

B20 FORMATION, EDUCATION & DISCIPLESHIP

1. INTRODUCTION

“Congregations of the old Protestant mainline denominations... continue to sponsor many educational activities, but they lack the intentionality, the coherence and the continuity needed to maintain and renew their identities as communities of faith.”-- Charles Foster

“We need a whole new vision and approach to religious education if Christian faith is to flourish in our time and culture... an approach that is contemporary, natural, holistic and flexible... it takes seriously our present sociocultural situation,... it reflects the process that goes on in our heads and hearts whenever we learn the stuff of life..., it engages people’s heads, hearts and hands,... a life to Faith to life approach...” -- Thomas Groome

2. FORMATION, EDUCATION AND DISCIPLESHIP WORKING GROUP

The Formation, Education and Discipleship (FED) Working Group was established within the Assembly’s Uniting Faith and Discipleship Team, with the Working Group meeting first in December 2013 and the National Director, Mr Craig Mitchell, commencing duties in January 2014. Given the timing of this commencement, between triennial Assemblies, it was agreed that initial review would take place in the 2015-2018 period.

The FED Working Group replaced the previous Christian Education Reference Committee (CERC) and national youth events, previously given oversight by the National Youth Activities Reference Committee (NYARC) came under the responsibility of FED. Rev. Tom Kerr, National Consultant - Youth and Young Adult Faith Development, and Mr Craig Mitchell, formed the staff team, resourced with great efficiency and necessary humour by Anna Catliffe.

The restructuring of Assembly work meant that a formal review of the whole of the FED work did not take place, although staff performance reviews were completed in 2017. Given the impending Assembly changes, the Convenor and National Director recommended that the FED Working Group be discontinued. This was not a denial of the value of the work but a recognition of the need for the Assembly to find ways to work differently.

The FED Working Group has been an excellent resource of wisdom, creativity, local knowledge, history and expertise. On behalf of the Assembly, we give great thanks for the participation of these people: Rev. Dr Ian Price (Convenor), Rev. Lindsay Cullen, Rev. Sue Ellis, Mr Drew Hanna, Ms Elaine Rae, Rev. Robin Yang, Mr Neil Thorpe, Dr Deidre Palmer, Mr Rohan Pryor, Rev. Duncan Macleod, Rev. Swee-Ann Koh, Rev. Fie Marino, Ms Susan Burt, Rev. Rick Morrell, Rev. Dr Adam Macintosh. Rev. Glenda Blakefield provided invaluable wisdom and encouragement in her oversight role as Associate General Secretary.

3. FED PRIORITIES

Vision included: (excerpt from ASC Minutes, March 2013)

- Congregations as lifelong learning communities of discipleship for the sake of the mission of God
- Church leaders as effective educational leaders, capable of guiding a community in forming disciples
- Congregations developing a culture of learning for and from engagement in mission - mission-shaping discipleship
- promoting Christian education as a distinctive ministry yet also integral to worship, teaching, doctrine, formation, community life and mission
- developing and promoting Christian education and formation as vital, interrelated contributors to growth in discipleship in Christian community

The primary strategies were to embed the vision across the FED work and to build networks of shared interest around formation and education for lifelong discipleship. Internet communication was a key strategy, particularly interactive engagement supported by frequent resource sharing, including Facebook, Twitter, Scoopit, Vimeo and blogs. The process explored the use of multiple accounts and platforms. Engagement across all platforms in terms of frequency and connection was very positive with documented connections with about 4000 regular people.

In November 2016, the National Director visited a range of denominational leaders across New Zealand to learn about their national approaches to resourcing faith development across generations.

4. COLLABORATION

The Standing Committee established a collaborative remit for the FED work.

4.1 WORKING GROUPS AND NETWORKS

The National Director was a member of several Working Groups or networks or taking the initiative to engage with them – Education for Ministry Working Group, Lay and Leadership Educators Network, Working Group on Worship, National Schools Consultative Group, Assembly Mission and Evangelism Network (AMEN). Both the National Director and the National Consultant attended the annual National Youth & Children's Coalition (NYCC) gathering.

4.2 CHILDREN AND YOUTH MINISTRY POLICY

The National Director worked with NYCC and in consultation with Rev. John Cox towards the development on a new UCA ministry policy statement and training package to accompany any requirements of the Royal Commission. This work has been passed on to the Assembly Resourcing Unit.

4.3 SPECIFIED LAY MINISTRIES

Work was undertaken by the National Director on Lay Preacher standards, competencies and assessments and also on analysing the variance across specified ministries.

4.4 PERIOD OF DISCERNMENT

With the Period of Discernment (PoD) coming under the auspices of FED, the National Director initiated a 'state of play' consultation across Synods. This process produced some information about how the PoD was being undertaken, but also raised a number of questions about aims, consistency and resourcing by Presbyteries. This work has been passed onto the Assembly Resourcing Unit.

5. EDUCATION AND TRAINING

5.1 WORKSHOPS AND SPEAKING

The National Director conducted sessions in every Synod and some Presbyteries on topics such as lifelong discipleship, ministry with children, the use of multimedia in ministry, creative worship and preaching. He also ran seminars at two national conferences.

5.2 COLLOQUIUM ON FORMING DISCIPLES IN MISSION

A National Colloquium was conducted in Melbourne in November 2015 in partnership with the Assembly Mission and Evangelism Network at the Korean Church of Melbourne. The event was

attended by 60 people and featured a diverse range of presentations covering areas such as missional leadership, multi-sensory faith formation, spiritual practices, youth discipleship formation, faith and doubt, biblical pilgrimage, evangelism, and faith formation in Asian contexts. Dr Deidre Palmer was the keynote speaker.

5.3 REIMAGINING FAITH FORMATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

A national conference and in-service training event were hosted in Sydney in August 2017 jointly with the NSW/ACT Synod Uniting Mission & Education. John Roberto from the US was the key presenter, along with Greg Whitby from Catholic Education, Parramatta Diocese. There was also a range of electives related to formation and ministry in a digital age, including online sessions with experts from the United States of America, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. The events were attended by about 80 people from Australia and New Zealand.

5.4 FRESH EXPRESSIONS AND NEW MONASTICISM

FED partnered with four Synods and four Presbyteries on the visit of Mark Berry from the Church Missionary Society and the Church of England in mid-2016. Mark's sessions on new forms of church and on the new monasticism movement were extremely well received.

5.5 TRANSFORMING WORSHIP CONFERENCE

FED partnered with the Working Group on Worship and the Centre for Liturgy, Music and the Arts in the organisation of the successful national Transforming Worship Conference in July 2017.

6. NATIONAL YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT EVENTS

We hosted FED events consultations in 2015 and 2016 with the intent of increasing young adult input and more diverse cultural input into the shaping of national events. These meetings also mapped out a timetable for national events through to 2020. We are appreciative of Drew Hanna's coordination of these meetings.

6.1 NATIONAL CHRISTIAN YOUTH CONVENTION

A new national NCYC policy was developed and approved by the FED Working Group on behalf of the Assembly. Rev. Tom Kerr provided resourcing to NCYC 2017 Yurora, which was hosted by the NSW/ACT Synod at Stanwell Tops. The event was a great success and the Synod, in particular Uniting Mission and Education, is to be congratulated for hosting such a diverse, high quality event. The organisers worked hard to increase the level of leadership by young adults in both the organisation and up-front leadership. As with Yurora 2014, there was increased leadership by people from a diverse range of cultures. It must be noted that attendance was lower than anticipated (about 800 people including leaders and volunteers). Sponsorship of the event by the Synod and Uniting NSW/ACT made it possible.

This was the first time that an NCYC had run under the new NCYC policy and a policy review is necessary. Discussions were held with two Synods during 2016 and 2017 about the possible hosting of the next NCYC, but at the time of writing, no Synod has offered to host the next event. Some work was undertaken on a possible national Youth Events bequest fund to help underwrite future events.

6.2 NATIONAL YOUNG ADULTS LEADERS CONFERENCE

Rev. Tom Kerr coordinated NYALC 2016 along with Rhane Tsetsakos and a team of young adults. NYALC was held on the Gold Coast in July 2016, attended by 90 participants and 30 leaders. There were people from all over Australia including from Elcho Island, Tasmania, Perth, Port Augusta, and Palm Island. NYALC participants came from many different Aboriginal communities and different cultures - Cantonese, Korean, Matu, South Sudanese, Samoan,

Tongan, Fijian, Filipino and Anglo/European. This was an extremely successful week and remains a significant event for the current and future leaders in the UCA. We are grateful for the patronage and attendance of the President, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) Chairperson and the President-elect. Videos of the event were produced.

6.3 ABOUT FACE

The National Consultant and National Director worked with the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania Commission for Mission and UAICC Victoria towards the hosting of About FACE in 2017. The original aim was for this to be held in mid-2017 in northern Australia. However the timing and capacity of communities to host visits was not possible and the event was postponed. For other organisational reasons, revised dates have not yet been set. We are grateful for the continued support and commitment that the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania and UAICC Victoria have towards this program.

FED has worked on a new About FACE policy in dialogue with the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania Commission for Mission and UAICC Victoria (on behalf of UAICC National Committee). This work is close to completion.

6.4 NATIONAL YOUTH MINISTRY CONFERENCE

Rev. Tom Kerr facilitated promotion for UCA attendance at the inter-denominational 2015 NYMC Conference on the Gold Coast, and coordinated a UCA pre-event gathering and interaction during the week. The UCA had the largest denominational group at the event.

7. RESOURCES

7.1 “WALKING TOGETHER” DVD AND STUDY GUIDE

In collaboration with the Working Group on Doctrine, FED produced a two-session study guide and DVD about the new Preamble to the Constitution. This was made available online (assembly.uca.org.au/walkingtogether) and through the Assembly office.

7.2 UNITINGLEARNING PROJECT

A key project was the development of a national online learning, resourcing and collaboration platform called UnitingLearning. The project arose from discussions with Synods' education staff, the National Lay and Leadership Educators' Network and the FED Working Group. The focus on UnitingLearning is on resourcing Congregations and Presbyteries for 'non-accredited' lay education. A secondary aim was to provide a platform for online collaboration nationally (document sharing, video-conferencing, etc.). A Task Group developed a learning framework and broad project plan which the National Director further scoped. A national online resources database platform was developed. The project plan was expanded to include the provision of online learning modules (e.g. by Synods and Presbyteries). After consideration of several online hosting options, the project plan recommended a high quality Moodle provider and a business plan. Most Synods agreed to participate in the project. However it was put on hold in March 2018 due to the uncertainty over Assembly staffing and priorities. It is understood that the Assembly Resourcing Unit is exploring how the project might continue.

7.3 “WE ARE THE UCA” VIDEO SERIES

A project to prepare two series of videos about the life and faith of the Uniting Church was commenced in 2015 with filming undertaken by FlipCreative based in Brisbane. Six videos about the life of the Uniting Church were released on the Internet (assembly.uca.org.au/weareuca) and on DVD through Mediacom in 2017. Six videos about the faith of the Uniting Church have been prepared through to the editing stage. It is hoped that these will be released by the Assembly in 2018.

7.4 BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION RESOURCES

A booklet for parents about the baptism of children has been worked on by three authors and has been through several drafts. At the time of writing, the product was not deemed to be in a final state for publication. A resource for baptism and confirmation of young adults and adults to accompany the “We are the UCA” video series is partly completed. These projects have been passed on to the Assembly Resourcing Unit.

7.5 MOBILE APPS

There has been some investigation of the possible use of mobile device applications/software for faith formation and education, with a directory of useful resources compiled by the National Director and a particular Australian application evaluated. Vinteract by the Verto Group has been used by congregations in several synods and by the Queensland Synod and the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

8. SCHOOLS

The UCA National Schools Consultative Group has met once or twice a year in different locations. The National Director attended and assisted with the organisation. The group exists primarily as a way for Synods to share information about oversight of UCA schools, and has been invaluable in this regard. Opportunity is taken to visit a UCA school each time the group meets. Agenda items have included school governance and UCA oversight, the Royal Commission, chaplaincy, religious education curriculum, and UCA ethos and values. The Group has also been informed by the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) of which the UCA is a member. Elaine Rae retired from the Group and as the UCA national schools contact person. The Assembly is greatly appreciative of her significant contribution in this field.

9. RESEARCH

The FED Working Group consulted with Rev. Dr Philip Hughes from the Christian Research Association about possible areas for future collaborative research but decided to postpone this until some other projects were completed.

The National Director also communicated with the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) and with the NSW/ACT Synod about the 2016 NCLS survey questions.

Mr Craig Mitchell’s doctoral research on Congregations as lifelong learning communities for missional discipleship was recognised as being important for the ongoing work of the Assembly.

10. APPRECIATION

We believe that the FED staff and Working Group began some wide-ranging and critical initiatives and heralded a shift in ways that the Assembly might work nationally. We see it as vital that the Assembly remembers the 2013 resolutions of the Standing Committee to maintain an explicit focus on Christian education and to address systemically how the church resources congregations and their leaders to be effective in lifelong faith formation.

We acknowledge the excellent work undertaken by Rev. Tom Kerr on behalf of the Assembly from 2010 to 2017. His encouragement of people, his creative teaching and communication, his wisdom and perception, and his sincere yet provocative faith were invaluable for leaders and for events. In particular, Rev. Kerr’s vision and nurturing of NYALC developed it into the vital leadership and discipleship event that it has become.

The work of the FED Working Group owes an enormous debt of gratitude to Mr Craig Mitchell. The reality is that all of this work reflects his copious knowledge, wisdom and breadth of understanding about the world of Christian education and discipleship formation. His tireless enthusiasm and hard

work has generated and underpinned the achievements of this Working Group. In particular, he has modelled a collaborative approach to our work and provided the hub for effective networking across Synods and Presbyteries. His research has been invaluable. His technical expertise, particularly in the areas of digital technology and online education delivery has been cutting-edge and opened the way forward for the UCA's future in these areas.

While the decision to curtail our work and support the new initiatives in the Assembly's way of working in the next triennium has temporarily suspended some of these activities, the Formation Education and Discipleship Working Group remains hopeful that all of them will be picked up and advanced by the Assembly Resourcing Unit and that the life and witness of the UCA will be strengthened through excellent educational resources and processes.

Rev. Dr Ian Price FED WG Convenor and Chairperson

Mr Craig Mitchell National Director Formation, Education and Discipleship