

B12 UNITING ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHRISTIAN CONGRESS

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last triennium the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) has begun a time of review; reviewing governance capacity, financial stewardship and direction of a number of regions. Congress has been asking about whether its structures are still suitable. In a time of increased government compliance and the need for stringent governance, Congress finds it must work closely with the rest of the Church.

Congress remains committed to its vision of holistic ministry, wanting to call people to an active following of Jesus, and affirming God cares for them as First Peoples with their own culture and history and deep connection to the land. Congress continues the exploration of multifaceted relationship between gospel and culture, and what Indigenous theologies are for our country.

In October 2017 the National Committee approved the following Vision and Mission statements:

Vision: Congress' vision is for the total well-being of all things in God's creation, and particularly First Peoples – spiritual, physical, social, cultural, economic, and political – who have broken free of domination and their dependence on others.

Mission: To present the story of Jesus and encourage people to follow him in the context of people's own culture and language, and in ways that support justice, healing, cultural identity, empowerment, and hope, and to be an equal partner in the life of the Uniting Church.

The same meeting of the National Committee encouraged continuing exploration of the possibility of an Institute for Indigenous Theology and Spirituality that would help people explore what it means to be authentically Christian and Aboriginal, and which builds relationships across the denominations.

It is significant that the Assembly will meet during NAIDOC Week. The theme this year is "Because of her, we can!" This year's theme celebrates the invaluable contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have made – and continue to make – to the communities, families and history of First Peoples, and to our nation.

For at least 65,000 years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have carried our dreaming stories, songlines, languages and knowledge that have kept our culture strong and enriched us as the oldest continuing culture on the planet. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were there at first contact.

They were there at the Torres Strait Pearlers strike in 1936, the Day of Mourning in 1938, the 1939 Cumeragunja Walk-Off, at the 1946 Pilbara pastoral workers' strike, the 1965 Freedom Rides, the Wave Hill walk off in 1966, on the front line of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972 and at the drafting of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. They have marched, protested and spoken at demonstrations and national gatherings for recognition of our rights and calling for national reform and justice.

They are our elders, our grandmothers, our mothers, our aunties, our sisters and our daughters. Without them we are not us.

2. MINISTRY

Congress continues to wrestle with the best way to prepare people for ministry. Where should people study, how does Congress form people and give them skills for ministry, and how do people gain enough knowledge to themselves become teachers.

The National Committee has encouraged the Ministerial Education Board (MEB) to consider what it means for formation and training, including access to other areas of learning that people need to be equipped for bi-vocational lives. The MEB was also asked to consider how people could be formed through part-time study and part-time placement in a pastoral context.

The National Committee committed \$20,000.00 to support the employment of Justine Gawinygawiny as a trainee teacher at Nungalinya College to further build our cultural workforce. It is wonderful to see Rev. Denise Champion in SA, and Rev. Maratja Dhamarrandji in the Northern Synod ordained and Congress congratulates them both for this achievement.

Rev. Dr Murray Muirhead completed his term as National Training Coordinator in January 2018, to pursue a career in nursing. Congress wishes to acknowledge Murray's long service and significant contribution to Congress' life.

3. GOVERNANCE

A lot of time has been spent in the last three years supporting governance both nationally and regionally. The National Executive carried out a few Regional reviews over the last three years; these were meant to encourage the regions in their ministry and mission, improve their governance, and gain control over spending. Unfortunately, the Executive has been forced to intervene in some Regional Committees. The good news is that as a result of those interventions there are stronger governance arrangements in place for those interventions.

We have reaffirmed the National Elders Council and have committed to utilising members' experience, wisdom and guidance in developing a stronger governance structure as well as initiate and progress Memorandums of Understanding with Regional Councils and Synods.

4. STAFFING

For a number of years Congress has worked with a National Chairperson (unpaid), National Coordinator, and National Training Coordinator (part-time for the last two years). There have been continuing conversations about support for the Youth Committee.

Midway through 2017 Rev. Dr Chris Budden indicated that he wished to complete his time as Interim National Coordinator early in 2018. In the subsequent conversations around roles and workloads, and in order to offer Congress solid directions for the future, the National Executive recommended to the National Conference that:

- i. the role of Chairperson become a full-time position (and be renamed President of Congress)
- ii. that a new position of Support Person be created to take account of the President's role
- iii. that the National Training Coordinator role be 0.4
- iv. that there be a new role of Youth Coordinator (0.6).

National Conference adopted this model, but determined that the youth position would be a full-time equivalent for three years (i.e. it could be two part-time people).

Rev. Garry Dronfield was elected as President. Megan O'Connell was appointed as Administrator. Rev. Dr Chris Budden is the National Training Coordinator for 12 months. The youth position has been requested to change into two part-time positions. These positions are yet to be advertised.

5. NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2018

Congress held its triennial conference at Geelong in January 2018, with 150 people present for the six days. The guest speaker was Harley Eagle, a Canadian First Person who spoke about healing and trauma. Bible studies were led by Dr Liz Boase and Rev. Denise Champion. Rev. Dennis Corowa was honoured for his fine contribution to Congress during his time as National Chairperson.

6. MARRIAGE CONVERSATION

There was significant passionate debate from all attending members of the National Executive. Perspectives were personal, congregational, regional and historically and contemporarily cultural. Following deep conversation, it was affirmed that Congress will make the following statement:

"We affirm we are all made in God's Image and Jesus died for all humankind and he embraces all human beings. God's word provides us with the wisdom to serve the Lord and pray with him. We as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are conflicted of this decision that has created passionate debates and we respect all traditional culture across this country.

We have not come to a unified decision because it conflicts us and challenges us to think deeply as human beings and to our Creator. We support all members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress to be able to hold and communicate as individuals their own position in all forums."

7. CANADIAN VISIT

In 2017 the Moderator of the United Church of Canada invited Congress and the Assembly to consider an exchange visit to explore and support reconciliation. A team visited Canada in 2017, and the return visit occurred this year in March. We share many similarities that arise from colonisation, stolen land, children taken from families, the destruction of language and culture, and the slowness of the church to give First Peoples

a real voice. Pain was shared, friendships developed, understandings broadened, and cultural understandings deepened.

There is a strong feeling among all those who were involved that there would be benefit in continuing to support meetings between the First Peoples of both countries. What this may look like is yet to be developed.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to acknowledge the tragic loss of Mr Bruce Carter who passed away in early 2017 at 86 years of age. Uncle Bruce was a proud Ngarrindjeri man, who was very much loved by all and significantly contributed to community. Uncle Bruce was a long-standing member of Congress. He was the first official State Elder for Congress and served for many years on the SA Regional Committee, the Congress National Committee and the National Council of Elders. He was also a member of the Presbytery and Synod of South Australia.

We miss his wisdom, guidance, pastoral care and unwavering support.