



B3 GENERAL SECRETARY REPORT

1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

...we who are non-Aboriginal members of our church grieve with you, our Aboriginal and Islander brothers and sisters. We grieve that the way in which our people often brought the Gospel to your people belittled and harmed much of your culture, and confused the Gospel with western ways. As a result you and we are the poorer and the image of God in us all is twisted and blurred, and we are not what God meant us to be. (Covenanting Statement, 1994)

The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God's ways. (Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia)

I begin this report acknowledging the First Peoples of this land, their ancient ways and knowledge, their stories and law, and their connection to and sovereignty in this land, and pay my respects to their wise Elders, past and present.

2. ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

The Assembly staff attend to what it means to work within the ethos of the Uniting Church and to be a team across all parts of the Assembly. We worship together once a week online, we meet together online across all the places our staff are situated (Sydney, Canberra, Brisbane, Adelaide and Melbourne) once a month and we look for opportunities to work together and share learnings.

The Assembly's work is grounded in the commitments of the Uniting Church as set out in our guiding documents, and also holds to the following values:

Hope: We participate in God's Mission in the world, working together to make a difference.

Justice: We seek peace and wholeness for every person and creation, where all are able to flourish.

Compassion: We care for others with empathy, guided by the love of God in action

Respect: We accept and honour diversity, uniqueness and the contribution of others.

Integrity: We dedicate ourselves to being honest, consistent and working ethically in our interactions.

Innovation: We collaborate for courageous and creative possibilities and solutions in everything we do.

3. A WORLD CHANGED

When the Assembly Standing Committee met together in March 2020, just half way through the triennium, the COVID-19 pandemic had just begun to impact Australia in a significant way. For the first time, we practiced hygiene measures for greeting and sharing Holy Communion. There were side conversations about how different parts of the church would respond, what would be some likely scenarios. The Standing Committee has not met in person since that meeting. Like other Councils, Congregations, Uniting Church agencies and schools, and other activities of the church, the work of the Standing Committee and the Assembly has continued in new ways in a world that changed under the cloud of the global pandemic.

3.1 **Governance and Operations**

The Assembly and its Agencies moved quickly to working remotely, ensuring that staff were equipped and resourced to do so, as well as setting up online spaces for connection and working to replace in-person meetings. All teams continued to deliver on work outcomes, albeit in new ways, to progress the work of the Assembly.

A Business Continuity Team was established with oversight of the Business Continuity Plan. The Executive team met weekly and regular updates on all matters, including risk, were provided to members of the Standing Committee.

Each part of the Assembly quickly discovered that the pandemic not only changed the way we undertook existing work but generated a significant amount of new work as well. This has brought additional workload on staff during the triennium.

3.2 **Paying Attention**

As lockdowns and restrictions continued in various states (Assembly staff work in five states and territories), and workload changed and grew, Assembly leaders paid attention to the health and wellbeing of a dispersed workforce. While work progressed, it was still tough and staying connected was key. Open and transparent, regular communication with all staff was important. One initiative that made a difference was a series of three sessions with all Assembly staff facilitated by outside experts which dealt with mindfulness and being present; finding meaning through work in a time of pandemic; and resilience and equanimity. Throughout the triennium we have continued our tradition of celebrating personal and corporate milestones and creating opportunities for staff to build relationships in less formal contexts. As the pandemic continues to disrupt life and work, we continue to put the wellbeing of our staff and the culture of the Assembly at the front of how we operate.

3.3 **Looking Outward**

Assembly staff also looked outward to the wider church, considering what they could offer. Working with the Transforming Worship Circle of Interest, three months of online worship was coordinated and provided each Sunday reflecting the diversity and creativity of people across the Church. Webinars focussing on how different cultures were dealing with the pandemic brought learnings for all who participated. Opportunities to catch up for coffee online with National Consultants provided spaces for people to talk about what was happening where they were, and in their Congregations and faith communities.

3.4 **Learnings**

We have learnt a lot over the past fifteen months, and we continue to do so. The Executive intentionally held sessions to consider these learnings and how they will be used in the way the Assembly works now and into the future. These learnings have been incorporated into our work practises and were shared with the Assembly Standing Committee.

My enduring reflection is that the Assembly and its agencies are blessed by the quality and commitment of their staff who have risen to the challenge of these extraordinary times.

4. **RELOCATION OF ASSEMBLY SYDNEY OFFICES**

In 2020, the Assembly (Assembly Secretariat and UnitingWorld) moved its Sydney office after 33 years at 222 Pitt Street to new offices in Pilgrim House at 262 Pitt Street, next door to Pitt Street Uniting Church. The need to move arose as a result of a change in lease conditions which were not sustainable.

When the new offices were being designed, it was agreed to move to a smaller, open plan space. There are fewer and small individual work spaces and more meeting and collaboration spaces. With staff currently working in a hybrid way (both remotely and in the office), coming together to collaborate and connect, the new Assembly offices are fit for purpose and financially sustainable.

As the move to the new offices took place during the pandemic, farewelling and acknowledging the life of the Assembly in the old offices and blessing the new offices took place online.

5. ASSEMBLY STRATEGIC PLAN

In the past triennium, the Assembly Strategic Plan 2017-2020 was finalised and evaluated. A new Strategic Plan 2020-2023 was developed following consultation with members of the Standing Committee, stakeholders and the wider Uniting Church. The Strategic Plan is based on the following commitments:

Affirming our faith in the Risen Crucified One, who constitutes, rules and renews the Church, we will live out our covenant as First and Second Peoples, our commitment to be an inter-cultural and inter-generational Church, our commitment to the mutuality and equality of women and men in ministry, valuing the participation and ministry of all the people of God, oriented towards justice, valuing scholarly enquiry and an informed faith, engaging constructively with ecumenical and inter-faith partners and providing a safe place for all people.

The Plan frames the work we do, focuses the work of the Assembly, provides transparency of Assembly projects and resourcing requirements to Synods, ensures projects from the Strategic Plan are delivered in a timely way, and allows appropriate levels of accountability and reporting to the Standing Committee for Assembly projects and areas of work.

The Plan includes five Strategic Directions with associated initiatives:

Respond to the Church: Respond to the ongoing needs of the whole Church and other Councils in line with the Assembly's mandated responsibilities

Identity: Communicate a clear and concise message — who are we as the UCA and what is our distinct role in working toward the coming of the kingdom of God in Australia

Innovation: Take risks, experiment and shape our church to respond to the needs of today and those of the future

Intergenerational: Welcome, equip and hold together the different generations, in the life, Ministry, decision making and leadership of the church

Intercultural: Learn from and enable diverse cultural groups within the church to flourish together

(Assembly Strategic Plan 2020-2023, <https://uniting.church/assembly-strategic-plan-2020-2023/>)

6. HOW WE WORK

(For the work of Assembly Agencies and the Assembly Resourcing Unit, see Reports B5, B8, B18, B19)

- 6.1 Throughout the triennium the Assembly including all agencies have worked in a highly collaborative and consultative way. The Executive meet monthly, with additional shorter gatherings fortnightly throughout the pandemic. This has been the place whereby strategy, risk and management practices are reviewed, shared and aligned. Through monthly whole of staff meetings, the Executive have created opportunities for wider sharing, building of relationships and establishing and reinforcing the culture by which we live.

The Assembly Strategic Plan and the more detailed annual business plans that flow from it, guide the work within the secretariat, Assembly Resourcing Unit and Assembly Services Unit.

All parts of the Assembly have annual performance reviews for all staff whilst also attending to the physical and mental wellbeing of our people as described above.

- 6.2 Since the 15th Assembly, the operations of the Assembly have been influenced by resolutions made at that meeting. *(please note: outcomes of resolutions from the 15th Assembly can be found in various reports, particularly B4 Standing Committee and B5 Assembly Resourcing Unit)*

6.2.1 Sovereignty

Following the 15th Assembly's resolution *Recognition of First Peoples as Sovereign* and subsequent work on how this might affect the Uniting Church's practices and processes, our commitment to the Covenant with UAICC remains key to how we work at the Assembly. Over this triennium, the appointment of Stuart McMillan as the Assembly Consultant Covenanting has facilitated this commitment and resourced the Assembly and the wider church. The development of the first Assembly Covenant Action Plan has been significant. We look forward to how this plan will focus our commitment even more in the coming years.

6.2.2 National Climate Action Plan

In response to Assembly resolution *For the Whole Creation*, the Assembly Resourcing Unit developed a Climate Action Plan for Assembly operations. A baseline for measurement across all parts of the Assembly has been established, as well as a commitment to a target of net zero emissions by 2040. Progress on this target will be reported annually to the Standing Committee. (<https://uniting.church/climate>)

6.2.3 Assembly Disability Access Guidelines

The *Disability Discrimination Act DDA 1992* (Cth) makes disability discrimination unlawful and promotes equal rights, equal opportunity and equal access for people with disabilities. In response to the DDA 1992, and in keeping with its biblical imperative to welcome all people, the 15th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia resolved to adopt Disability Access Guidelines: *To request the Standing Committee to develop disability access guidelines for use at all events and activities overseen by the Assembly, and to encourage each Synod to develop similar disability access guidelines for use at Synod events and meetings.*

Rev Andy Calder, Disability Inclusion Advocate for the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania developed the Guidelines for the Assembly based on his work in Victoria/Tasmania. These Guidelines are now in place for all parts of the Assembly's work. (<https://uniting.church/disabilityaccess>)

6.3 Circles of Interest

Since their launch at the 15th Assembly the seven Circles of Interest have been a significant form of engagement between the Assembly and the wider church, as well as places of connection for Uniting Church members in specific areas of interest for them. The Advocates and Panels of each Circle have also contributed to the work of the Assembly, and Task Groups established by the Standing Committee for particular areas of work.

Over the triennium, it has been wonderful to see the large number of people connecting with the work of the Assembly through the Circles of Interest, participating in conversations, sharing resources and expertise, and engaging with the Assembly. The Advocates have been important leaders in shaping this new way of working for the Assembly, and we offer them our gratitude for sharing their significant expertise and commitment.

7. ACT2

Throughout 2020, the Standing Committee participated in conversations about the future for the Uniting Church, and our responsibility to listen to God's living Word. Just as those who collaborated to bring the Uniting Church to birth, almost 44 years ago now, we too are being called to look ahead with faithfulness and openness to confess Jesus Christ, the risen crucified One, in fresh words and deeds, including new, innovative and culturally engaged ways of being the Church.

In the lead up to the 16th Assembly reconvened meeting in 2022, members of the Uniting Church, our Congregations, agencies, schools and Councils, are invited to engage in a conversation about the future to which God is calling our Church.

The Act2 Project is about:

- **Looking to the future**, asking what is God saying to us as the Uniting Church about how we order our life so we can be committed to transforming lives and communities in God's love?
- **Being aware of the journey the Uniting Church has been on since it began almost 44 years ago**, and also what has changed, in the world, in our country, in our church, for our members, in society's attitudes towards Christianity.
- **Understanding our identity**, who are we as the Uniting Church? We have to have clarity about this. Having the common grounding as seen in the Basis of Union enables us to engage with one another with a shared foundation, be open to the leading of the Spirit and to look with hope-filled anticipation to the future.
- **Checking the health of the Uniting Church**, asking ourselves how are we doing? What are our strengths? what are our challenges? And, 'where is God leading us, what is God calling us to do in this new context and how do we order our lives to best fulfil that calling?'

With these things in mind, the task of the project is to identify and implement sustainable structures, practices and ways of working. When the project was being defined, the Standing Committee identified three outcomes which were critical to any future structure, practices and ways of working:

1. Create an enabling environment for local communities of worship, witness, service and discipleship formation.

There are many diverse local communities of the Uniting Church, however we describe them, engaging in worship, witness, service and discipleship formation. We aspire that more of our local communities whether they be congregations, schools, agencies, confident in the gospel, are equipped and released for this work. We also know that there is a role the wider Church plays in either enabling or hindering this aspiration.

2. Foster a cohesive national character of the Church and collaborative ways of working across the Church.

We are also a national church with a collective voice on issues of significance for our nation. To be a truly national church we want to foster a more cohesive sense of ourselves. We also know that as our resourcing context becomes more challenging, we need to build on our current collaborative efforts to develop broader and deeper collaboration on the common challenges we face.

3. Fulfil the Church's legal, ethical and social obligations.

We know that the Christian church has failed to meet the expectations it has of itself and the wider society has of it. As a church we are committed to addressing those failings and striving to better meet these legal, ethical and social obligations. This requires us to order our lives in such a way that we can meet those obligations as effectively and efficiently as possible.

A national survey has been undertaken, and six national online conversations have taken place as we begin to listen to the wisdom and experience of our church and its members. It will be crucial to hear from people across the breadth of the Uniting Church as we continue to be open to what God is saying to us, and where God is leading us.

8. ROYAL COMMISSIONS

Over the triennium, the Uniting Church took significant steps in response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse with the establishment of UCA Redress Ltd and the National Safe Church Unit, indicating our continued commitment to being a safe place for all. It is important to acknowledge the significant national collaboration between the Assembly and the Synods that occurred to enable these outcomes. (See Reports B17 and B11 respectively)

The Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety was established in October 2018 and handed down its report in February 2021. UnitingCare Australia led the church's response, also providing coordination for Uniting Church agencies who responded to and appeared before the Commission. (See UnitingCare Australia's Report B18)

The Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability was established in April 2019. With the collaboration of the Assembly, UnitingCare Australia and its network, and Synods, the Disability Royal Commission National Task Group was set up. The purpose of the National Task Group is to provide leadership of the Church's engagement, response and contact with the Royal Commission, working collaboratively with the Church's community services agencies and schools, along with Synods, Presbyteries and Congregations.

As Chair of the National Task Group, it is a privilege to once again see the Uniting Church responding to what is asked of it, as well as applying learnings to its policies and activities to be a place of access and welcome for all people who participate in its activities.

The National Task Group is supported and resourced by Executive Officer, Tenille Fricker. The Assembly and the church is also grateful to UnitingCare Australia for providing the resourcing for Tenille's role. (See UnitingCare Australia's Report B18)

9. CONCLUSION

The past triennium has brought its challenges and its joys, as well as the continuing privilege to work with so many staff, volunteers, Committee and Board Chairs and members who contribute to

the work of the Assembly and the Uniting Church with passion and dedication. The work of God is blessed by them.

It has been an honour to work with Dr Deidre Palmer, President of the National Assembly in so many significant projects and endeavours. Her commitment to justice for all, the leadership offered to us by young adults and the ministry given to our church by all members has been an inspiration and a gift to the Assembly and the wider church.

The members of the Executive Team of the Assembly continue to provide exceptional leadership to their staff and areas of work, providing the Assembly with strength and wisdom, insight and courage. Rob, Leo, Jannine, Claerwen and Sureka, I would be lost without you, and I am grateful that I get to share the journey with you.

Finally, as we look to the future, my prayer is for bravery, boldness and a certain amount of nerve for all of us at the Assembly and the wider Uniting Church, as we hold true to being the Church God calls us to be and as we continue to be a pilgrim people for all that is to come.

Colleen Geyer
General Secretary