

# Leader seeks to unite

By Nigel Tapp

**RRONANG** Garrawurra (pictured) strokes his luxuriant beard thoughtfully.

It is not that he needs time to ponder his answer but he first must filter his words through his native Liyakawumirr Aboriginal language before responding in English.

The short pause, in and of itself, says much about the new chair of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

You sense that Reverend Garrawurra is not a man to be rushed, but a man who walks with God in a measured and deeply thoughtful way, seeking always to be in tune with the Holy Spirit and ready to hear and act when the Lord speaks.

I had asked him if he felt any fear or concern when standing in front of the media to speak at a Prayer Vigil called by the Uniting Church's 13th triennial Assembly in Adelaide last month. The vigil was organised to voice opposition to the Federal Government's Stronger Futures legislation.

A quick shake of his head and his dark eyes open wider with a look of some surprise at the question.

"(Uniting Church in Australia) President Andrew (Dutney) said to me when we were walking down the street (for the vigil) that he was feeling nervous," Mr Garrawurra said.

"I said 'Why are you nervous? It is not your business or my business that we are doing it is God's business and if God says we have to walk then we walk.'

"Because he has the power and strength to deal with the matter, not us."

The sight of the new heads of the Church and Congress walking side-by-side was also a very symbolic act, given the deep

desire of both men to progress the covenanting relationship between the two organisations.

Messers Garrawurra and Dutney are in the infancy of their leadership, having been installed at separate July national gatherings of their respective bodies.

Mr Garrawurra is adamant that the more Congress and the Uniting Church work on issues together the deeper will become the understanding between the two.

But, he also wants to see that depth of understanding grow within the multicultural elements of the Uniting Church.

He interlocks his fingers to show the depth of the bond he envisions occurring as all who come under the Uniting Church banner live and pray together.

Mr Garrawurra – who grew up in a strong Methodist home in Arnhem Land before finding his own way to the Lord in his late '20s thanks to a team from Rev Billy Graham's ministry in outback Australia in 1972 – is greatly pleased by how he sees the Church responding to Congress and vice versa.

There is still much learning and understanding to be done as part of the covenanting process, but Mr Garrawurra is confident that will happen as the relationship progresses.

He said Congress would continue to work with UnitingJustice to ensure appropriate recognition of the First People is enshrined in the Federal constitution, just as it was in the revised preamble to the Church's constitution three years ago.

Mr Garrawurra is pleased the Church is campaigning so strongly for the recognition of his

brothers and sisters.

Both leaders are determined that the covenanting relationship must be more than just words on a piece of paper.

"I was excited and pleased to have the opportunity to march alongside Andrew and it is a sign of the closeness which is being generated between Congress and the Church," Mr Garrawurra said.

"It was one of the few times that the national leaders of both the Church and the UAICC have marched together and it was a sign of that closeness in our relationship.

"The relationship is getting stronger and stronger and the more we do together the closer the relationship will become.

"It is not just about issues like the (Northern Territory) intervention (where there is already agreement) but on different issues we will need to walk through together (here agreement is not as clear).

Mr Garrawurra will leave his Elcho Island home and base himself in the Northern Territory capital of Darwin to make him more accessible during his chairmanship. He has been involved with Congress ever since it was first established. It was Congress which encouraged him to undertake his bachelor of

theology studies many years ago.

He was initially sent to Darwin to begin his studies by his local Methodist church on Elcho Island after it accepted his call to ministry.

The challenge in studying was that Mr Garrawurra had only completed two years of primary school – admitting he 'ran away' because he did not like school and preferred to learn about his culture at the feet of his parents.

Mr Garrawurra talks excitedly

about feeling God's guiding hand throughout his studying which led to him being appointed Minister of the Word on the Gove Peninsula.

He sees his first and primary role as the pastoral care of his Congress leaders Australia-wide.

"Others things can wait but it is a priority that I support and encourage my leaders wherever they are," he said.

"There is not time to wait."

## New deputy chair is a Tasmanian

**TASMANIAN** born and bred Rev Tim Matton-Johnson is the new national deputy chair of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

Nominated by South Australia, Mr Matton-Johnson was installed at Congress' national gathering in Alice Springs last month.

He sees his role as to provide support to the national chair Rev Rronang Garrawurra.

As well as working as an accountant for three years, Mr Matton-Johnson has spent most of the past almost 30 years in rural and regional postings in Victoria and Tasmania.

Currently the Congress' Northern Tasmanian placement minister, Mr Matton-Johnson was ordained in 1985 and ministered at Heywood and Corriyong, in rural Victoria. He returned to Tasmania after completing his master's degree in theology in 1996.

Rev Matton-Johnson ministered at Oatlands then moved to the suburban Glenorchy parish. He took on his current role at the beginning of last year.



Rev Rronang Garrawurra and Rev Tim Matton-Johnson