

B19 CHRISTIAN UNITY WORKING GROUP

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern ecumenical movement started in Vadstena, Sweden, on the 17th of August 1895.

It is of course ridiculous to ascribe such a definite time and place to a movement of the Holy Spirit, but that was where and when the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) was inaugurated. As a result of that gathering the ecumenist John R Mott visited Australia in 1896 and inspired the establishment of the Australasian Student Christian Union at a meeting held in Wyselaskie Hall, Ormond College, Melbourne, a venue that is now part of the Centre for Theology and Ministry of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania. From these ecumenical student organisations developed the subsequent international ecumenical organisations, the International Missionary Council, the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work, and the World Conference on Faith and Order, which united as the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948, 70 years ago this year.

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is a product of the modern ecumenical movement. The leaders of the movement for church union, and those who advocated for it in congregations and councils, were people who had experienced ecumenism through the WSCF and the WCC. In return, the birth of the UCA inspired the ecumenical movement: ‘...it seems the developments in Australia have something more to offer the ecumenical movement. While other mergers tend to result in united churches, the Australian incarnation of the organic unions calls itself a uniting church. The difference is not merely grammatical, but psychological as well as the Qld Synod Moderator, the Rev. Rolland Busch, has pointed out: ‘Through the merger we are being given the opportunity to become again the sort of church to which the New Testament points us.’ The fact that the new body is called the Uniting Church indicates that this goal will be its continuous endeavour. While united churches suggest a task accomplished, a uniting church enshrines the hope of an even wider union as a testimony to God’s redemptive activity in history.’ (Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 15, 1978, p. 600)

As both a product of the modern ecumenical movement and a sign of hope to it, the UCA has always been a church with a deep and fundamental commitment to ecumenism. This does not mean that our relationships with other churches have limited our mission. There have been times when the UCA has recognised that our greatest gift to our siblings may be to make decisions that they find difficult or impossible: affirming that ordination without discrimination on the grounds of gender is a fundamental implication of the gospel (1990); allowing Presbyteries the freedom to decide whether or not to ordain people in same-gender relationships (2003); recognising that ‘the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to [the First Peoples] through law, custom and ceremony’ (2009). If the Fifteenth Assembly gives UCA ministers and marriage celebrants the freedom to marry same-gender couples according to their conscience we will again be making a decision with which most of our ecumenical partners will disagree. Our commitment to ecumenism enriches us; it does not limit us.

2. DIALOGUES

2.1 ANGLICAN

There has been no official Dialogue with the Anglican Church over the past triennium. Instead the emphasis has been on encouraging the continuing reception of the document “Weaving a New Cloth”. Following its reception by the Anglican Church of Australia’s General Synod in 2014 and the Fourteenth Assembly in 2015 “Weaving a New Cloth” has been distributed to Dioceses and Synods across Australia. Dioceses have been encouraged to make local agreements in the context of the framework provided by the document, and Synods were encouraged to adopt the document as the basis for future ecumenical cooperation. Synods across Australia have received the document and commended it to Presbyteries for study and further action, noting that it is

theologically based, but simple and practical in its orientation. In the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania the launch of “Weaving a New Cloth” by the Moderator and Archbishop has provided an opportunity for further discussions on ecumenical relationships by organising a meeting of Regional Bishops and Presbytery Officers – further tangible evidence of our commitment to the relational unity which is both the desire and command of our Lord (John 17:20-23).

2.2 LUTHERAN

The Dialogue continues to work toward “A Concordat for Full Communion” as the goal agreed to by both Churches (see “The Declaration of Mutual Recognition” – LCA 2009; UCA 2010). The document “At the Table: Report on the Eucharist” represents a stage along the way toward this goal of sharing around the table. It was submitted to the leadership of both Churches this year for consideration and feedback. An additional document, “Eucharistic Hospitality for Congregations in Special Need”, was also submitted to both Churches for adoption. This document proposes that the work done and agreement reached so far on the teaching and practice of the Eucharist in both Churches now makes it possible for particular congregations to host each other in celebration of the Lord’s Supper in situations of special need. The document outlines these situations and provides a proposed process and guidelines to implement Eucharistic hospitality. UCA members of the Dialogue: Rev. Dr Anna Grant-Henderson (Co-Chair), Rev. Dr Craig Thompson, Michael Champion, Rev. Paul Stephens and Rev. Denise Liersch. Rev. Dr Rob Gallacher resigned from the Dialogue in 2016 after many years of faithful service.

2.3 SALVATION ARMY

This Dialogue was asked to produce a teaching document on “Holiness and Social Justice”. The task has now been virtually completed and the final document is ready for publication. It includes a Small Group Discussion Guide to provide easy access to the key ideas in the text. The Dialogue teams are not expecting to continue beyond the publication of the document, as no further remit has been provided. Despite the fact that the document is presented as a unified ‘voice’, this work has been a significant exercise in receptive ecumenism, enabling members of the Dialogue to discern the essential nature of the connection between holiness and social justice. UCA members of the Dialogue: Rev. Dr Sandy Yule (Co-Chair), Rev. Dr Morag Logan, Rev. Rosemary Carter and Rev. Dr Glen O’Brien.

3. ECUMENICAL BODIES

3.1 WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

In 2018 the WCC will celebrate its 70th anniversary, and member churches are invited to hold celebrations in their own contexts around 23 August, the date of the opening of the first WCC Assembly in Amsterdam. The UCA continues to offer the expertise of its members and Ministers as a gift to the WCC. UCA Minister and Convener of the Working Group Rev. Dr Morag Logan was elected as a Vice-Moderator for the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission in 2015. UCA member Emily Evans was elected to the WCC Executive Committee in 2016 after being elected to the WCC Central Committee at the WCC Assembly in 2013. Rev. Elenie Poulos continues to be a member of the WCC Commission of the Churches on International Affairs.

3.2 GLOBAL CHRISTIAN FORUM

The purpose of the GCF is ‘to create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and inter-church organisations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges’. Participants attend Forum gatherings by invitation and participation at gatherings is divided between leaders of the older churches (Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, Anglican) and leaders of the younger churches (Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic,

Independent). The third Global Gathering of the GCF will be held in Bogotá, Colombia, in April 2018 with the theme 'Let mutual love continue' (Hebrews 13:1). Rev. Kim Cain is the Communications Assistant of the GFC, a gift of the UCA to the GCF.

3.3 WORLD COMMUNION OF REFORMED CHURCHES

Representatives from across the world gathered in July 2017 for the General Council of the WCRC. Held once every seven years, the General Council this year was held in Leipzig, Germany, to coincide with the 500th anniversary celebrations of the Reformation. UCA representatives were Rev. Sean Gilbert, Bethany Broadstock and Rev. Denise Liersch. During the Council a new President, Najla Kassab, the second woman ordained in the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, was elected. The themes of the General Council focused on the unfinished work of reformed theology, the meaning of communion, justice, and gender justice, including a major document urging the ordination of women in all member Churches. Consensus decision-making was introduced, significantly supported by the UCA's Rev. Terence Corkin on the WCRC business committee. The WCRC signed the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" in Wittenberg as part of its commitment to Christian communion. The Pacific Region delegate elected to the Executive Council is Hannah North of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. Continuing the work of communion and diversity in a spirit of consensus building, the WCRC held a consultation in late 2017 in Chennai, India, on the theme 'Strengthening the Communion: Communion and Human Sexuality'. Officially supported languages of the WCRC have now increased to eight, including Korean, Indonesian, Mandarin and Arabic. The WCRC continues to focus on issues of justice, peace building and strengthening communion through solidarity visits, theological work, sharing of resources, prayer and regional partnerships.

3.4 WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL

The outgoing and incoming Councils met either side of the five-yearly World Methodist Conference, in Houston, Texas, USA, between 30 August and 5 September 2016. The Conference was an uplifting worldwide celebration centred on the theme 'One'. The Council meetings struggle with the complexity of many denominations within the 'Wesleyan family' and finding ways to engage with the diversity and competing priorities. The UCA had 11 members present. Rev. Prof. Robert Gribben was thanked as he completed his role as Chair of the Standing Committee on Ecumenical Relationships, and Ann Connan completed her term as President of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women. All members were allocated to ongoing committees but the degree of activity and connectivity has varied greatly. Rev. Dr Amelia Koh-Butler was elected Chair of the Worship and Liturgy Committee. Isabel Thomas Dobson was elected to the Nominations Committee. The next Council meeting is to be held in Seoul, South Korea 12-15 July, at the same time as the Fifteenth Assembly, so very few UCA Council members will be able to attend.

3.5 UNITING AND UNITED CHURCHES

The Ninth Consultation of the United and Uniting Churches was held from 25 November to 2 December 2015 in Chennai, India. The consultation was hosted by the Church of South India (CSI) with the cooperation of the Church of North India (CNI) and the Mar Thoma Church and sponsored by World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission. The theme was: 'Living in Tents (Hebrews 11:9): The Pilgrimage of the United and Uniting Churches'. We heard from participants, stories of witness in the changing landscapes of their contexts. Most delegates were affected by the refugee crisis at the time and shared ways in which their churches were trying to alleviate the suffering of refugees and the advocacy work they were doing in their countries. We also paused to pray and wrote messages of solidarity and gave them to the delegate from the United Protestant Church of France to share with his Church because of the tragedy that took place in Paris a week before the Consultation. We wrestled with the biblical and theological understanding of being pilgrims within our contexts, issues of hospitality, how to live faithfully in our rapidly changing contexts. We noted the need for this small family of churches to strengthen its fellowship and

provide support for each other, as it does not have a structure like other communions. The UCA in Australia was represented at the consultation by the former Assembly General Secretary Rev. Terence Corkin who presented one of the major papers and Rev. Charity Majiza who was a member of the Continuation Committee that planned the consultation. Charity was elected for the second term in this capacity. This consultation is held once in seven years. All United and Uniting Churches (UUCs) in 2017 participated in the celebrations of the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation and many attended the General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) that was held in Leipzig, Germany in June 2017.

3.6 CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA

The CCA gathered in Jakarta for its 14th Assembly in May 2015. Led by the President, Rev. Prof. Andrew Dutney, a five-person UCA delegation participated in the biggest regional ecumenical council outside the WCC with 101 member churches and national councils. 'Living Together in the Household of God', the Assembly gathered people to listen to each other, share our burdens and struggles, celebrate our joys, and give voice to our concerns. UCA General Secretary Rev. Terence Corkin was elected to the Executive Committee and he was instrumental in the CCA changes to the governance structure. UnitingWorld's Partnerships Manager Asia Rev. Dr Ji Zhang participated in another CCA conference, 'Congress of Asian Theologians 8th Conference' which took place in India in the southwest coastal city of Cochin in April 2016. By the invitation of Senate of Serampore College, a total of 107 participants from 17 countries took part in this biennial gathering. They were warmly received by the Patriarch of Jerusalem of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. Ji presented a paper on the 'Uniting Church in the Asian Century'.

4. THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN AUSTRALIA

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) is made up of 19 Christian Churches who have embarked on a pilgrimage together. Each brings a widely varied history of place, experience, and theology, but shares a common faith and confession in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. We also share a common future as we are convinced that the future of Christians in Australia lies together, not in separation.

In the last triennium the NCCA has undergone a number of significant changes, two of which include the legal separation of NCCA and Act for Peace, and the conclusion of Sister Elizabeth Delaney in the role of General Secretary in early 2018. The current President is Bishop Philip Huggins. In 2017 Mr Rob Floyd from the UCA was appointed to the NCCA Governing Board.

During this triennium the NCCA has participated in a range of significant events including the recent Receptive Ecumenism Conference held in Canberra, World Council of Churches and Christian Conference of Asia gatherings, and events marking the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

The work of National Council of Churches in Australia is primarily carried out through the work of a number of groups and the Secretariat. The UCA is represented and active in most NCCA groups, and in the last triennium, this has included:

- Faith and Unity Commission
- Social Justice Network
- Safe Church Network
- Eco Mission Network
- Australian National Dialogue of Christians, Muslims and Jews

5. CHRISTIAN UNITY WORKING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

The Christian Unity Working Group (CUWG) consists of the following people: Rev. Dr Morag Logan (Convener), Gavin Faichney, Rev. Dr Avril Hannah-Jones, Joan McRae, Rev. Charity Majiza, Rev. Dr Glen O'Brien, Rev. Peter Weeks and Jacob Yang. Rev. Dr Ji Zhang has acted as a theological consultant. During the triennium Dr Michael Champion, Rev. Margie Dahl, Rev. Prof. Robert Gribben, Rev. Jason Kioa, Rev. Fie Marino and Maureen Postma resigned. We thank them all for their contributions.

We would also like to express our appreciation for Rev. Dr Chris Walker, who resigned from his role as Secretary and National Consultant during the triennium, and Rev. Terence Corkin, who as the General Secretary was a member of the CUWG ex-officio. Both contributed greatly to the work of the CUWG.
