



**Uniting Church in Australia**  
**ASSEMBLY**  
Assembly Standing Committee

27-29 August 2021

**DOCUMENT 5**

<b>Title</b>	<b>General Secretary Report</b>
Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	For information and decision
Assembly or ASC Minute	Not applicable
Consultation	As noted in the report
Purpose	To advise the Assembly Standing Committee on Assembly progress against Strategic Plan, operations and issues relevant to its work.
Rationale & Findings Summary	See the report
Attachments	Attachment A: Strategic Plan and Business Plan Reporting
Proposal/s	That the Assembly Standing Committee: 1. Receive the General Secretary's report
Submitted by	Colleen Geyer General Secretary <a href="mailto:colleeng@nat.uca.org.au">colleeng@nat.uca.org.au</a> ; 0411 333 167

# GENERAL SECRETARY REPORT

## Introduction

In the Introduction to my report in March 2021, I included the following overview of the previous triennium. (I include it in full here for the information of new ASC members):

*It seems like a long time since this Assembly Standing Committee met for the first time for dinner at the 15th Assembly at Box Hill Town Hall in Melbourne in July 2018. Not only had we just completed an Assembly where significant decisions had been made regarding issues such as family and domestic violence, disability access, sovereignty, climate change and marriage, but a substantial amount of work had been referred to the ASC for its consideration, decision and action. ASC diligently addressed this work, alongside providing oversight to planning for various possible scenarios as the church worked through the decisions that the 15th Assembly made regarding same-gender marriage and associated matters.*

*The second half of this ASC's term was contextualized by a global pandemic, moving to meeting online, and a growing conviction that the challenges the UCA was currently facing required us to look to the future of our church in an intentional way. Assembly operations were carried out remotely as staff pivoted to new ways of achieving outcomes and engaging the church in the work we do. The ASC provided oversight with the aid of monthly management briefings and a specific COVID19 Risk Register.*

*Along the way two Royal Commissions began, UnitingWorld became a Public Benevolent Institution, a Board Remuneration Policy was approved for Assembly Agencies, national conversations on redress and stipends were held, a Climate Action Plan was developed as was a new Assembly Strategic Plan, and we undertook a major revision of our risk management processes and reviewed our financial sustainability. This of course, is by no means a comprehensive overview of the work of the ASC throughout this triennium.*

As we begin this new triennium, with part of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly meeting still to occur in 2022, some of the context above continues and will be addressed in this report. I welcome all ASC members and look forward to the work we will do together.

## Online Meeting of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly

In the week beginning 28 June 2021, following multiple lockdowns in various states, including a two-week lockdown in Greater Sydney, the decision was taken to move the hub for the online meeting of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly from Sydney to Brisbane.

A number of factors influenced this decision:

- The closure of the venue where the Sydney hub was to happen – with no certainty that the lockdown in Sydney would not be extended, there was also no certainty about whether the site would be available.
- Key people required to be in the same place for the Assembly meeting were not in the same location – due to border closures and lockdowns, it became necessary to locate those people necessary to run the business of the Assembly in the same place. This was a small number of people, however they were coming from a number of states and territories.

As a result of this decision, the following occurred:

- The opening worship and installation of the President took place with only those required to be present (ie no invited guests), and was live-streamed to members and publicly via the Assembly vimeo channel and Facebook
- With fewer people onsite, the timetable for the meeting was reconfigured for more pre-recorded reports

- Scenario planning was undertaken for both the meeting being broadcast from the Qld Synod office, and if further restrictions were put in place, for the meeting to be broadcast completely remotely, which was achievable
- Peter Rose who manages the Qld Synod Safety Management Plan, acted as advisor to the Assembly meeting regarding any Qld Government restrictions that would affect the meeting and how it was to be run. We met twice weekly with Peter until the Assembly meeting and put in place a safety management plan for the meeting.

The decisions taken were made to ensure that the Members of the 16th Assembly were able to experience and participate in the 16th Assembly as had been planned since the ASC made the decision to hold the online Assembly meeting in January this year.

The Local Arrangements Committee and the Business Committee worked tirelessly in the short lead time to the online Assembly meeting following the new arrangements being put in place, and I am extremely grateful to them for that work and how it enabled the Assembly meeting to run well and the business to be done. The tech teams who worked with us in Brisbane ensured that we encountered few glitches along the way.

Following the meeting, Assembly members were invited to complete an evaluation of the meeting, considering both the platform and the online format of the meeting, with just over half of the members responding. Overall, the results were positive, including difficulties experienced and helpful suggestions for future meetings if the Assembly needs to meet in a similar way.

### **Reconvened meeting of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly**

Following the resolution of the online meeting to adjourn until 2022, preliminary work has begun for planning for the reconvened meeting of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly.

While it is still hoped that the reconvened meeting will be in person, planning will also include an online scenario. ASC will be updated at the November 2021 meeting in more detail.

### **COVID19 Response**

The operations of the Assembly have been impacted with recent lockdowns in multiple states. As Assembly staff live and work in three different states and two territories, not only have staff variously had to work remotely or from the office or in a hybrid situation since the March ASC meeting, teams have been isolated from each other depending where staff live. This situation has continued the uncertainty that crept into most workplaces and maintained a hold on them from the lockdowns of 2020.

The Assembly Executive team have reported continued weariness in staff as they manage multiple responsibilities in their personal lives, alongside changing work arrangements. The following have been put in place for staff:

- Certainty where possible about work arrangements, even if this involves the hybrid model we moved to towards the end of 2020
- Close contact with Managers so that any concerns/personal arrangements can be raised and solutions found
- Clear communication to staff when government restrictions impact how staff work
- Focus in monthly whole of staff meetings and team meetings on self-care
- Acknowledging and rewarding staff, creating opportunities to build and sustain a culture that recognizes what is happening and providing opportunities to socialise together as teams
- A gift to staff of an Assembly Day Off on 13 August, which didn't impact on annual leave entitlements and recognised the need for rest and time out

The Business Continuity Team has also met to review the Business Continuity Plan (BCP) in the light of recent restrictions and lockdowns and is also planning a review of the BCP for a future where uncertainty is the norm and flexibility is key. The Travel Guidelines for Assembly staff remain in place.

As will be clear from the agenda for this meeting, the closure of one triennium and the transition to a new triennium involves significant changes in the membership of committees and other groups that contribute to the work of the Assembly. This requires much interaction with people across the Church, thanking and fare-welling some, while also orienting to the work and building relationships among newly established and re-established groups. Much of this will be done though online means for the first time and thus require attention to detail and care. Similarly, Assembly has needed to exit some staff and recruit new staff using the same online approach. These are challenges experienced across the Church and the wider community and is something the Executive Team and other Assembly Leaders will continue to monitor. A year ago we conducted a COVID Lessons Learnt workshop with senior staff which will be revisited later this year.

Members of the Executive Team continue to work tirelessly both to continue the work of the Assembly and to support their teams. I continue to be in awe of, and grateful for their commitment and their leadership.

### **Reduction in Synod Grant**

In the past month, we were advised of a reduction of \$200k in the grant to the Assembly from the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania for this financial year. This reduction impacted the budget for the Assembly Secretariat (Offices of the President and General Secretary, Assembly Resourcing Unit and Assembly Support Unit), taking it from a slight deficit to a more significant deficit for the current financial year.

A reconsideration of the budget, including not filling staff vacancies that have arisen due to staffing changes, reductions in travel due to COVID and other savings have clawed back half of this reduction. The way the Assembly works in the coming year and beyond will have to reconsider priorities for its work, including how it delivers on the Strategic Plan.

### **Assembly Review**

The future sustainability of the Assembly, particularly the Secretariat, is becoming increasingly challenging and uncertain. In order to enable the Assembly to continue in a healthy and viable way over the coming triennium, particularly as we undertake the significant work of the Act2 Project, I am intending to review the Assembly operations to consider options for this to occur.

I propose to bring a scoping and process document with recommendations, to November ASC for consideration and approval, for work to be carried out for sign off at the March 2022 ASC meeting. In this regard, I would welcome any insights and ideas from ASC members at future ASC meetings, and between meetings.

### **Assembly Strategic Plan and Business Plan**

This is provided at Attachment A. At each ASC meeting, members can expect to see the progress on delivering on the Strategic Plan in this document which gives updates and indications of when outcomes are not being met.

### **Climate Action Plan**

The Climate Action Plan for the Assembly has been actioned following ASC approval. Coordinated out of the Secretariat, all parts of the Assembly are measuring their activities in keeping with the plan as we work towards our target of net zero emissions by 2040.

As requested, reporting on the Plan will be made annually to the ASC, with the first report to be provided at the November 2021 meeting.

### **LGBTIQ+ Apology Task Group**

This Task Group was due to provide a report to this meeting of the ASC regarding a proposed project plan and any budget implications for its work going forward. This report will now be brought to the November 2021 ASC meeting.

## **Our Vision for a Just Australia – July 2021**

One significant piece of work that has been produced and released since we met in the online Assembly is a revision of the justice and advocacy platform *Our Vision for a Just Australia*". This is a collaboration of justice staff and Circle of Interest members from across the Church who contribute generously of their time and expertise to ensure our focus is appropriate and up to date. With a federal election scheduled within the next 12 months, this document provides a platform for our Church's advocacy to government on key areas of public policy.