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For immediate release

UNITING CHURCH SUPPORTS FIJI METHODISTS

The Uniting Church in Australia has today expressed grave concern for its partner church, the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma.

Uniting Church President, Rev. Gregor Henderson, said he is distressed that the Fijian military and police have been intimidating Methodist Church ministers, and have announced the government will prohibit the church from holding its Annual Conference in August.

"The Uniting Church in Australia stands in solidarity with the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma and finds the government banning of a church conference entirely unacceptable," Rev. Henderson said.

"The ban represents a major interference of the state in the operations of the church and seriously compromises the principle of freedom of religion, which was enshrined in the 1997 Constitution of Fiji."

The Uniting Church has today written to the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and to its eleven Pacific church partners inviting them to make representation to the Fijian government to lift the ban on the Methodist Annual Conference.

Rev. Dr Kerry Enright, National Director UnitingWorld, said the Methodist Church was concerned for the economic hardship, increasing poverty and loss of freedoms currently being experienced by Fijians, and was trying to make a positive contribution to the future of the nation.

"We are in regular communication with the Methodist Church leadership who are committed to a peaceful solution and have been unrelenting in their attempts to dialogue with the government.

The attitude and actions by the Fijian government towards the Methodist Church are being experienced by many other institutions including the media, non-government organisations, the judiciary and lawyers.

"We plead with the Fiji government to immediately restore basic human rights, including freedom of assembly and freedom of the press," Rev. Enright said.

"In the interests of peace and justice, the Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma must be allowed to hold its annual meeting without government interference."

The Methodist Church is the largest Fijian denomination with 36% of the Fijian population and 62% of the total Christian community.

Rev. Enright is available for comment: 0408 231 611.