

Vale Dr Keith Suter AM

Born England 25 July 1948 – 10 December 2025, Sydney Australia

There will be many reflections about Keith Suter during these coming weeks, months and years. Keith wore many hats and had a considerable number of personal connections and participated in a broad range of organisations and businesses. Keith would become quite widely known in the general public as the Foreign and International Affairs Editor for *Sunrise* and *The Morning Show* on Channel 7, a commentator role he commenced in 2002.

John Sandeman (*The Other Cheek*) asked me to provide an article¹ about Keith's church connection, which was primarily the Uniting Church, though he did speak at and connect with many different denominations. Keith received his AM in 2019 "For significant service to international relations, and to the Uniting Church in Australia."

Keith's connection with the Uniting Church coincided with that of the denomination which was inaugurated in 1977. He arrived in Australia in the early 1970s enabled by a British scholarship arrangement that provided for opportunity to study in accredited institutions in Commonwealth countries and began the first of two PhDs that he would complete at the University of Sydney.

Keith's initial church connection was at the Presbyterian residential college at the University of Sydney, St Andrew's (Fr 1973). Keith left St. Andrew's in 1975 two years before the church union. The college remained a Presbyterian College after union, as part of the [continuing] Presbyterian Church.²

I think the experience of life at St Andrew's in the 1970s left an indelible impact on Keith, and in a practical way helped to reinforce his long-standing teetotaller commitment. In more recent years Keith was involved in supporting the college, particularly in mentoring and alumni events.

Keith later connected with the Methodist Church, another branch of the imminent Australian union church, The Uniting Church, through the influential Methodist Parish, the Central Methodist Mission in Sydney that would become Wesley Central Mission (Sydney). Keith started under the formative leadership of (soon to conclude) Superintendent Rev Sir Alan Walker and held the role of Director for Administration from 1976-1981.

¹ The article on John's website is a short version of this article.

² Unlike for congregations in the Methodist Church, it was not mandatory for Presbyterian congregations to enter union. There was also a process for working out which institutions became part of the Uniting Church or continued as Presbyterian (or in some cases Joint), though there was a long legal dispute over some arrangements. There was no dispute with St. Andrew's College and it remained a Presbyterian College. Note: St. Andrew's College is no longer a Presbyterian College, though the 1998 Act retains a church connection through the concept of 'approved church' for various appointments including a proportion of members of the college council. This change is a long story and would require a separate article. For the new establishment context see [St-Andrews-College-Act-of-Parliament.pdf](#). For an overview of the Uniting Church and its antecedent make-up see my article in Church Heritage. [ch-20-2-05-bentley-uca-40-years.pdf](#)

During this period at Wesley Central Mission Keith returned to residential life at the University of Sydney, though in his second sojourn he went to Wesley College (from 1979), while undertaking further studies and helping with tutorial arrangements. I don't know of anyone else who had two 'fresher' years, but there may be other students who had this dual experience of Australian residential university life. Keith's interest in conflict resolution studies was fuelled at Wesley College by practical circumstances. I remember that he told me how he coped with the raucous and often late night (secret bacchanalian?) behaviour of partying students who were ten years younger at this stage. As mentioned, Keith followed the established Methodist teetotaller tradition and was often an early riser. His negotiation strategy was to play band music loudly at 6 am in the morning, a couple of hours after his neighbours had crashed out. A compromise was soon reached. Keith was recognised by Wesley College in early 2025 for his service to the college and society with a Foundation Medal.

Time with the Uniting Church Assembly

An opportunity arose for Keith to use his growing academic and writing skills with the newly established Commission on Social Responsibility. This Commission along with other commissions had been formed in 1977 with the creation of the Uniting Church, and were tasked with providing national perspectives and resources for the national council of the Uniting Church, the Assembly³. The Commission on Social Responsibility began to find its feet in terms of considering major public and social issues, and was looking for a person to establish the work on a broader academic foundation.

Keith became General Secretary of the Assembly Commission on Social Responsibility in the early 1980s, serving for a term from 1982-1985, concluding as he told me as 'collateral damage' in what would be one of many restructurings of the Assembly governance structure and office.

Keith was the ideal person in these early years as he had finished his first PhD on international law and [guerilla] warfare, and had a keen interest in peace initiatives, particularly concern about nuclear armaments, and these areas were a major public focus for many organisations and movements in the 1980s.

In a memorable media frenzy during these years, Keith was caught up in *The Bulletin*'s exploration of new left movements with their initial article having the wonderful headline 'The Radical Left's New Power Bases' (January 25, 1983). I understand Keith was quite bemused by this and thought his burgeoning depiction as a leading communist in Australia to be quite exaggerated. Keith certainly connected with and wrote for communist publications, though he was keen to have his work published by all who were interested in matters of peace. Interestingly one of Keith's mentors, Alan Walker was a pacifist in World War II (the Vietnam era is the one usually highlighted).

³ The state council for the Uniting Church is the Synod, the regional body is the Presbytery and the local church, the Congregation.

‘*The Bulletin* affair’ dragged on into 1984, and re-emerged in later years in other publications, as it became a prominent matter in debate in Synod newspapers and discussion in local congregations. The membership of the Uniting Church was of course a good deal more traditional and conservative then. Peace was seen a good foundation in general for a new denomination influenced by Methodist social action, but the associations of socialism and communism, particularly for the more entrepreneurial members was not an endearing quality.

Time in Western Australia

Trinity Church (a church from a congregational tradition that entered the UCA in 1977) was located in central Perth and had a large financial base from a redevelopment. The church decided to use some of the proceeds to create a centre focussed on Peace. The Trinity Peace Research Institute was formed and the timing and connection for Keith fitted perfectly. He took on the role of inaugural director, serving for five years (1986-1991). Keith decided to leave Perth at the end of the term as he found it did not present the wider opportunity for academic connection and the intellectual challenge he needed at that time.

Back to Sydney

On return to Sydney Keith reconnected with Wesley Mission Superintendents, past leader Rev. Sir Alan Walker, and the now established leader Rev. Dr Gordon Moyes. Keeping busy in his ‘retirement’, Alan Walker had established a new organisation in the 1980s, the National Goals and Directions Movement. Alan was keen to promote public discussion of key issues and consider the future of Australia from a Christian foundation. Again Keith was an ideal person to further develop this and he became the Executive Director of the National Goals and Directions Movement (1991-2001) on a part-time basis. During this time, Keith connected with high-profile people from business, politics, the not-for-profit sector and educational spheres, building a strong base and personal network.

Returning to Sydney in his early forties, Keith decided to look to a more permanent accommodation arrangement as the thought of living at Wesley College again was not on his agenda, though I am sure he would have been welcomed as an academic tutor in the senior common room. Through Alan’s initial facilitation and Gordon Moyes’ willing agreement (Gordon knew what value he could bring to Wesley Mission), Keith was employed again in this significant church mission agency as a consultant with a helpful starting package to enable him to enter the housing market at what for many in that period was a late time in life.

Keith thus began a new period of fruitful collaboration at Wesley Mission that would span nearly three decades. This included 17 years as a policy and issues consultant, providing among many duties, social analysis and information for Gordon Moyes and the Wesley senior leadership team, and practical political advice when it came to liaison with the wider Uniting Church. The consultancy position allowed Keith wide-ranging opportunity to explore a variety of topics and he soon became a key person for media organisations to seek out for public comment (increasingly wider than the initial 2GB role that came from Wesley’s connections).

After concluding his contract role Keith continued serving Wesley as a board member from 2009, in the pivotal role of secretary from 2012, and as Chair of the Congregational Mission Life. He only fully retired from Wesley Mission in 2023, though this did not mean he was thinking of actual retirement and he willingly accepted more speaking engagements, and started new initiatives including a podcast on international affairs.

Third and Final PhD

Early in that new decade of ministry and service, Keith embarked upon his third PhD (awarded in 2013). The topic was “The Future of the Uniting Church in Australia: The Application of Scenario Planning to the Creation of Four “Futures” for the Uniting Church in Australia”. Keith’s scenarios considered the outcomes for an institutional church with a large social and community sector and an ageing membership. A copy can be downloaded at one of his websites: [Church Futures](#).

Keith was disappointed that in general, the Uniting Church leadership or ‘hierarchy’ ignored his thesis as he viewed this decade to be a critical time because the denomination had entered a period of substantial decline. Keith spent some time particularly in 1977, the fortieth anniversary of the denomination promoting consideration of the scenarios through selected invitations, particularly in WA and in a limited way in Queensland, and there was also significant discussion and connection with evangelical groups and organisations within the Uniting Church.

During all these decades, Keith maintained a local membership in the Uniting Church, mainly at Wesley Mission, usually connecting with two congregations and representing one at the regional council, the Presbytery.⁴ Keith was comfortable talking with people from all types of backgrounds and was never one to ask people to call him Dr Suter, though many people did, or rather Dr Keith.

As a prominent Lay Preacher he maintained a regular preaching schedule outside of Wesley Mission, and visited churches and Christian organisations to speak at seminars on international and contemporary issues. Keith conducted the ministry of Lay Preacher for nearly fifty years, notably within the major stream of the Methodist tradition that focussed on personal faith, holiness and social justice. Keith’s Christian faith and commitment was the foundation of all his work and service, and among his wide legacy will be a tremendous body of writing and reflection, worthy of a Presidential Library. I am hopeful that someone will complete a PhD on Dr Keith Suter. His insightful mind and genial nature will be missed.

With prayers for his partner Jane, wider family and Keith’s many friends, colleagues and supporters. Well-done good and faithful servant.

Peter Bentley
pkbentleyarchive.com; 12 December 2025

Note: A shorter version of this article was published on The Oher Cheek on 13/12/2025

⁴ On a personal note, Dr Keith Suter wrote and presented a warm Minute of Appreciation upon the conclusion of my time as Secretary of the Presbytery of Sydney in 2004.