



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

11 - 13 March 2022

**DOCUMENT 3**

Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	Information
Title	President's Report
Assembly or ASC Minute	<i>Regulation 3.6.4.2 Duties of the President: "The duties of the President shall be to give spiritual leadership and encouragement to the Church generally, to represent the Church as appropriate, to give counsel as occasion requires and to do such other things as may be requested or advised by the Assembly"</i>
Consultation	
Purpose	To report on key activities of the President.
Rationale & Findings Summary	
Attachments	Pastoral Letter re Religious Discrimination Bill Media Release re Religious Discrimination Bill
Recommendations	That the Standing Committee 1. receive the report
Submitted by	Sharon Hollis, President

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## **President's Report**

### **Give Spiritual leadership and encouragement**

#### *Christmas message*

Parts of my Christmas message were picked up by the mainstream media. Thank you to the Assembly communications team who worked hard to ensure my Christmas message was

#### *Support to the Tonga community in Uniting Church after the eruption of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai*

It was privilege to be able to provide pastoral support to Tongan-Australian members of the Uniting Church following the eruption of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai through prayer vigils, including one held on Pacifika TV & Radio. A number of leaders in the Tongan community in the Uniting Church, including the President-elect, provided excellent commentary to the media including the opportunity to witness to their faith.

#### *Invasion/Survival Day*

I recorded an interview with Rev. Mark Kickett to mark Invasion/Survival Day. Marking this day with a resource Uniting Church can use to reflect continues to be a key priority for me. I hope as travel becomes easier the Congress chair and I might be able to film the video together next year.

### **Represent the Church**

#### *Responding to the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 and related bills*

The Assembly submitted a response to the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 and related bills to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee. In January I appeared before both these committees representing the Assembly along with Ms. Claerwen Little, National Director UnitingCare Australia. At the Joint Committee we appeared with Mr. Jason Masters and Mr. Elliot Nicholas from Uniting Network.

We released a media statement, and I was interviewed by ABC PM program. I also released a pastoral letter to the church. Both the media release and pastoral letter were widely and mostly positively shared on social media.

While much of the media and political debate focused on the rights of transgender, non-binary, gender fluid and intersex children and teachers in education the Assembly submission also focused on the rights of disabled people to be free of discrimination particularly in service

provision, the risk of the bill to people of minority faiths and the threat the passage of the legislation might pose to the willingness of people to access UnitingCare community services or work for UnitingCare because of a perception the legislation might create that UnitingCare services discriminate on the basis of belief

Thank you to Rob Floyd whose hard work and research produced our excellent submission and who provided a detailed briefing before our appearances, Claerwen Little for appearing with me and providing expert knowledge on navigating inquiry appearances and to Rebecca Beisler and the Assembly communications team who worked very hard to ensure our voice was heard in the debate.

The Uniting Church in Australia was the only major denomination to make a submission that opposed the passing of the Religious Discrimination Bill, although several smaller faith groups and agencies of several denominations also opposed the bill.

Our submission raises questions about how welcoming and inclusive the Uniting Church is for trans gender, and gender diverse people. How do we best meet unique liturgical, pastoral needs of this community? How careful are we about the language we use in relation to gender? How do we ensure our people are well educated about questions of gender, sex and sexuality?

#### *ALP Faith communities and climate policy Forum*

With Milise 'Ofa' Foiakau I attended a forum hosted the National ALP for faith communities to discuss what faith communities are hoping for from national climate policy and to hear what the ALP's plans are.

It is clear to me that both major political parties are seeking to engage with faith communities as the election approaches. The policy of the Assembly is to advocate for issues not to endorse any particular party. As the election gets closer and parties reach out to Faith Communities to win votes maintaining this line will

#### *Ecumenical and Overseas partners*

I signed (sadly, via Zoom) a partnership agreement with the United Methodist Church, Philippines. This agreement was developed after a request from Filipinos living and worshipping in Australia as part of the Uniting Church to develop a formal relationship between the church they belonged to in the Philippines and the Uniting Church. We also have a long-standing partnership with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. Thank you to Dr. Sureka Goring and Rev Dr. Apwee Ting for their hard work in building a relationship with this community and negotiating the Memorandum of Understanding that underpins the partnership agreement.

I recorded a greeting to Presbyterian Church in Taiwan for their forthcoming Assembly and a sent condolence letter to Solomon Islands on the death of the General Secretary.

I attended the installation of Paul Smith Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand

## **Other things as requested or advised by the Assembly**

### **Other matters**

*Some questions I've been reflecting on*

Several events I have attended or spoken along with the submissions and evidence relating to the Religious Discrimination Bill at have caused me to reflect on some questions about the gifts of the Uniting Church and what we might offer our fellow Christians and the world. I believe the freedom we have as a church that has a long history and connections to various confessional bodies but no formal obligations beyond ourselves gives us a freedom to think about faith within the context of Australia's geography, history, politics and cultures. This means that we often have the freedom to explore contemporary questions in ways that are different to our ecumenical siblings. So, I wonder what should we do with this freedom? How might we think about and understand who we think God is calling the Uniting Church to be? What are the charisms or gifts that we have as the Uniting Church that we contribute to the work of God in the world and to other churches, both those in Australia and our ecumenical partners worldwide? How do we understand our limitations and weaknesses?

Sharon Hollis

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01 March 2022

## **Appendix1: MEDIA RELEASE**

### **Don't rush the Religious Discrimination Bill**

President of the Uniting Church in Australia Rev Sharon Hollis has urged Federal Parliamentarians not to rush the *Religious Discrimination Bill 2021* through the Senate this week.

This comes as two reports from Parliamentary Inquiries on the *Religious Discrimination Bill 2021* were released last Friday, both of which supported the passage of the Bill with the addition of only minor and technical amendments.

Rev Hollis expressed her disappointment at the findings, after a Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) Assembly submission to the Religious Discrimination Bill 2021 expressed concern that the Bill fails to strike the correct balance between people's rights, protections and responsibilities.

"We have appreciated the opportunity to make submissions and to appear before both Inquiries," said Rev Hollis. "However, the reports do not address our concerns that some provisions in the Bill could embolden discrimination in the wider community and give implicit permission for discriminatory or demeaning statements and actions."

"Rather than building harmony and tolerance it could have a corrosive and divisive effect."

"We urge all Federal Members to not react in haste to the short time frame that has been given to this third and final draft's passage through both Houses, but take the time that is needed to fully examine the issues and reach out to community groups who have expressed genuine concerns."

The Uniting Church Assembly has resisted the idea that its members are the subject of discrimination on religious grounds, maintaining that its primary concern is for others who are or may become vulnerable to discrimination under the legislation.

In its submission and appearances, the Assembly expressed particular concern for the safety and wellbeing of LGBTIQ people, people with disabilities, women, and people of minority faith communities should the Bill be passed in its current form.

The Assembly has long advocated that necessary protections from religious discrimination would best be made through the mechanism of a comprehensive Human Rights Act, within which the competing claims and values inherent in this discussion may be grounded in a holistic approach to human rights.

Rev Hollis reiterated previous statements that the Uniting Church does not seek to discriminate as an organisation or an employer, and its firm commitment to diversity and inclusion in community life and employment practices.

"I want to reassure all people that whether or not this Bill passes into law, the Uniting Church in Australia and its wide network of service agencies will continue to be places of welcome and inclusion for all people."

**MEDIA CONTACT: Rebecca Beisler 0450790218**

## **Appendix 2: Pastoral letter**

### **To UCA members, congregations and faith communities,**

Dear friends in Christ,

This week will be a challenging week for some members of our Uniting Church community as the Australian Parliament considers the Religious Discrimination Bill.

I am aware the current political debate will heighten the vulnerability of members of the LGBTIQ+ community, particularly LGBTIQ+ children and their families. You are in my prayers at this time.

I also uphold in prayer people with disabilities who have concerns that they might experience discrimination and judgement in the provision of services if the Bill proceeds.

The Uniting Church has urged Members of Parliament not to rush the Bill into law. We maintain the Bill does not strike the correct balance between rights and protections. In submissions to Government, we expressed concerns for the safety and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people, people with disabilities, women, and people of minority faith communities, should the Bill be passed in its current form.

We have acknowledged that there are members of the UCA who remain fearful for the consequences, intended and unintended, that might arise from this legislation.

The Uniting Church is committed to seeking to be a place of welcome and inclusion for all people, including LGBTIQ+ people and people with disabilities.

Our commitment comes from our belief that all people are created in the image of God and are loved and valued by God.

We believe every person is entitled to dignity, compassion and respect, and that the community flourishes when all people are included and accorded the dignity and respect they deserve.

I note with sadness not all LGBTIQ+ people feel fully welcome and safe across the Uniting Church.

I encourage members of the Uniting Church and people of faith to offer prayer and support to those around them who are feeling particularly vulnerable because of the political and public debate taking place.

In the weeks ahead, I encourage those who lead worship to think about how they will preach and pray and the language they use that expresses this commitment to the inclusion of all.

Many of us still have much to learn about how to be allies of both LGBTIQ+ people and people with disabilities, so in the weeks and months ahead, I encourage you to show your solidarity through learning, growing and becoming more informed about how to provide care and support.

In my sermon to the Assembly meeting, and the theme I chose for the Assembly, I urged all members to  *dwell in love*. For me this is what it means to dwell in love, that we do the hard work required to enact our love with care, knowledge and compassion.

Grace and Peace,

Rev Sharon Hollis

President of the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly