



PRESIDENT: Dr Deidre Palmer

GENERAL SECRETARY: Colleen Geyer

ASSEMBLY REPORT

Annual Meeting
Uniting Church in Australia Synod of South Australia
February 2021

Introduction

The UCA Assembly affirms our faith in the Risen, Crucified Christ, who constitutes, rules and renews the Church. Our ministry and mission as the Assembly arises from and is shaped by this faith. Our priorities are set by members representing all councils of the Uniting Church meeting in prayerful discernment using the principles of consensus decision-making.

The Assembly acknowledges the sovereign First Peoples of the lands and waters where we work in locations across the country. We pay our respects to their elders past and present and to all their descendants who have cared for this place since creation. An [acknowledgement of First Peoples](#) is something we recommend for all church meetings and have published guidelines on these acknowledgements to resource the church.

In all our activities, the Assembly lives out the UCA's commitment to being in Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), particularly through our connections with the UAICC National Executive. This commitment is enhanced by the work of the Assembly Consultant, Covenanting.

In 2021 we mark 36 years since the Uniting Church declared, "[We are a Multicultural Church](#)". We acknowledge the wonderful contribution and leadership that our culturally and linguistically diverse communities bring to all parts of the Uniting Church.

In the past year, as discrimination and disadvantage on the basis of colour and ethnicity have been laid bare globally and anti-discrimination campaigns have gained such momentum, our commitments to the Covenant and being a truly multicultural and intercultural Church have never been more important.

Response to COVID-19

Since March 2020 Assembly operations have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in accordance with government-mandated lockdowns and restrictions. With staff spread across four states and two territories this has brought many challenges and the need to pivot our work to meet each context.

As the pandemic spread globally, the Assembly staff have been working predominantly from home while attending to ongoing projects and personal responsibilities. We have attended to business continuity and risk planning for different future scenarios. We have worked to identify our learnings and how these will affect the future way we work.

In April 2020, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) approved [online gathering for worship with Holy Communion](#) for those Congregations that wished to provide this. This approval is in place until the end of June 2021, when the decision will be reviewed.

The Assembly and its Agencies have also provided national resources for the Church, online forums for CALD leaders to share their experiences, as well as opportunities for UCA members to connect with each other, participate in webinars and be in conversation with overseas partners. The Assembly Resourcing Unit also held online BYO Coffee chats on a Monday evening. A series of webinars on [the Church and COVID-19](#) is available on the Uniting Church in Australia Vimeo channel.

The Assembly justice activity during the pandemic has involved advocacy on the JobSeeker and [JobKeeper support packages](#), the need for services supporting people in family and domestic violence, the plight of refugees and asylum seekers and those on temporary visas including international students, most of whom were and remain ineligible for any support.

A post COVID-19 advocacy platform was developed, [#BuildBackBetter](#).

Assembly Strategic Plan 2020-2023

The [Assembly Strategic Plan](#) has five Strategic Directions:

Respond to the Church: *Respond to the ongoing needs of the whole Church and other Councils.*

Identity: *Communicate a clear and concise message – who are we as the UCA and what is our distinct role in working toward the coming of the kingdom of God in Australia.*

Innovation: *Take risks, experiment and shape our church to respond to the needs of today and those of the future.*

Inter-generational: *Welcome, equip and hold together the different generations in the life, ministry, decision-making and leadership of the church.*

Inter-cultural: *Learn from and enable diverse cultural groups within the church to flourish together.*

Assembly Communications

In July 2020, the Assembly launched a new website, <https://uniting.church>.

The website details the work of the Assembly along a broader explanation of Uniting Church identity, under the banner: “A community of people following Jesus and God’s call to live with love, grace and hope in the world.” This includes an extended explanation of the Uniting Church’s distinct approach to Christian faith and practice in new sections [Shaped by Jesus](#), [Empowered by the Spirit](#), [Called by God](#) and [Exploring our Call](#).

The Assembly has also released a six-part series of short videos on the concepts of Christian faith as understood and practiced in the Uniting Church in Australia, told through the voices of the women and men in a range of ministries. The ["Our Faith" series](#) was produced by Dr Craig Mitchell. A series of Bible studies to accompany the series is in development.

ASSEMBLY RESOURCING UNIT

The Assembly Resourcing Unit is a multi-disciplinary, project-based team, working in collaboration with other parts of the Assembly and the wider UCA to deliver on projects and areas of work aligned with Assembly responsibilities and priorities.

Circles

At the 15th Assembly in Melbourne in 2018, the Assembly launched [Circles of Interest](#) - a new way for Church members to engage with and in its areas of work. There are seven Circles of Interest: Walking Together as First and Second Peoples, Working for Justice, Being a Multicultural Church, Growing in Faith, Seeking Common Ground, Discipling the Next Generations and Transforming Worship. Anyone can join. Circles are supported by an Advocate and a Panel of experts.

Currently over 1000 UCA members belong to the Circles and are engaged with sharing their knowledge and interests, particularly through private Facebook groups. Through their participation, many members are contributing to developing resources and projects run by the Assembly. The conversation in these forums is also leading to greater take up of Uniting Church resources. This has been particularly apparent in last year’s sharing around A Season of Creation in September, #16Days against gender-based violence and the 2021 Day of Mourning resource.

illuminate portal

The [illuminate document portal](#) is being developed as a searchable repository for all liturgies, statements and resolutions relating to the Assembly’s work. Almost 600 documents have already been added to the portal which will make finding current and historical resources an easier process.

Uniting Learning

Uniting Learning is an online learning platform that has been launched by the Assembly. Used by two Synods and UCA groups across the country, it is a growing learning community as well as an opportunity to share and distribute online educational resources across the UCA.

National Conferences

The UCA is enriched and enlivened in its life by 13 National Conferences (Tongan, Fijian, Samoan, Niuean, Indonesian, Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Tamil, South Sudanese, Middle East and Ibero-Latino). The National Conferences are supported with a small financial contribution from the Assembly, and usually meet together annually or biannually.

The Chairs of the National Conferences meet together regularly, and with the President and members of the Assembly Resourcing Unit for sharing and contributing to the life of the UCA nationally.

The Assembly is committed to providing more resources in different languages. For example, currently the Basis of Union has been [translated into 10 languages](#) and Basis translators recently [held an online forum about their work](#).

Ecumenical News

The Assembly continues to hold and fund UCA membership in international ecumenical organisations on behalf of the UCA. These include the World Council of Churches, the World Methodist Council, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Global Christian Forum, Pacific Conference of Churches and Christian Conference of Asia.

Due to COVID-19, some international ecumenical gatherings have been postponed. These include: World Council of Churches 11th Assembly (now August 2022), Christian Conference of Asia 15th General Assembly (2022 tbc), World Methodist Council (now August 2022).

A long-standing dialogue between the UCA and the Lutheran Church of Australia continues to meet.

Interfaith Activities

In 2020 the Assembly in a joint initiative with Affinity Intercultural Foundation, the Synod of NSW and the ACT and Uniting NSW.ACT, [co-hosted an Iftar dinner online](#). Planning is underway for a similar event during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in early May 2021.

The UCA continues to meet twice yearly with members of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry in a dialogue that continues to offer opportunities to share and learn between our two faith communities. Both meetings in 2020 - in May and November - took place online.

Advocacy

As noted above, much advocacy has been related to COVID-19 and our Church's concern for people being left behind by government responses. We have been part of the End COVIDforAll campaign, urging our government to provide vital support to vulnerable nations during the crisis, including equitable access to COVID vaccines, when they become available.

Additionally, the Assembly continues to encourage participation in a number of climate change-focused actions including the School Strike 4 Climate groups and as part of the global ecumenical initiative, [A Season of Creation](#). We have also [hosted a national, interfaith event](#) with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) commemorating the 75th Anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in support of the Australian Government signing and ratifying the United Nations Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The Treaty entered into force in January 2021, but the Australian Government has yet to sign the Treaty,

ASSEMBLY AGENCIES

UnitingCare Australia

[UnitingCare Australia](#) is the national body for the Uniting Church's community services network, and an Agency of the Assembly. UnitingCare Australia has a mandate to advocate with the Church, to Government and the broader community on policies and practices which enhance the dignity of people, especially those who are most vulnerable. We work towards a community in which every person meets their full potential.

Strategic Plan

The UnitingCare Australia [Strategic Plan](#) includes four Strategic Priorities:

Justice for First Peoples: *that the unique place of our First Peoples in the life of our nation is acknowledged and upheld*

Ageing to our Full Potential: *that all people experience compassion and dignity as they age and exercise their rights as full members of society*

Addressing Economic Inequality: *that all people are able to fully participate as citizens across all domains of life*

Royal Commission Responses: *that the Uniting Church embraces the opportunity that Royal Commissions bring to create a society where all people are valued and honoured.*

Initiatives in the UnitingCare Australia Strategic Priorities include:

Justice for First Peoples

- Uniting First Peoples Network and Working Group
- Advocacy on a number of issues including Closing the Gap targets, incarceration rates, housing and domestic violence

Addressing Economic Inequality

- Submission to, and appearance at, Senate Inquiry into Government's response to COVID
- Advocacy on a range of topics include JobSeeker, homelessness, child poverty and emergency relief

Ageing to our Full Potential

- Advocacy on a number of issues, in particular around responding to COVID-19
- Responding to the Aged Care Royal Commission.

Royal Commissions

Aged Care Royal Commission

Submissions have been made as follows:

- Final summary submission
- Submission on Impact of COVID on aged care services
- Submission on Direct care workforce regulation
- Response to Home care propositions and Hearing appearance

Disability Royal Commission

The UCA response to the Royal Commission is overseen by the Disability Royal Commission National Task Group (facilitated by UnitingCare Australia), and Synod Task Groups.

Submissions have been made as follows:

- Response to Emergency Planning and Response issues paper
- Response to Rights and Attitudes Issues Paper
- Response to the experience of First Nations people with disability in Australia issues paper

Board

The UnitingCare Australia Board provides governance oversight to the work of the Agency. Geoff Batkin AM was appointed the new Chair of the UnitingCare Australia Board. Mr Batkin retired as Chief Executive Officer of Wesley Mission Queensland in late 2020.

Frontier Services

[Frontier Services](#) is an agency of the National Assembly. Its main activities are to [raise funds to support Bush Chaplains](#) and to connect volunteers to help people doing it tough in remote Australia through the [Outback Links program](#).

The rapidly changing economic climate and policy changes like border closures have seen Frontier Services adopt a flexible but pastoral focus in supporting staff, chaplains and remote communities. The 2020 [Outback BBQ fundraiser](#) was extended across a longer time frame to allow for greater engagement.

Strategic Plan

To enable Frontier Services to be there when we are needed most, we are focusing on three priorities:

1. Expanding the Bush Chaplaincy network to 25 Bush Chaplains covering all of remote Australia.
2. Having a team of 2,000 volunteers to support those living and working in remote Australia
3. Making Frontier Services a financially sustainable organisation through building working capital and reduced debt.

Board

The [Frontier Services Board](#) provides governance oversight to the work of the Agency.

Frontier News

Frontier Services' quarterly publication [Frontier News](#) highlights the Agency's work.

UnitingWorld

[UnitingWorld](#) is the international partnerships agency of the National Assembly, collaborating with churches overseas to create lasting change together.

UnitingWorld's mission is to address the causes and consequences of poverty, injustice and violence, and strengthen the Church for this mission. Its focus has four themes: overcoming poverty, gender equality, climate justice, and strengthening leadership. UnitingWorld also responds to humanitarian crises that impact UCA partner churches. Our most recent appeal was to assist Fijians affected by Tropical Cyclone Yasa through our friends in the Methodist Church in Fiji.

Strategic Plan

UnitingWorld has four strategic goals

1. To nurture church relationships in the Pacific, Asia and Africa on behalf of the UCA, creating space for engagement, learning & advocacy.
2. To implement collaborative programs with partner churches that deliver sustainable change to their communities in line with our mission.
3. To engage and inspire the UCA community to partner with us through learning, prayer, advocacy and financial support.

4. To operate a responsible and effective organisation with effective leadership, learning and continuous improvements.

Board

The [UnitingWorld Board](#) provides governance oversight to the work of the Agency.

Annual Report

UnitingWorld Annual Reports are [available online](#).

Aid projects in a COVID-19 world

COVID-19 has seen UnitingWorld's work change significantly. Every single project has been adapted and re-oriented to address the risks arising from the pandemic. In the last six months across the range of our partners, UnitingWorld have supported the distribution of thousands of relief rations, soap/sanitiser hygiene kits, masks, health and safety information, education materials for children missing school and held community information sessions on COVID-19 safety and the safeguarding and protection of women, children and those with disabilities.

Structure and Resourcing

On 1 October 2020, UnitingWorld reached a significant milestone in its strategic plan, moving to operate under its own ABN as a registered charity, with status as a Public Benevolent Institution, with the ability to offer tax deductibility for all donations. This has taken many years to accomplish. Governance and control arrangements remain exactly as before.

ASSEMBLY UNITS AND COMMITTEES

Uniting Disaster Recovery

The Uniting Church supports and responds to disaster-affected people through the Assembly, its Synods, Presbyteries, Congregations and Agencies. This ministry includes direct financial relief, disaster recovery chaplaincy, peer support, targeted recovery programs and ministries.

Assembly Disaster Recovery Officer Rev. Dr Stephen Robinson equips the Church for this work. For a report on this area of work please read the document, [Summary of key issues related to disaster recovery in 2019/2020 fire season](#).

UCA Assembly Defence Force Chaplaincy Committee

The UCA Assembly Defence Force Chaplains' Committee (UCA DFCC) is comprised of serving chaplains, both full-time and reservists. The report of the Committee is [available for download](#).

Uniting Church Adult Fellowship

The work of Uniting Church Adult Fellowships continue throughout the UCA. The report of the National Committee is [available for download](#).

NATIONAL EVENTS

President's Conference

The President's Conference which was to be held in October 2020 has been postponed until 29 April to 2 May 2021. It is scheduled to be at UCity in Adelaide. Registrations are now open. The theme of the Conference, *Called by God*, was introduced in [a webinar over three sessions](#) on Saturday 3 October 2020, with an opportunity to join in online worship on Sunday 4 October. The recorded webinars and the online worship service are available through the Assembly website.

NYALC (National Young Adults Leaders Conference)

NYALC was to be held in January 2021. It was cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions. A new initiative [NYALC Online](#) has commenced. The President and Rev Charissa Suli hosted these conversations. They were good opportunities for young adults to stay connected, and speak about their experience of faith, life and the mission of the Church in our current context.

President's Roundtables

The President has held six President's Roundtables with youth and young adult members of the Uniting Church to hear their voices around a series of key areas and questions regarding their journey with Christ, and their experience and views of the UCA. The Roundtables will begin again this year when it is safe to do so.

OUR CALL INTO THE FUTURE

In the challenging times that we face as a nation and as a Church, we are called to move into the future shaped by God's grace and bearing Christ's liberating hope in the world. We give thanks to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit, who guides, renews and transforms our life now and into the future, so that we may be faithful witnesses to God's reconciling and renewing of the whole creation.

Colleen Geyer
General Secretary

Dr Deidre Palmer
President