

B11 UNITING CHURCH NATIONAL HISTORY SOCIETY

1. SETTING UP THE SOCIETY

Towards the end of 2014 the idea of establishing a national history body emerged at the Historical Reference Committee which since 1991 had given oversight of the Church's archival and historical interests. After 23 years it became clear that we had to change. We needed to become more efficient with archives as technology advanced and we needed to transform our role in fulfilling the historical aspects of the Assembly's Mandate.

For about a year the Committee explored various ways forward. Eventually, a proposal went to the Standing Committee that the Committee be disbanded and its responsibilities be divided between two new groups: Uniting Archives responsible for archives and a National Uniting Church History Society responsible for history.

In November 2015 the Standing Committee approved the proposal and Patricia Curthoys and William Emilsen were given the responsibility of consulting with Synod-based History Associations and establishing a Steering Committee for creating a national body to be launched in 2017. There was great energy immediately apparent in our meetings with representatives of the NSW/ACT Historical Society, the Vic/Tas Historical Society and the South Australian Historical Society. They generously supported the idea for the new body and each agreed to nominate two people to the steering committee - Glen O'Brien and Bob Evans for NSW/ACT; Jenny Bars and Robert Renton for Vic/Tas; Judith Raftery and Val Canty for South Australia. As some Synods do not have an existing historical association, Alison Longworth agreed to represent the Western Australian Synod, Wendy Beresford-Manning the Northern Synod and John Harrison the Queensland Synod. Eleven people representing all Synods made up the Steering Committee.

About the same time as the Steering Committee was established, representatives from the South Australian Historical Society proposed holding a historical conference for the 40th anniversary of the Uniting Church in Australia. The Steering Committee and the South Australian Historical Society agreed to combine resources and work together on the conference with South Australia acting as host for the first of what we hope will become biennial conferences.

The Steering Committee met by teleconference over the next 18 months. During this time it worked on three tasks: (i) preparation of a draft Constitution for the Society; (ii) organising (with South Australia) the first conference for the emerging national historical society; and (iii) electing a board for the new society and seeking general endorsement of its draft constitution. A healthy spirit of energy and cooperation infused the Steering Committee with confidence and hope.

2. THE INAUGURAL NATIONAL CONFERENCE

In June 2017 the National Society was launched in Adelaide by President Stuart McMillan at its first national conference, "A Pilgrim People: 40 Years On". Over 60 people representing all Synods registered for the conference, and they were joined by others at the public forum on the Saturday night of the conference on "The Church in the Public Square" and the double celebration of the birth of the Uniting Church and its 40-year milestone on the Sunday night. In addition to the President and Patron of the new society, other church leaders supported the conference: the Moderator of the NSW/ACT Synod Rev. Myung Hwa Park, who led the daily worship sessions; President-elect Dr Deidre Palmer; Moderator of the South Australian Synod, Rev. Sue Ellis and former Assembly Presidents Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood and Rev. Prof. James Haire.

There were 16 presenters at the conference covering a broad and lively array of topics promoting and advancing the study of history in the Uniting Church and its predecessor churches: urban mission, the quest for a vital religion, women in leadership, the role of missionaries in shaping the Uniting Church, congregational case studies on church union, the emergence of the national LGBTIQ network, Indigenous history, the tenacity and longevity of the Uniting Church, the Church's

influence on public policy, the history of the diaconate, the incongruous place of city missions, the use and abuse of history in the Church and the legacy of John Wesley and our predecessor churches. All contributors sought to find meaningful connections with those who have gone before. In her keynote address, “A Pilgrim People 40 Years On: The Uniting Church as an Experiment in Ecumenism”, Associate Professor Renate Howe assumed the role of prophet, peering deep into the Church’s soul and identifying slippage from the theological vision of the Church’s founders over the past 40 years as a major concern.

On the last day of the conference, a Board for the society was elected. It consists of seven people with the power to coopt two others: Rev. Dr William Emilsen (Chairperson), Rev. Dr Glen O’Brien, (Deputy Chairperson), Dr Judith Raftery, (Secretary), Rev. Robert Renton (Editor of *Proceedings*), Rev. Dr Julia Pitman, Dr Wendy Beresford-Manning and Dr Alison Longworth. Dr Patricia Curthoys was subsequently coopted. Also, the draft Constitution prepared by the Steering Committee was endorsed by the AGM with minor emendations and additions for the Standing Committee’s final approval in November 2017.

The Conference generated a modest profit which the South Australian History Society generously donated to the national organisation for its work.

3. AFTER THE 2017 CONFERENCE

Since the Adelaide conference the Board has met seven times by teleconference. There have been challenges and considerable time delays in gaining a presence on the Assembly website and negotiating the complex and laborious task of setting up a bank account within the structures of the Assembly.

On the positive side the proceedings of the 2017 Adelaide National Conference has been edited by Rev. Robert Renton and will be published in time for the Fifteenth Assembly. Moreover, in keeping with its Mandate, the Society has organised a public lecture by Professor Stewart Gill, Master of Queen’s College in Melbourne, to be held on Saturday 7 July, immediately before the Fifteenth Assembly. His topic is ‘No Gods and Precious Few Heroes: Why we need to remember our History’. Finally, progress is well under way for the second national conference to be held in Melbourne in 2019. The Vic/Tas Synod History Society has agreed to host the conference, and a subcommittee consisting of Rev. Robert Renton, Glen O’Brien and Katharine Massam will oversee the planning.

Currently, the Board’s most urgent task is to build up its membership base, particularly as the society will be self-funded from subscriptions.

4. LOOKING FORWARD

For the first year of its existence much of the Board’s energies have been used to establish the Society so that it can effectively fulfil the Mandate given it by the Assembly. The Society is very conscious that it is a national body and is examining options for establishing a national digital library and publishing a national newsletter that keeps the church up to date with the latest research, publications, conferences, public lectures and workshops pertinent to the history of the Uniting Church.

Rev. Dr William Emilsen, Chairperson
Judith Raftery, Secretary