confirmation."

The Becoming Disciples proposals return to the Assembly for decision on Thursday.

Congress report: partnership encouraged

The leaders of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress yesterday encouraged the Uniting Church to develop its partnership with indigenous people.

UAICC chairperson Rev Sealin Garlett and national coordinator Rev Shayne Blackman pointed to indigenous employment programs (IEP) now under way, community justice groups and Shalom College at Townsville as three positive areas of ministry for the congress.

"The church has done a great thing in inaugurating the congress," said Mr Blackman. "We in the congress love you. We don't know whether you want to love us back, but we love you."

Both men highlighted the indigenous employment program, based on the 2000 Assembly's decision to ask synods to work with congress so that at least 2% of church staff will be indigenous people.

"Synods have been able to use it and have an impact," said Mr Garlett. "I am encouraged that more synods are still embarking on this journey with us."

The UAICC report said that the South Australian synod's program will see more than 100 indigenous people in employment throughout the church. In Queensland 300 or more indigenous people are to be employed and trained over the next five years. And Victoria has now begun its program with a coordinator appointed recently.

Progress in community development and education also featured in Mr Blackman's address to the Assembly.

He described Shalom College as "one of the most exciting projects in Australia", drawing about 400 children from across Queensland and the Northern Territory.

"It raises a whole raft of issues in education across Australia," he said of the college, which won a national award last year for its work in literacy with primary school students.

And the community justice groups had helped to make an impact of the problems with alcohol consumption – a situation that was now "much more positive. We've been able to make a contribution," said Mr Blackman.

UAICC reported to Assembly that the community development arm of the congress's Calvary Presbytery in Queensland had had "a major impact in initiating and shaping the development of community justice groups".

"More recently, these groups have gained statutory

powers to regulate the possession and consumption of alcohol in their communities," said the report.

"This has had a considerable positive effect in some communities ... resulting in decreased consumption, reduced levels of alcohol-related hospital presentations, less violence and fewer people appearing before the courts."

Mr Blackman described the covenanting program as "absolutely essential" and encouraged the church to engage in it.

Covenanting can be liberating for all members of the church, Peter Lewis, national director of covenanting, said yesterday.

He described covenanting as a gift from congress to the rest of the church.

"It was congress' idea to have a covenant," he said.

"It's a deeper thing than reconciliation. It's about how to respect each other and be committed to justice.

"In one sense it's like a treaty within the church.

"We need to articulate that more – how does the church relate to congress and the regions of congress?"

"That's a subject of on-going discussion between the leaders of assembly, the synods and congress.

"It doesn't need fixing. It just needs refining."

Mr Lewis said covenanting is also about each member of the church seeing that issues of reconciliation and justice can demonstrate who they are as disciples in this land.

"It's not just a structural issue," he said. "It's how we see our discipleship."

A commitment to covenanting can be liberating for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, he said.

"By covenanting, by struggling with Indigenous people for justice, we can help liberate Indigenous people from what I call the colonial matrix that's been imposed on them.

"In that journey non-Indigenous people will also be liberated from the demon of terra nullius.

"They won't be bound by the mindsets that come from our invader culture. They'll see things for the perspective of the people who were originally here.

"We'll see things more from the view of the crucified in this country. That will change our perspectives and, I hope, deepen our commitment to the crucified God."