1. Introduction

Since the review of Congress in 2018, and the subsequent challenges that presented Congress in SA has seen a number of new developments and new challenges that have encouraged and strengthened us. We feel that the direction that we are moving is a very positive one for Congress SA, Congress nationally and the Uniting Church. The report tries to share some of these new challenges and exciting developments.

2. Governance

Congress has worked hard in the last two years to improve our financial accountability and to work towards having a balanced budget. We have also changed our leadership, and strengthened our executive capacity.

Of most significance has been new appointments to the leadership of the Regional Council. We have a new Chairperson in Robert ‘Nyimmy’ Taylor (Port Augusta), who brings youth and enthusiasm to the Regional Council along with Uncle Ken Sumner, Deputy Chair/Mentor (Raukkan), who brings much wisdom and Congress history to the table. Robert has been a member of Congress National Executive since January 2018, and has also been part of the Congress National Youth Committee for some years.

Coupled with this has been the formation of the SA Congress Regional Council Executive Management Committee (RCEMC) to assist in dealing with SA Congress business in between Regional Council meetings.

The RCEMC consists of the Congress Chairperson, the Deputy Chair/Mentor and includes Maria Anderson-Tanner, who is also filling the role of Women’s Representative for SA Congress. The D.O.O. along with the Resource Officer also sit on the RCEMC, representing the State Office.

Regional Council has met three times this year in February, June and September. At the last meeting we spent two days working on Strategic Planning. The foundational word that came from this time was the word, “Belonging.”

2.1 Frontier Services and the Oodnadatta Track Bush Chaplaincy

The most exciting news shared at the September Regional Council meeting is that after many years of discussions with Frontier Services they have agreed to fund a part time bush chaplaincy ministry amongst First Peoples east of the Stuart Highway. This in a small way replaces the old Mobile Aboriginal Patrol, which was fully funded by Frontier Services. Julia Lennon who lives in Oodnadatta will be the first bush chaplain in this role, which will enable Julia to be in fulltime ministry, as she is presently funded half time to minister in the Oodnadatta community through the Uniting Foundation. This is a wonderful story as Julia joined Congress as a result of the ministry of the old Mobile Aboriginal Patrol. This new ministry will be known as the Oodnadatta Bush Track Chaplaincy.
2.2 Oodnadatta Pilgrimage & Property

When the Moderator went to Oodnadatta on the Anzac weekend, she was able to announce on the site of the first Colebrook Home (Stolen Generation site), that this special site called the church ground, now belonged to the Uniting Church and Congress. This was six years after the first negotiations began with the UAM to purchase the site, and build a church there. The weekend began with the first ever Anzac Day service and march to be held in Oodnadatta. The service was held at the church ground and the march was completed at the site of the first ministry of Frontier Services: the old Oodnadatta Hospital and Health Centre.

The weekend continued with nightly worship, and some working bee activities such as tree planting, erecting a cover over the outdoor stage (see the picture on the front of October 2019 “New Times”) and community meals.

This year’s Reconciliation Week appeal also continues our fundraising push for the Oodnadatta church building. In 2018, over $18,000 was given to the building fund, while so far in 2019 an additional $7,000 has been given through the gifts of churches, groups and individuals. The fund now has over $30,000 with UC Invest. Congress sincerely wishes to thank all our supporters of this important project.

Congress is also pleased that Property Services have been able to sell the Congress Manse at Salisbury Heights. This will release funds to the Congress Capital Fund, which will enable planning for the Congress church at Oodnadatta to proceed.

2.3 Adelaide Congress at Salisbury

Many Congress members have had great difficulty with the Assembly decision on same gender marriage. Some members have left Adelaide Congress. Adelaide Congress have raised some issues about their situation in the Congress and Uniting Church, which we spent some considerable time discussing in all of our meetings this year. There have also been other special meetings at Salisbury, which have included at times the Moderator, General Secretary and the Executive Officer of Pastoral Relations as well as Congress staff.

Adelaide Congress have also been greatly saddened by the death of some of their members this year. These have included the wife of Kevin Heffernan, Karen Kulyuru, and most recently in September, Aunty Diane Thomas. Both have had long involvement with the Salisbury church from its first year in 2004. Special memorial services were held for both women.

3. Kalparrin

Some Kalparrin members left the Regional Council meeting in February and are no longer members of the UAICC due to the Assembly decision on marriage. This caused great sadness for Congress. Mark Kickett has continued to minister part time in the Kalparrin and Murray Bridge communities. The funding for this position will finish at the end of November. Mark will become full time Congress Development Officer for SA
4. Port Augusta

Rev Denise Champion has struggled with her health this year, and is taking some leave from November. Rev Jesse & Chelsea Size will be providing supply ministry. One of the highlights for the NSW/ACT Walking on Country group in their trip to SA & the NT was their two nights in Port Augusta, and their day trip to Ikara (Wilpena Pound). Denise also loved being involved in the Writer’s workshop in October. The local community has been more involved in using the Congress space this year through art workshops, and a young women’s group has also been recently established.

We also remember with love Clayton & Beth Nelson who have recently moved back to WA. A special mention also needs to be made of Pastor Max Wright, who passed away last November. Max pastored all around Australia, including nearly two years with Congress at Port Augusta. Max was honoured with a memorial and funeral service at Ceduna.

5. Raukkan

Raukkan is a small Aboriginal Ngarringjeri community on the southern shores of Lake Alexandrina. It was originally set up as a mission in 1859, with the first missionary being the Rev. George Taplin from Stow Congregational Church (now Pilgrim Church) in the city. The church left the mission during WWI (1916). Clyde Rigney from Raukkan has consistently said to our Moderator’s and President’s over the last few years when they have visited that they long again for a partnership with the Uniting Church.

Deidre Palmer had her pre NYALC Walking on Country at Raukkan with 20 young adults from around Australia. Six young adults from Raukkan including Sean Weetra and Jordan Sumner attended the National Young Adults Leaders Conference (NYALC) in January. When they have a fellowship meeting or singalong at Raukkan (which happen at irregular times) it is not unusual to have 30 or 40 people participating.

When Jordan Sumner and Sean Weetra proposed that Raukkan become a Congress Faith Community in February, naturally the Congress Regional Council was delighted. This was formally approved by the Standing Committee in June.

In September, the Regional Council met at Raukkan, and was hosted with very generous hospitality. Uniting College also received warm hospitality on their Walking on Country for students and staff as well as the Moderator Elect. The NSW ACT Walking on Country event finished their visit to SA and the NT, with two nights at Raukkan, including a full day with Raukkan as host.

Most recently five young women at Raukkan attended Surrender conference in Adelaide with their leaders which was great experience for them. Congress will receive funding from the Uniting Foundation for a youth worker to work with the many youth and young adults at Raukkan.

5.1 Pilgrimages & NYALC

As mentioned above 20 young adults visited Raukkan before NYALC. This included three Aboriginal young adults from Oodnadatta. They all had a great time. Of the 150 delegates to NYALC there were over 20 from Congress communities, including 15 from SA. Thank you to every church, individual and organisation who supported them. The fruits will not just being seen in the future, but also now.
On June 1st over 25 people visited the Murraylands, Coorong and Raukkan for a day pilgrimage with Sean Weetra. The money raised through this visit helped with expenses for Sean, who along with Jordan Sumner is visiting Taize, France with the young adults group organised by the Centre for Music, Liturgy and the Arts. Thanks again to the churches, organisations and individuals who are supporting Jordan and Sean with this trip.

In June the NSW / ACT Walking on Country trip to Alice Springs and Uluru also visited Port Augusta, the Flinders Ranges, Coober Pedy, Salisbury and Raukkan. The 50 participants also include a couple of South Australians. A highlight for many was being hosted by Congress members in each of our ministry centres.

5.2 Training & Formation Coordinator

We are very grateful for the support of the Uniting Foundation, which has made this 0.3FTE position possible. This position has arisen out of the ministry of the Rev Jesse Size in 2018 through which seven young adults from Port Augusta participated in the Period of Discernment weekend. Some of these participants became students of the college, and undertook Cert. 4 subjects at the Uniting College through weekly mentoring by Jesse.

This position aims to continue that sort of mentoring, and to facilitate training & formation opportunities. We are very pleased that Chelsea Size will commenced work in this position in June. Currently Chelsea has four students from Adelaide, Port Augusta and Oodnadatta enrolled in studies, and is planning training opportunities for next year.

We are also glad that the Synod Computer redeployment program chose Port Augusta as a home for some of their old computers, so that students can use them in their studies.

6. Writer's Retreat

A number of Congress members from SA and interstate took part in this workshop in October at Nunyara. All were blessed by the opportunity. Thanks are due to Vicky Balabanski for organising the retreat, and to the funding bodies.

7. Surrender – Adelaide & Melbourne

Congress members continue to participate in the Surrender conferences in Melbourne and Adelaide. We are pleased that the Uniting Church has also joined as a sponsor this year in both locations. In Adelaide, Rev. Charissa Suli from Sydney was one of our keynote speakers. On the Saturday, the conference moved in the afternoon to Warraparinga at Marion, for the Welcome to Country and workshops. All of our Congress communities were involved in the workshops or the Indigenous led worship that night.

8. National Work

Congress SA continues to be actively involved at a National level, particularly through the work of our Development Officer, Mark Kickett. Examples this year include:

Rev Jeffrey’s memorial services in Darwin & Elcho Island
Vic/Tas Synod Walking Together Group
National Exec, National Executive Management Group & Assembly Standing Committee
Visit to APY Lands with NRCC staff, Howard Amery and David Forsyth
Meeting of Congress and Aboriginal leaders from Uniting Care in September

9. Congress SA as a Presbytery

Congress agreed to explore what it means to become a Presbytery. At the September meeting the Regional Council set up a process to enable discussion and exploration of this important issue. Congress would like an extra 12 months to explore this issue, rather than trying to rush a decision by the Synod meeting. There are a number of reasons for this, including:

1. Synod being so close.
2. Some questions being raised at the Transitional Presbytery meeting.
3. The reality that Adelaide Congress is already part of Generate Presbytery.

For more thoughts from Congress on their reasons to become a Presbytery, please see the Document at Appendix 1: “Some thoughts on the Reasons why SA Congress wants to be a Presbytery.”

9.1 SA Congress Review Report & Recommendations

In May 2018 Congress SA, agreed to a review of its work being undertaken, subject to Congress having the right to accept, amend or reject any of the recommendations. In November 2018, the Regional Council supported all 11 recommendations of the report of the Interim Congress Review report. In December 2018, the Standing Committee approved all 17 proposals of the final report. Regional Council was not made aware of these additional 6 recommendations which were by then resolutions until February 2019. Following that meeting RC wrote a letter requesting SC put a hold on the resolutions, and in April 2019, SC agreed to defer action on the proposals. RC felt that due process had not been followed and that the Covenant agreement that the UCA & UAICC have, had not been respected.

Regional Council met in early June and discussed all the recommendations. They accepted all but two proposals from the final report. The two they did not accept were losing the Resource Officer position, and the creation of a part time Finance and Administration role.

The RC felt strongly that it would significantly disadvantage Congress to lose the full-time Resource Officer’s position and the support that this role provides to all Congress members. The RC believes strongly that this role is vital to the life and ministry of Congress and whereas personnel can and do change, the role of this position needs to remain as it was originally intended.

With regard to the Finance and Admin role, RC recognised the need for this role and agreed they would like to explore more possibilities in relation to it. In particular, the RC were very keen to see this role as an Aboriginal Identified position and have highlighted young Indigenous people in places such as Raukkan and
Adelaide who have appropriate qualifications and who are already working in this field. And the subsequent meeting in September approved the creation of this position.

9.2 Congress SA Financial & Employment Matters

Congress continues to be exceedingly grateful for the work of the Rev. Ross Honey for all his work on our budgets and finances. As reported at the Standing Committee meeting on June 1st 2018, Ross worked with the RC to pare back our spending so that our budgeted deficit for 2018 came in at the planned amount of $36,000. We are very pleased to advise that the Congress audited statements for 2018 show a deficit for the year of $6,379. This is an outstanding result - considering where we were early in the year - which could not have been achieved without the support of the Resources Board, the Interim Gen. Sec. Rob Brown, Congress staff and members and Ross Honey.

Following the strategic planning discussions at our September 2019 meeting, the council considered a broad budget outline for 2020 and made decisions concerning its financial governance and staffing.

The following resolutions were agreed at the end of these considerations:

“The Congress SA Regional Council has determined:
1. To properly manage Congress SA finances
2. To prioritize employing a Finance / Administration person in 2020 in a 0.4 – 0.5 role
3. That the Finance / Administration person should be a first Nations person appointed by Congress, and supported by Rev. Ross Honey
4. To acknowledge the ongoing support of Ross Honey, and accepts his offer to mentor the Finance / Administration officer
5. To employ Mark Kickett as full time Development and Outreach Officer from December 2019
6. That the Resource Officer, Ian Dempster, be employed on a 0.4 basis”

The Resource Officer role in SA has been reduced from fulltime to 0.4, to enable the Resource Officer to take up a temporary part time national administration role with Congress. This will enable the Development Officer to move into a fulltime role from December 2019, (when the funding from Uniting Foundation for the 0.5 ministry position at Kalparrin ceases). Some of the savings with this change to staffing will enable Congress to appoint a part time First Nations person to fill the new position of Finance and Administration Officer in 2020. This was one of the outcomes recommended in the 2018 SA Congress review.

Robert Taylor, SA Congress Chair
Mark Kickett, SA Congress Development Officer
Ian Dempster, SA Congress Resource Officer
Some thoughts on the Reasons why SA Congress wants to be a Presbytery

The SA Congress Regional Council met at Raukkan in the first week of September. One of the things we did at this meeting was to work on our strategic plan. The key theme that came out of the planning was the theme of “Belonging”.

Congress was set up in the early 1980’s, and recognized by the Uniting Church in 1985, so that First Peoples could have the freedom to minister to their own people in culturally appropriate ways. A large percentage of First Peoples are Christian, but they do not belong to or attend mainstream churches.

Congress invited the Uniting Church in 1988 into a Covenant relationship, so that we could work together in partnership. The Covenant is all about relationships, and where we belong and how we relate as First and Second peoples in his land.

Two of our Regional Councils across the country (in the Northern Synod and Queensland) become Presbyteries. The Queensland Presbytery of Calvary only has seven churches, and has existed as such for over 30 years. The other Congress Regional Councils have all been smaller, and have struggled to work out where they belong in the Uniting Church.

In SA for example, the Congress communities were not formally invited to join any of the networks, when SA became one Presbytery. Basically, Congress felt they did not belong anywhere except as a Congress Regional Council.

Though we are small, we are growing. At the turn of the century, we did not have any congregations or faith communities: now we have five. By enabling Congress SA to become a Presbytery, Congress will have a place in which they belong in the UCA structure in SA.

We will still need our relationships with the rest of the UCA. Our Covenant says that, and being a Presbytery will enable congregations, the Synod and the other new Presbyteries to continue to grow in relationship and to work in partnership with Congress SA.