



muylathina takila-ti Le:wun tunk-ungai tuldangk tunk-ungai
Ola ma tumau i le alofa' 사랑 안에서 살기 Tinggal di dalam Kasih
Nofoma'u i he Ofa 愛中合居



B16 UNITING CURCH NATIONAL HISTORY SOCIETY

1. SETTING UP THE SOCIETY

The Uniting Church National History Society was established in Adelaide in June 2017, during the Society's inaugural Conference celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the formation of the Uniting Church. Dr William Emilsen was elected President and served a two-year term with the wisdom and grace for which he is so well known. We are very pleased that he has remained a member of the Board during this present term. I thank each member of the UCNHS Board - Bob Coote (NSW), Patricia Curthoys (NSW), William Emilsen (NSW), Alison Longworth (WA), Steve Orme (NT), Julia Pitman (QLD), Judith Raftery (SA), and Robert Renton (VIC) - each of whom has faithfully volunteered their time to ensure the smooth operations of the Society. The Board switched its mode of gathering to Zoom (even before the lockdown hit) and, after a short settling in period, this has proven to be a very effective means of staying connected across the great distances between us.

The Society's objectives are to:

- promote and advance the study of the history of the Uniting Church and its predecessor churches
- encourage and facilitate research into and publication (by any means) of the history of the Uniting Church and its predecessor churches
- organise conferences, public lectures and workshops
- establish connections with other national and international historical organisations
- award prizes and scholarships which advance public knowledge of Uniting Church history, including the Geoff Barnes Memorial Prize for excellence in Church History
- draw to the attention of the Assembly significant dates, events and people in the history of the Church and its predecessor churches with the aspiration that appropriate resources may be provided for their celebration, commemoration or reflection on the contemporary life of the Church
- do all things necessary, including fund raising, to enable the Organisation to meet its objectives

This report will indicate the successful meeting of many, but not all, of these Objectives. At its 12 March 2021 meeting the Objectives were considered and it was decided that they should remain a standing item on the agenda for the next several meetings as we work through ways of achieving them more fully.

The Society has made some significant gains, seeing an increase in membership to 85 (down from 91 after a recent culling of non-financial members) and a balance of funds of \$26,633 as at 23 April 2021. In an effort to attract a younger constituency, but also to better serve our present members, we have established a social media presence with a Facebook page that has attracted 352 followers and 332 'likes'. Our Twitter feed has 47 followers and our website, hosted on the Assembly webpage, carries basic information on the Society, news items, Conference Proceedings and our regular newsletter in PDF format.

The dissolution of the NSW/ACT Synod Historical Society and the transfer of most of its membership and all of its assets to the National Society has greatly strengthened our viability. Synod historical societies in South Australia and Vic/Tas continue to operate in partnership (not competition) with the National Society and the West Australian and Northern Synods remain meaningfully engaged under the leadership of Alison Longworth and Steve Orme. Julia Pitman has also managed to establish a fledgling Queensland Synod Historical Society where one did not exist before. The UCNHS is not in competition with any of these other activities and many people share membership in both their Synod Societies and the National Society. The National Society belongs to this network but has the additional responsibility and scope of reporting and being accountable to Assembly. The Board of the UCNHS has representatives from all Synods and the rotating of our Biennial Conference and Annual Lectures is designed to give us a good national presence.

2. BIENNIAL CONFERENCE AND PUBLIC LECTURE

Our 2019 Biennial Conference on the theme *Finding a Home in the Uniting Church* was held in Melbourne at the Centre for Theology and Ministry, 7-10 June 2019, and attracted 54 registrations. There were three keynote addresses (from Meredith Lake, Joanna Cruickshank and Graeme Davison) and 22 other papers were presented. William Emilsen and Patricia Curthoys headed up the Planning Committee for the Third Biennial Conference held from 11-13 June 2021 at the Centre for Ministry in North Parramatta, on the theme *Growing Up Uniting*. A concerted effort was made to include younger members of the UCA. The keynote speakers at the conference are the President of the Uniting Church (and our patron) Dr Deidre Palmer, the Executive Director of the National Church Life Survey, Associate Professor Ruth Powell, Dr William Emilsen, and Dr Elizabeth Watson. Projecting forward to 2023 we are looking forward to the hospitality of the Northern Synod, as we plan to host the next Conference there in association with commemorative celebrations of the establishing of Milingimbi Methodist Mission in 1923 and the Wesleyan congregation in Darwin (then Palmerston) in 1873.

In addition to the publication of our Conference Proceedings, *Finding a Home in the Uniting Church*. ed. Robert Renton (UCNHS, 2020), six issues of the newly-established newsletter *Uniting Church History and Heritage* have appeared also under the editorship of Robert Renton. This newsletter stands in direct continuity with *Church Heritage*, the historical journal of the Uniting Church NSW/ACT Historical Society which ended its previous incarnation with its March 2019 issue (vol. 21, no. 1), after the Society was dissolved and, in effect, merged into the National History Society. The journal was founded by the Rev Eric Clancy in 1978, then from 1993 until 2019, Dr Malcolm D. Prentis served as editor and developed the journal with excellence, leaving behind a valuable repository of Uniting Church history that will serve researchers and the interested public for generations to come. Though *Uniting Church History and Heritage* is quite different in format to the earlier journal it will continue with the aim of publishing news items, articles, and book reviews on the history of the Uniting Church and its precedent churches. It serves as the principal means of communication from me to our members through the 'President's Notes' column that appears in each issue.

In addition to its Biennial Conference, the Society holds a Biennial Public Lecture in the non-Conference year, the first of which was held in conjunction with the 15th Assembly when Professor Stewart Gill, Head of Queens College, University of Melbourne, spoke on 'The Horizons of Religious History.' The second Public Lecture took the form of an expert panel on the topic of UCA Redress (the Uniting Church agency set up to respond to the federal government's Redress programme in response to the findings of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse). Members of the interdisciplinary panel (held via Zoom) were: Sarah Lim, National Director of UCA Redress, Dr Janice McRandal, public theologian, Wesley Mission, Queensland, Emeritus Professor Shurlee Swain, historian, Australian Catholic University, and Melia Benn, UCA Redress executive member, who provided an Indigenous contribution and response. It was particularly pleasing to have an all-woman panel of experts which followed the pattern of last year's Conference when two out of three keynotes were women scholars and the 2021 Conference when three out of the four keynotes will be delivered by women. The video recording of the UCA

Redress Panel was shared on social media and within the University of Divinity which cosponsored the event through the use of its Zoom Webinar platform.

Some have expressed surprised that the History Society should see a panel on UCA Redress as within our sphere of activity. For historians the past is not only something of antiquarian interest or limited to questions of heritage. It continues to shape and inform the present. Historical study helps the church engage with presenting issues of urgent significance. The Black Lives Matter protests have forced many countries (including Australia) to face their problematic heritage of institutional racism, as just one example of the way that past experience continues to shape the present. As the Revised Preamble to the Constitution (2009) states 'the uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied, utilised, cultivated and harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken, and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.' Since 1994 the Covenant established with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress has sought to respond to God's call to 'pray and work together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.' That work must continue and remains even more urgent in the midst of a global pandemic in which Black Lives Matter protests are sometimes seen as a public health hazard. The real threat to 'public health' goes to a much deeper spiritual malaise, one that can only be healed in response to God's call to be a reconciled and reconciling people. Facing up to the historic crimes against children that are at the centre of the Redress scheme are also part of that divine call.

3. MATTERS OF IMPORTANCE

The UCNHS would like to draw to the attention of the Assembly to two matters of importance.

- There is a need to continue to ensure that our theological colleges are sufficiently resourced to offer candidates and other students adequate training in history and that they are well acquainted with the history of the Uniting Church and its precedent churches. This includes ensuring adequate staffing of the colleges and the ongoing presence of historical study in theological curricula. It is recognised that theological education is Synod-based activity, but the Assembly holds responsibility, through its Education for Ministry Working Group, for the standards of formation, education and training for the ministry of the Word, ministry of Deacon, ministry of Pastor and ministry of Lay Preacher.
- The archival resources of the Synods are a highly significant resource. A recent flooding event in the Tasmanian Archives saw damage to the collection. Are there steps the Assembly could take that might assist Synods to preserve their archival collections, for example, through digitization? Serious mould and water damage to materials in the Camden Theological Library in Sydney led to the digitisation and online hosting of over 16,000 items on the *Illuminate* platform. A coordinated national policy on archive preparation that utilises the most up to date archival technology would be of great assistance to Synods.

4. LOOKING FORWARD

Having entered its fifth decade, the Uniting Church in Australia has a rich history to draw upon and the UCNHS has an important role to play in addressing present challenges to the Church's witness, mission, and self-understanding. As I look for something positive to come out of the COVID-19 epidemic, a number of reflections come to mind. Perhaps we will reconsider our constant drive to produce more and more goods and let go of the myth of ever-expanding economic growth. Maybe the earth itself will have some time to breathe as the cessation of human activity allows some ecological 'bounce back'. As our relationships with family members and friends are tested by forced absences, perhaps we will learn not to take such precious connections for granted and make every effort to express our love and appreciation for those dearest to us. The era of Global Pandemic will no doubt be remembered as one of the hinges upon which future historians will conveniently hang

their competing theories. While we are writing and researching history, we are also *making* history in the ways we respond to the present circumstances. May we each have the wisdom to discern the best responses we can make for the good of our present neighbours as well as for the global citizens of the future.

(Revd) Associate Professor Glen O'Brien
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