



B14 UNITING ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHRISTIAN CONGRESS

1. TOUGH & SORRY TIMES: REMEMBERING OUR FORMER LEADERS

We know that all of the world has had a tough time over the last 2 years with the Covid – 19 virus.

This is true also for Congress over the last 3 years. In 2019, three former national chairs of Congress passed away: Pastor Bill Hollingsworth, Rev. Jeffery Garrawurra & Rev. Sealin Garlett. Sealin served as national chair for at least 6 years, continuously flying across the country on overnight flights from Perth to Sydney and Townsville. Pastor Bill naturally is remembered not only as a national leader in the Reconciliation movement, but was Congress chair when the Covenanting statements were made in 1994. Rev. Jeffery Garrawurra was chair when the Destiny Together prayer event was held in Canberra and across the country in 2013.

In 2020 the wife of one of the founders of Congress, Rev. Dorothy Harris - Gordon passed away. We are glad that she was able to be present in late 2019 for the launch of the book on her husband, Rev. Charles Harris, written by William Emilsen. The book, "Charles Harris: A Struggle for Justice" tells the story of the early years of Charles and Dorothy and the beginnings of Congress in the 1980's. In many ways the story is as relevant today, as the time it was written. It should be read by the whole church, not just Congress leaders, and is a great tool to retell the Congress story.

2. GOVERNANCE AND STAFF CHANGES

As well as dealing with the sad loss of leaders, which has resulted in a loss of great knowledge and expertise, Congress has had some leadership changes over the last three years which has affected our governance at National Executive. Amongst these was the departure of our Administrator, Megan O'Connell after a little over 12 months in the position in early 2019, and the resignation of our President, Rev. Garry Dronfield in March 2020. Ian Dempster replaced Megan from May 2019 as interim national Admin Assistant, while Mark Kickett took over Garry's role as national Interim Chair. Both Mark and Ian worked only 0.6 FTE for Congress nationally, while continuing in their roles 0.4 FTE in SA as Congress State Development and Resource Officer respectively. From 1st July Mark has been released to work full time for Congress nationally until the National Conference.

When Garry was President one of the changes he developed was the instigation of a Strategic Planning and Support Group (SPSG), to provide support and advice to the national Congress leadership. This has proved to be an invaluable resource to the Congress leadership.

3. CONGRESS STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKSHOP

Another initiative was the development of a Strategic Planning Workshop in Adelaide in the first week of March 2020, just before the Covid lockdown. One of the reasons for the workshop was a paper titled, "Congress: Where to Now" which was presented to the Congress and the General Secretaries by two of our Congress elders and former national chairs, Rev. Dennis Corowa and Uncle Vince Ross. This workshop not only included members of our Congress National Executive, but also some

of our key young adult leaders. Former Congress staff and Covenanting partners including Chris Budden assisted with the workshop. Nine key areas were identified by the workshop being: Covenant, Identity, Safety, Governance, Assets, Training & Education, Youth ministry and Support, Women's ministry and support and other areas (Justice, Partnerships and Profile). It is anticipated that further work will be done on some of these areas at workshops at the Congress National Conference.

At the Strategic Planning Workshop, Congress affirmed its vision, "for the health, well-being and freedom of all First Peoples, that includes a relationship with Jesus, and an affirmation of their identity as First Peoples." It reinstated the core values of Congress as:

- Self-determination and justice in relationships
- Wholistic ministry and evangelism
- Importance of culture, First Peoples theology and worship
- Equality of women and men, and respect for voices of both
- Centrality of service to the wider community of First Peoples

4. CONGRESS NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Normally (ie pre – Covid), Congress has had their triennial national conference before the Assembly meeting. In recent times this has been in January, so initially Congress made plans for our National Conference to be in January or April 2021. We are planning now to hold our 2021 National Conference after Assembly in Darwin at Nungalinga College from October 11- 14th. Due to Covid we will be severely limiting our numbers to about 50 members. Recent conferences have had up to 150 people in attendance including family members. The National Executive hopes that we can have a follow up Celebration and Fellowship conference open to all Congress members some time in 2022 or 2023.

In the first week of June, Congress held a National Executive meeting in Perth, with some members joining by Zoom. At this meeting the National Executive developed the theme for National Conference. The theme is "AWAKENING: NEW SEEDS FOR FUTURE DREAMING, UAICC 2021". The core values mentioned above will allow Congress to reimagine and redream the Congress story through keynote speakers, Bible studies and workshops at the conference.

5. WORK IN THE REGIONS

Naturally there have been many challenges in Congress work in the regions. After a review of Congress ministry in **NSW**, the National Executive sadly placed the NSW Regional Committee into abeyance. The NSW Congress ministry is now managed through a National Executive NSW Task Group with the support of the NSW / ACT Synod. The NSW task group includes the National Interim Chair, as well as members from NSW, Tasmania and WA. We are blessed that the three ministry centres in NSW have faithful ministers, who just love being on about their local ministry. They also all happen to be in the one presbytery, being the Macquarie Darling Presbytery. We are working with the ministry centres to grow Congress ministry in NSW and to reinstate an oversight committee to replace the National Executive Task Group.

SA Congress faced financial challenges with deficit financial results for a number of years. Following a review of SA Congress operations, the Regional Council accepted 15 of the 17 recommendations of the review. We are grateful for the support of the Synod, and in particular the Resources Board through Rev. Ross Honey who have helped SA Congress turn this situation around. Congress now has a First Nations person working part time as a finance and administration officer, so that Congress is being empowered to manage our own affairs. The other thing that should be noted is that in SA with the Synod increasing the number of Presbyteries from one to three, there was some discussion

about the Congress becoming a Presbytery. This has not occurred at the moment, and instead the Standing Committee have given the SA Congress some of the powers of a Presbytery. MOU's will be developed with the Presbytery's which will help us work well together.

Congress nationally was very disappointed that the Calvary Presbytery in **Queensland** was disbanded as a Presbytery, being one of only two Presbyteries that Congress had in the nation. (The other is NRCC in the Northern Synod). This came as complete shock to the National Executive, and highlights the need for Synod leaders to be talking not only to their local leaders, but also to the National Office of Congress. The seven Congress congregations in Queensland are now part of two Presbyteries, with six congregations forming the Calvary Zone of Carpentaria Presbytery, while the Zillmere Congregation is part of a city based Presbytery. We are pleased however that the Queensland Synod is working hard with Queensland Congress to plan a new way forward. This has included a meeting in November 2020 in Cairns with all Congress congregations, and a follow up meeting in May 2021 which included a wider audience, including First nations people who work in Blue Care, and who are involved in other congregations. Mark Kickett and Stu McMillan participated remotely for one day in the first meeting, sharing and retelling the story of Congress, so that younger members of Congress could understand the history of the UAICC and our relationships in the Uniting Church. We were also delighted that Roberta Stanley was ordained at the meeting in November, though disappointed that due to Covid, national representatives could not be at her ordination. Rev. Roberta Stanley is a former national deputy chair of Congress, who has played a significant role in the life of Congress both locally and nationally.

In the **VicTas** Synod we are grateful for the ongoing support of Congress ministry particularly through the VicTas Walking Together group, which is a regular meeting of Congress and Synod leaders. The Victorian Oversight Committee of Congress along with the National Office are looking to grow Congress ministry beyond the wonderful work of Narana at Geelong.

In **Tasmania** we are enthused about the community engagement work of Leprena in Hobart, who provide a great wholistic ministry. This has included seminars on grief and healing, elder's lunches and taking people out of town on Walking on Country experiences. Tasmania also has an MOU with Kingston UCA to develop premises together, thereby demonstrating Walking Together and partnerships in practice. We are blessed that Alison Overeem has taken up a seat on the UnitingCare Australia board, and is a member of the Uniting First Peoples network, along with the National Interim Chair. Alison also has a gift in writing prayers and poetry which she freely shares with all of us. Another member of the Leprena team, Grace Williams shares her art work, as seen on the cover of the Assembly Covenanting Action Plan and January's Day of Mourning service.

WA Congress is seeking to extend their ministry reach beyond their current footprint in Perth and at Waroona. They have been working on their strategic plan, with a focus on developing their young leaders through the formation of a State Congress Youth committee. Their newest ministry focus is Tamin, a small town on the Eastern Highway in the WA wheat belt. From there they would like to grow ministry further into the Noongar country of south west WA. After the tragic early passing of Rev. Sealin Garlett in November 2019, we are pleased to report that his son Mitchell Garlett is progressing well with his ministry studies, which includes training at Nungalinga College in Darwin.

The **Northern Synod** comprises a vast area, not only in the NT, but also in the APY Lands in SA and the Kimberley in WA. As such it has the largest number of ministry centres and communities of any of our Congress regions. The region is broken up into Area Ministry Councils thereby enabling local self-determination. These regions are East Arnhem. West Arnhem, Darwin, The Centre (mostly APY communities) and the Kimberley. It should be noted that although Congress has many pastors in these communities, none of them are paid. Pastors minister out of love and in God's grace in their local communities. The only paid staff are in the NRCC office in Darwin and in some of the area ministry councils, where there are positions for Educators and Support Workers.

During this triennium it should be noted that Howard Amery finished his position as Resource Officer, and Rev. Jo Mar took up a position as NRCC Presbytery Minister, while still being Support Worker for the ministry at Mowanjum in the Kimberley. Congress continues to have over 40 students at Nungalinya studying certificate 3 & 4 in Christian Ministry & Theology and Diploma students in Translations, as well as other students in certificate 2 and students in art, music and media and foundation studies. The National Office staff along with Alison Overeem were pleased to be able to visit Darwin in March in preparation for the national conference at Nungalinya. We were able to spend some time with NRCC members and also share in devotions and a staff meeting with the Northern Synod & NRCC staff, thanks to the hospitality of the General Secretary and the Moderator.

6. REV. DR. DENISE CHAMPION AND “ANADITJ”

“Is there a doctor in the house?” So asked the Reverend when she phoned excitedly to the Congress State Office staff in early November 2020. The following Monday night there was a good size contingent of family and other Congress members at Adelaide West UC at the Adelaide College of Divinity graduation, when Aunty Denise Champion received the honorary doctorate (Doctor of Divinity: Honoris Causa).

One scholar wrote, “Through her writing and education, Aunty Denise has made a significant contribution to theological education, initially in Australia and now in Aotearoa.” Another said, “Aunty Denise is a scholar looking to the horizon by reclaiming the ancient past of her peoples – a stance that makes her a thought-leader among First and Second Peoples in an Australian church profoundly influenced by colonial missionary theology, and an important indigenous contributor internationally.”

Since the doctorate was awarded Aunty Denise has published a second book, “Anaditj”. The English translation means “always was, always will be.” In June Denise had an on-line book launch through Common Grace with hundreds of people joining in to watch. In July, Denise is being interviewed by Brooke Prentis on Radio National on “Soul Search” about the Walking on Country pilgrimage in which she led thirty (mostly Uniting College) students to her Adnyamathanha country in the northern Flinders Ranges. (“Anaditj” is available from the Uniting College through Bev Freeman, email bfreeman@sa.uca.org.au). Denise is now working at the Uniting College as a Theologian in Residence.

7. OODNADATTA BUSH CHAPLAINCY & FRONTIER SERVICES

Through the work of the old Frontier Services Mobile Aboriginal Patrol, in the mid 2000’s ministry was established at Oodnadatta. Julia Lennon undertook the Congress training program and established Oodnadatta as a new faith community. Initially Julia was supported by the Uniting Foundation in SA as a part time pastor. This was supplemented by Frontier Services from October 2019 when Julia became a part time bush chaplain as well. From January 2020 Julia has been ministering full time from Oodnadatta as the first Aboriginal woman to serve as a bush chaplain thanks to the support of Frontier Services. Her work can serve as a model of how the Congress can work in partnership with the Synods and Frontier Services to grow Congress ministry across Australia.

8. WORKING WITH THE PRESIDENT AND ASSEMBLY STAFF

It has been a blessing to work with the President and other Assembly staff over the last 16 months. Highlights have included sharing in the live streamed Day of Mourning service in January, filming for NAIDOC week, the anniversary of the Royal Commission into Child Sexual Abuse, speaking on-line at the President’s Conference, “Called by God” and speaking out about Black Lives Matter. I have also shared in many statements with the President and UnitingCare Australia on other important matters. I have along with others from Congress served on various groups including the Sovereignty Task Group, VicTas Walking Together & Covenanting Action Plan meeting, Disability Royal Commission National Task Group, Frontier Services Board, Uniting First Peoples Coalition, Uniting World partnership with Pacific Council of Churches, Future of the Church (ACT 2) meetings. Congress have also worked with Covenanting Coordinator, Stu McMillan at National Conferences.

The President also organised with Charissa Suli a Pre-NYALC Walking on Country with our Ngarrindjeri friends and Congress community at Raukkan, which was attended by 20 people. For some this was the highlight of their NYALC (National Young Adult Leaders Conference) experience. Congress was also pleased that they had 20 First Nations young adults at NYALC out of a total of 140 – 150 participants including the Moderators from all of the Synods.

As we plan for an important National Conference, we are reminded that our young leaders are the key to the re-awakening and future dreaming of Congress as we retell the gospel and Congress story. We value your prayers and support as we move forward in our Covenantal partnership.

Mark Kickett
Congress National Interim Chair
June 2021