



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

15-17 July 2022

**DOCUMENT/S:**

Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	Information
Title	President's Report
Assembly or ASC Minute	<i>Regulation 3.6.4.2 <b>Duties of the President:</b> "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	Appendix 1: Albert St lecture paper Appendix 2: Report of observations of 16th Assembly by Roman Catholic observers.
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**

#### *Uniting Church Anniversary*

I provided a short message as part of video to mark the 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Uniting Church. In my message I reflected on some of the things I am thankful for as well as the challenge before us that we will address in Act2

#### *Uniting Network*

As I was unable to attend the Uniting Network conference in person I provided a video message. I reflected on the progress the Uniting Church has made on inclusion of LGBTIQ+ people and what work we still have to do to honour Assembly resolutions that affirm LGBTIQ+ people are members of the Uniting Church with the opportunity to express their discipleship through whatever ministry or role they are called to. The change required is largely cultural requiring the Church and its members to develop a culture of inclusion built on knowledge, rethinking theology and learning from the LGBTIQ+ community. I encouraged Uniting Network to continue their work on Affirming congregations so LGBTIQ+ people can search for a church to attend with some confidence.

#### *Albert St lecture*

At the invitation of the Cooperative I gave an Albert St lecture in June 2022. I took the opportunity of this lecture to reflect on three topics that are key issues the Uniting Church: Act2; Consensus decision making and the Preamble and Constitution. I have attached a copy of my lecture as an Appendix. You can also view the lecture here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=8kRr95h--0w&fbclid=IwAR33fAWVj3CDN99w5Nb6WBwHI5AgcEKWu-kVL3b3Pq3O3bHGpiUppGaDPG0>

### **Represent the Church**

#### *Iftar dinner*

I was pleased to attend the annual Iftar dinner jointly hosted by the Assembly, Uniting NSW/ACT, The Synod of NSW/ACT with our partner Affinity Intercultural Foundation. This is a small but significant sign of our commitment to interfaith friendship.

#### *Supporting the Uluru Statement.*

On behalf of the Assembly I agreed to support a multi-faith statement in support of the Uluru Statement which was signed at an event on 27 May 2022. I was sorry that illness prevented me from personally signing the statement.

Initial conversations with UnitingCare National have begun about how we can develop an advocacy strategy once the process for a referendum becomes clearer. I anticipate we will seek to engage the whole church in advocating for Voice, Treaty, Truth

### *Synod meetings*

The General Secretary and I have attended the Synod meetings of Queensland, South Australian and Victoria and Tasmania. Each Synod has both distinctive features, unique challenges, exciting ministry and mission and a shared sense that there are real challenges to fulfill all the obligations of the Council in all councils of the Church

### *Ecumenical and Overseas partners*

I have sent a greeting to the Methodist Church of Zimbabwe as they gather for their Assembly, a letter of congratulations to Rev Dr Demiarius Ice becoming President of the Gereja Masehi Injili di Halmahera (GMIH) and letters of condolence to Rev Simisi Turagavou General Secretary of the Methodist Church of Fiji on the death of his wife and Christian Conference of Asia on the death of the CCA Moderator Archbishop Willem T.P Simarmata. Archbishop Simarmata was a leader in the Asian Ecumenical movement for several decades. We also received greetings for our 45<sup>th</sup> Anniversary from the GMIH.

These are small reminders of the connections we have with partners overseas.

I attended a reporting session with Uniting World's project partners in the Pacific. The partners reported on their work in gender-justice and violence against women prevention, child safeguarding and climate mitigation. Their work is inspiring as they seek to address very challenging as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

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

### **Other matters**

#### *Reconvened Assembly*

I was delighted with the spirit which the reconvened Assembly was conducted with attentive engaged listening, active debate and a desire to find ways to achieve consensus. My thanks to everyone who contributed to the success of the reconvened Assembly.

I have had a very interesting conversation with three Catholic observers (online) of our Assembly. This is part of a very large piece of work the Catholic Church is doing on synodality at the request of Pope Francis. The recently concluded Plenary Council is the most visible

example of the Catholic Church's exploration of synodality. They were warm in their praise of the way the Assembly met and I attach a report they prepared as Appendix 2

The NCCA hosted a round table on synodality where we were represented by Isabel Thomas Dobson and Rachel Kronberger. There is the possibility that these conversations will continue beyond the Plenary Council. We have much to learn about how to gather for discernment as Christian community from other churches. Of particular interest to me is the chapter meeting process that many women religious orders use which are grounded in the discernment practices of the particular order, involve deep listening and are more focused on consensus than other decision making processes in the Catholic Church.

*Preamble conference*

Rev Dr Chris Budden had a preliminary conversation with the General Secretary and me about a proposal to hold a conference looking at the theology of the Preamble in the first half of 2024. Both the General Secretary and I gave Chris enthusiastic encouragement and he has begun discussing the idea with Congress and various theological colleges.

Sharon Hollis

[President@nat.uca.org.au](mailto:President@nat.uca.org.au)

0439 396 577

06 July 2022

## Appendix 1

Albert St Lecture.

Delivered on 16 June 2022

### Reconvened Assembly especially Act 2

Next week will be the 45th Anniversary of the Inauguration of the Uniting Church. I am 9 years older than the Uniting Church and I only have one very vague memory of the inauguration of the Uniting Church. My family were worshipping in a church in Melbourne's west that was established when the move towards Union was already under way and so it was assumed that union would take place and the congregation began its life as church formed and shaped by the movement towards union. The week before Union, having some memory of being technically a Methodist church we had an afternoon of singing Wesley hymns, as if they might not be sung again.

Over the last 45 years this congregation has been through its share of changes, experimenting with different ways to share the gospel with their ever changing community as different waves of migrants settled in the area, followed by the suburbs in its are rediscovered by younger generations as a vaguely affordable place to live not too far from the city. It has merged with other Uniting Church congregations as all of them have grown smaller and older. They have also sold of some property, and remodelled other property to better serve their needs. They are a microcosm of much life in the Uniting Church.

We have to face some facts about how the Christian church, the Uniting Church and the world are different from the time of Union. The size and membership of our communities of faith are much smaller than they were at Union and this decline is likely to continue into the future. Our declining membership and population growth in Australia that is more diverse in religious belonging means the percentage of people within the Australian population who claim to belong to the Uniting Church is also smaller.

I have seen commentary, mostly on social media it has to be said, that suggests that pointing out these fairly basic facts and seeking to ask how we should be as a Church in light of this decline in membership is to engage in deficient thinking or scarcity thinking. I don't agree with this way of viewing discussion of numbers and the issues that lie behind the numbers. To speak honestly about this is not to say that the Uniting Church is dying, though we might be. It is not to diminish those places where there is growth in membership, in faith, in engagement with communities. It is not to suggest I haven't noticed the large vibrant migrant-ethnic churches that are successfully discipline their young people and caring for their old people. Nor is it not to say that there are not exciting signs of renewal of ancient practices and fresh new ways to speak the good news of life in Jesus Christ.

But if we are not honest about our current situation we cannot begin to think about what might help communities of faith flourish and grow into the future. And we will not be in a position to deal compassionately, kindly and well with those communities, activities,

organisations or congregations that do need to close, whose life at least in its current form has come to an end.

This decline in membership Uniting Church impacts every Council of the church. It is becoming increasingly hard to find people who have the desire and gifts to serve in roles and positions across the life of all Councils of the Church. Again I am not dismissing all those who serve the Church. Nor am I suggesting that those who currently serve are not gifted. But we need to acknowledge it is getting harder across all Councils of the Church and we are burdening many people with multiple leadership roles so they are finding it hard to remember the joy of faith that drew them into the life of the church in the first place and are sapping them of energy for sharing the vision of God's reign with the world.

The Basis of Union, the Constitution and Regulations make clear the roles and responsibilities of each council of the Church. Some councils are finding it increasingly difficult to honour all these roles and responsibilities. Many are also weighted down by the compliance expectations of government. These expectations are absolutely necessary if we want to be able to engage with the wider community in a way that give the community confidence that we are learning how to be safe and trusted communities

Along side this our agencies and institutions have grown in size and reach since Union. They offer community services right across the land, often pioneering innovative approaches to addressing complex social issues. They are staffed by a diversity of people, many of whom choose to work with church agencies because they appreciated the values and spirituality of the organisation and want to work for an organisation that is guided by values of justice, fairness, service and compassion.

It is this context that Act2 is seeking to address. We are hoping to engage all Councils of the Church along with National Conferences, and other groups connected to the Uniting Church. We will journey with Congress, ensuring that they find their own place within the Uniting Church honours that honours their sovereignty and right to self determination and that whatever structure is found for them to continue to be part of the Uniting Church doesn't undermine this sovereignty.

We want to have honest, courageous conversations about how best to support communities of faithful people to flourish, to engage their communities, share the good news of Jesus Christ, make and grow disciples who do the work of bearing witness to God's will for the world. We need to talk about how inter conciliar governance will work in ways that reflect our current situation. We will explore what the role theological education should be in the life of the Uniting Church that is more than just a conversation ministerial training. Rather we are seeking to ask how best to provide theological education for the whole Church.

I am excited by the possibilities of these conversations. I hope we will be reminded about what is at the core of who we are as the Uniting Church even as we confront our difficulties and failings. Facing up to the reality of our situation, while hard, is the best

hope we have for new life to emerge. I have been convicted for some time that for new things to emerge we have to have the courage to let some things end, to lay down treasured things that are no longer working, that no longer support the work of the reign of God.

### Consensus decisions making

Christian denominations meet to discern the will of God for their life using a variety of methods. In the Uniting Church we have chosen to use consensus decision making as the way we seek to discern the movement of the Spirit when we gather. Others have also seen the wisdom of this way of seeking to listen to the Spirit's leading. We've been doing it this way for 30 years and it is shaping us but there hasn't been a lot of reflecting on how we are being formed by being a church that discerns using the Manual for Meetings, what are the practices needed to be a community of consensus and what the risks are. I'm wanting to suggest some things we could think about, reflect on and write about some more.

I have been thinking a lot recently on the verse in 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul says we currently see through a mirror dimly. This reminds me constantly that none of us can ever fully comprehend the truth about God or God's movement in the world. Seeing dimly is not just an individual thing but also I believe applies to churches and communities.

So one of the key spiritual practices that is necessary for any discernment including discernment using consensus decision making is humility -an acknowledgement that none of us has a full and complete understanding of truth -about God, about humanity, about theology, about whatever topic is under discussion. This is why consensus creates structures and ways to listen to each other in different ways. It is why we are to give particular attention to the minority voice, to listen carefully and test whether there is truth we have overlooked, missed or deliberately turned away from. It is why when we have disagreement, when we don't have a common mind we need to ask those who are speaking in the minority voice 'Do you believe you have been heard?' And ask those in the majority 'Do you believe you have heard what our siblings have said?' For consensus to really work we need to ensure these questions don't become formulaic, just a step on the process. We need to continue to really ask ourselves, have we listened and heard, have we been listened to and been heard. We need people to be brave enough to say 'No' when we haven't really listened, 'No I'm not sure you've heard me well.'

Humility is also required by those who are in the minority to be willing to agree that while they don't agree with the majority they will accept that most of the faithful people gathered in the meeting believe they have discerned, to the best of their ability the next steps forward and be willing to allow a meeting to move forward.

The humility to be willing to listen to the other, to seek truth beyond oneself also lies at the heart of the commitment to interconciliar relationships where we heed the wisdom

of other Councils of the Church when making decisions. Even when a council has the full authority to make a decision councils are encouraged to listen, to take note, to wonder at other wisdom and voices.

One of the things about consensus decision making using the Manual for Meeting that is both a joy and challenge for those who chair meetings is the capacity to seek out and encourage voices that have been missed, to make a particular call to invite those who might be most impacted by a decision to speak before those are less impacted. It helps break the traditional pattern of for and against that we used to use and instead invites diversity of voices. It invites comment, hesitation, wondering, along with statements of declaration.

At the recent Assembly we had a proposal about some steps we could take to become a more intercultural church. In the process of a deliberative session where we explored the proposal there was the opportunity to intentionally and deliberately invite people from who have the least power in this conversation. At its best consensus allows the community that is meeting to make space for the voices that we so often overlook and render less powerful by our structures.

This listening is grounded in a willingness to accept each other as people known by God, as people seeking the will of God for the church. If we are to listen to each other we need both to come with good will and also be willing to say 'my sibling in Christ I believe you are earnestly seeking God but I do not see the will and way of God in what you are saying.'

Alongside active engaged humble listening consensus also needs people who are willing to speak. Through the use of small groups and a facilitation process in large meetings we hopefully make it easier for a rich diversity of people to speak and be heard. It also requires people who think about the matters before the meeting to be willing to share their sense of what God is calling the church to in this time and place, to be willing to advocate for their understanding of how to act faithfully and be willing to hear from others. Consensus also relies on people being willing to say 'I don't see it the way you', or 'Would you be willing to consider this as well as what you are saying?', or 'Could you make this change that is important to me to what you are thinking?'

Discerning using the Manual for Meetings allows us to make decisions in ways that aren't always linear. It allows us to look at a proposal, question or idea from several different angles, to be perplexed, to ask questions in a way that seek understanding. Consensus assumes that worship, prayer, building community, eating together all contribute to our discerning and deciding. I think this an advantage in decision making and we need to continue to attend to processes that help us in this enterprise of being less linear and more willing to work in a circular, interactive way.

In thinking about consensus decision making I have been challenged to think about the dangers of consensus in the work Melissa Florer-Bixler whom I first heard on Liam



Miller's excellent podcast Love, Rinse, Repeat and have now read her book How to have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace

She says: 'The work of the church is not to unify as a way to negate difference or to overcome political commitments. Instead, we are called to enfold our lives into the gospel, our whole lives. The good news of Jesus Christ is only good news when it proclaims that we will overcome enmity by aligning ourselves with others who reject the principalities and powers of the old age, knowing this will set us all free.(p.24)

Her questioning of unity as an absolute goal of the church in way that ignore positions and structures that work against the gospel is a challenge to a Church that has at its core the seeking of unity. As I reflect on the quest for unity that lead to the Uniting Church, which has shaped the development of consensus decision making and provided a key motivation for adopting it as the best way for the Uniting Church to discern and decide I am reminded that those who were called to seek the union of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches did so not just to be more friendly but because they believed the gospel called them to this. There was much they did not agree on and yet they continued to work for union because they believed this was the way of the life of the gospel. That work has opened up space for us to be more intentional about reconciliation, mission, and opening ourselves to the wisdom of contemporary thought and our partners in other countries. Unity only has value when it serves the radical work of God in the world.

Consensus should not be used to smooth over real disagreement or to promote a move to a centre that denies the radical nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ that assumes we will have enemies because of our commitment to stand against the principalities and power, the agents of death, injustice . We need to ask ourselves regularly 'How do we ensure we are listening to and for the gospel?' How does our listening, discerning and deciding help us sift all we hear against the vision of God's reign and not just our own voices. How do we ensure the structures of consensus decision making are particularly alert to those that have the least power in the conversation? How do we pay attention to the voices that aren't in the room? How do we pay attention to those most impacted by whatever we are meeting about, those who will bear the greatest cost of what we decide? How do we hear front those who will bear the weight of our decisions in their daily life, whose bodies and minds will carry the trauma of poor process and bad decisions.

Covenant and preamble

At the rehearsal for the Renewing the Covenant worship at the reconvened Assembly as I knelt before Mark Kickett, just him and me I was so overcome as I read the words of confession about how poorly we have done as a church and how poorly I have done as a disciple to live into the covenant. Those of us who are Second Peoples need to constantly reflect on our on the ways we gain from colonisation and how much colonisation has shaped our worldview.

This is not just something we need to do at a personal level but something we need to attend to as the whole Church. By renewing our commitment to the covenant and by seeking to live more fully into the preamble we need to hear and act on the profound challenge this makes to every part of our life as a Church. We are inheritor of colonial privilege, enriched by living, working, worship and serving on stolen land. We have structured our polity, practices and worship in ways that reinforce this privilege. If we really want to be committed to the covenant we have ask hard questions about everything we do.

Our polity, our practices, our structures, our distribution of resources, our worship, our theology all need to be re-examined to ask how well they live out our commitment to the covenant.

I am conscious of the costliness of this conversations for members of Congress, of the very real risk they face every time they engage with us of our failure to understand, of being misunderstood. Second peoples need to take responsibility to do their own learning, reading writings by First Nations people, watching their movies, drinking in their art, listened to their theology. And we need to pay for this. Buy the books, pay the rent, support places that do indigenious theology, encourage their leaders.

A commitment to the covenant also means we reexamine our theology. Even time I have a conversation with Rev Dr Chris Budden he talks about the way the Preamble destabilises our theology.

I was thinking about the way the covenant and preamble destabilise theology when I read the following in Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology by Amy Plantinga Pauw:

‘the doctrine of creation should ground and orient everything else Christian theology says about God’s economic dealings. .. God’s special purposes for Israel and the church are always penultimate to God’s larger purposes for the life and well-being of all peoples. On an even broader scale, God’s economy of communication with humanity falls with the larger economy of God’s work of creating, sustaining and embracing the entire cosmic order.[p11]’

I think there is exciting work in thinking about how God’s economy of communication in Creation comes to us in the spirituality and theologies of First Nations peoples. What does First Nations peoples understanding of creation, land and country teach us about the economy of creation? How might an understanding of creation that places caring for creation, living within the provision of creation sustainably and caring for all of creation as part of community at the heart of spiritual practices, lore and customs destabilise our western understandings of creation? How might we listen and learn without needing to own, colonise and control? What might it mean to understand God’s economy of creation through the stories, practices and beliefs of the First Nations peoples in this land?

The Covenant and Preamble also forces us to re-examine our understanding of the nature of the covenant God has made with Israel and the church. The Covenant and Preamble invite us to reexamine all that we think we know about the story of God, creation, incarnation and salvation in light of the relationship that First Nations People have with their land and waters, with their stories and song lines, their lore and customs. First Nations understandings of Spirit and Creator that are so strong they shape all they do and believe invites us to consider what other stories and covenants God has, beyond the ones we know from scripture. In what ways do First Nations understandings of creation and care of creation help us understand God's economy of creation.

At the recent Assembly we passed a proposal that called us to take our lead from First Nations people, particularly from Congress as we seek to deepen and strengthen our response to the climate change across the church. First Nations

The Covenant and Preamble are such a rich resource for our theology but there is also risk. We need to be careful that in seeking to learn from the covenant and preamble and to invite it to shape our life as a Church we don't take it over and colonise the Covenant and Preamble, make it say what we Second Peoples want or using it to justify our actions. We must ensure that we listen carefully and learn from First Nations people and take our lead from their reflections, theology and practice of church. We need to accept we do not have access to all that shaped and guides and have no right to this knowledge.

This risk is not just for our theologising from the Covenant and Preamble. We need to be aware of our capacity to continue the colonisation of First Nations people in the Church through our structures; our desire for efficiency; linear time; the use of the dominant language of English and accountabilities that are shaped by western concepts rather than First Nations ways of being.

The migrant church especially those who come as First Nations people in their country can also help us in this journey. They bring unique insights to this conversation as people who often have experience of colonisation as well as living in this country as Second Peoples. They bring non-Western ways of doing theology, or listening and learning.

The Covenant and Preamble which affirms the right of First Nations people to be able to be self determining and the affirmation of the 14th Assembly of the sovereignty of First Nations people also need to shape and inform our engagement with our neighbours in Asia and the Pacific. One of the key areas of advocacy for the The Pacific Council of Churches is the right to self determination and independence for Pacific Nations. This is seen in both their advocacy for nations who are still ruled by colonial countries, such as Kankay (New Caledonia), Maohi Nui (French Polynesia) who are continuing to seek referendums on independence in ways that are led by the First Nations peoples of these lands rather than the French government and Tanah Paula (West Papua – who are seeking independence from Indonesia. Our commitment to the First Nations Peoples'

sovereignty in these lands must shape our engagement with the churches in the Pacific and Asia. It needs to shape our advocacy with the Australian government on questions of foreign affairs. Churches particularly in the Pacific are looking to us to walk the talk of our commitment to First Nations People, sovereignty and self determination. Our commitment needs to be evident not only in what we advocate for but also in how we advocate.

The way the Covenant and Preamble teach us to hear the distinctive beliefs of First Nations Peoples in these lands can also form us to learn from Pacific and Asian beliefs and theologies, to acknowledge those of us formed in a western theology framework see through a mirror dimly and our seeing, knowing, thinking and praying will be enriched by listening and learning from Indigenous theologies of our neighbours. As with our engagement with First Nations people we who are used to having the power need to be very careful we don't or seek to own and control.

## Conclusion

A friend of mine when speaking about her work with refugees in Egypt and anti racism work in the US says 'It's good work, its hard work, its holy work. I believe this about the challenges facing us as the Uniting Church. It's good work, its hard work, its holy work. I would much rather do hard good work on things that I hope are seeking to cooperate with God's life giving engagement with creation and all who dwell in creation that easier work that has less meaning. I give thanks for good hard work to do and pray we keep seeking the way of God in all we do. This is work that is sustained in silence, prayer, dwelling in scripture, community and reflecting and listening to diverse voices.

To be President of the Uniting Church is a huge privilege and joy, one I never imagined would be mine. I am so grateful for the opportunity to do good, hard holy work, sustained by the prayers of so many, in the company of people who want to have important conversations about the healing of creation, reconciliation, how to love our enemies and develop ways of being Church that support worship, witness and service in communities, agencies and institutions.

Thank you to The Cooperative for this opportunity to reflect on some of what makes me so grateful I am able to exercise this ministry.

## 16th Uniting Church in Australia Assembly: *Dwelling in Love*

In the spirit of receptive ecumenism, the Catholic Church had indicated that it was seeking, through listening and dialogue, to deepen its understandings of synodality. In response, the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) graciously invited Catholic representatives to observe online its reconvened 16th Assembly: *Dwelling in Love* held on 6-9 May 2022 at a camp site on the Sunshine Coast of significance to Queensland UCA. The observers were:

- Rev. Dr Michael Trainor, co-chair, South Australian Uniting Church-Roman Catholic Dialogue
- Michael Vial, member, South Australian Uniting Church-Roman Catholic Dialogue
- Professor Gabrielle McMullen AM, member, Australian Synod of Bishops National Committee.

The Assembly “is the triennial decision-making meeting of the national Council of the Uniting Church, which guides the life of the Church and its advocacy over the next three years”. The 16th Assembly commenced on 17-18 July 2021 – its live-streamed sessions can be viewed at <https://uniting.church/16thassembly/>.

This short report summarises the observers’ insights in relation to the 2022 reconvened Assembly’s

- Processes
- Business and decisions
- Learnings for the Catholic Church

### **Assembly Processes**

The critical elements of the Assembly are summarised below.

- *Welcome to Country*

The Assembly was held on the lands of the Gubbi Gubbi people. Each day of the Assembly they welcomed the two hundred attendees to their country and deepened understanding of their traditions, stories, song and dance. Of great significance on the first evening was renewal of the 1994 Covenant between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Kneeling and led by President Rev Sharon Hollis, “Second Peoples” were invited to participate in an “act of contrition” and re-commitment to the Covenant.

- *Worship*

Worship was an integral element of the Assembly sessions. It encompassed prayer, Bible Studies led by students from Nungalinya College, liturgical song and dance, and Communion to conclude the Assembly. Significantly at times during the gathering, prayers were offered in diverse languages, including 11 First Nations languages and Dinka, Fijian, Korean and Tongan.

- *Business Sessions*

Several sessions throughout the Assembly were devoted to consideration of resolutions related to the Church's ministry, works, programs, advocacy and operations following preparatory discernment of UCA future directions. Generally, the resolutions were underpinned by extensive prior input from working parties, informed by reports provided in a timely manner prior ahead of the Assembly. The business sessions were conducted in line with the *UCA Manual for Meetings*. Of particular note was the iterative process of conducting these sessions, informed by discernment and "listening to one another in openness and humility" [<https://uniting.church/16thassembly/>], and seeking consensus decision-making. They encompassed:

- a 5-minute presentation by the formal proposer and 3-minute one by the seconder of a resolution/s,
- an information, deliberative and decision cycle in relation to the resolution/s with the goal of reaching decisions by consensus,
- facilitation groups working between sessions to refine resolutions,
- the show of orange and blue cards indicating 'reaction' (*'warm' and 'cool' respectively*) to a resolution, consensus or decision on a resolution.

- *Community Working Groups*

Meetings of smaller gatherings, entitled community working groups, were convened twice during the Assembly.

- *Snapshots of Assembly Work*

During the course of the four days, delegates were updated on UCA ministries by film clips and the presence of senior leaders of UCA agencies and services: UnitingCare Australia, UnitingWorld, Frontier Services National Strategic Finance and Administration and the Assembly Associate General Secretariat.

- *The Examen*

The three evenings of the Assembly closed with the Examen, resembling the observers' previous experiences of Ignatian gatherings.

- *Fellowship*

The Assembly was characterised by a powerful sense of community and fellowship, fostered by the style and format of the Assembly, its interactive activities, and hospitality and social gatherings outside the Assembly room. The multicultural community with a wide range of age groups and experiences expressed their aspiration to be an intercultural Church. Their voices informed, in an engaged but orderly manner, the participatory and iterative process of decision-making across the Assembly.

- *Inclusiveness*

The three observers were impressed by the inclusiveness of the Assembly. Every speaker, even those making short interventions, recognised the First Nation's country where they lived and, in some instances, also another where they ministered or worked. Further, the processes observed projected the explicit and affirmed leadership of women in the Assembly. Other aspects of the Assembly's processes, noted above, also convey the nature of its inclusiveness.

## **Assembly Business and Decisions**

The agenda, proposals, reports and documents of both the July 2021 online session and in-person May 2022 session are available from the 16th Assembly website [<https://uniting.church/16thassembly>].

A number of important decisions arose from the attentive listening and discernment of the meeting this year:

- *The Act 2 Project* [<https://uniting.church/act2/>]  
The Assembly [acknowledged all that had been done for the Act2 Project](#). This project was initiated in March 2020 by the Assembly Standing Committee, inviting the whole Uniting Church to discern the next stage of its life following the period of over 40 years since its union in 1977. The Assembly affirmed the project's importance and urgency and resolved to continue this work. Looking to the future, it was resolved that the Assembly invite the whole Church, including the Synods and Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, to work together in progressing further work on Act2, which will return to the 17th Assembly.
- *Continuing Witness* [<https://uniting.church/continuing-witness/>]  
The Assembly [warmly adopted a proposal](#) that invites the Church to "listen anew for words of continuing witnesses from recent and contemporary contexts" through engagement with three documents from other churches, to challenge, renew and strengthen the faith of the Uniting Church. The three documents are *The Confession of Belhar*, *Laudato si'* and *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.
- *Call to Action on Climate Justice*  
A [resolution on climate justice](#) commits the Uniting Church to take seriously the voices and wisdom of First Peoples on climate change and care of creation and calls on the Councils and agencies of the Church to join with the Assembly in committing to net zero emissions by 2040.
- *Ageing and Aged Care*  
Another adopted proposal prioritises [ageing and aged care advocacy](#) to ensure the dignity and care of older Australians, and establishes a new annual day on the Church's calendar to recognise the contribution of older people.
- *Deacons in the UCA Anniversary*  
Assembly members acknowledged and expressed deep gratitude for the ministry of the diaconate within the Uniting Church in Australia, noting the 30th anniversary of the renewal of this ministry. The whole Assembly prayed over Deacons present and there was encouragement to take the time to listen to a Deacon and share their good news stories. A [video](#) celebrating UCA Deacons was presented.
- *Preventing Harm from Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts*  
The Assembly Standing Committee was tasked in another resolution with preparing resources to support and educate the Church in preventing harm from Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Change Efforts (often referred to as 'conversion therapy').
- *Moving Forward in Being a Multicultural Church*  
In its final business session, the Assembly [passed a proposal](#) seeking to deepen the Uniting Church's commitment to living faith and life interculturally in a range of ways, including a new annual Sunday of celebration, 'Intercultural Neighbouring Sunday'.

- *Regulations*

Two resolutions dealt with Uniting Church Regulations: one delegating authority to the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) to review immediately the regulations relating to complaints and discipline; another that allows the ASC to amend regulations to reduce the administrative and financial burden of auditing processes in small congregations.

### **Learnings for the Catholic Church**

In the spirit of *Receptive Ecumenism* (“what is the gift of the other?”), there are, among several others, six gifts which the 16th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) might offer the Australian Catholic Church (ACC) as it moves towards its second Plenary Council assembly and seeks to explicate its commitment to Synodality.

These gifts might confirm, adjust, encourage and deepen a *modus operandi* within the ACC as encouraged by Pope Francis.

#### **1. Penitential Spirit**

The 16th Assembly began with a recognition of the manner by which historically the Second Nation Peoples had abused and treated the First Nations Peoples. This attitude had sometimes explicitly, and at other times unwittingly, been incorporated into the life of the Uniting Church, its worship practice and educational teachings. The Assembly opened with a renewal of the Covenant between the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. This renewal reaffirmed the centrality of this covenantal relationship in the UCA. It was expressed penitentially by its President and delegates in the Assembly’s opening worship and continued in different forms throughout the meeting. Delegates identified themselves geographically, in terms of their Presbytery/Synod and the designated First Nations’ locale.

The ACC might look towards ways that a Covenant could be established in a similar manner, that First Nations cultures and languages might be more explicitly incorporated into worship life, and that a penitential rite might lay at the heart of our Plenary Council gathering.

#### **2. Leadership with Women**

The leadership and decision-making process was presided over by a female President. She exercised skilful facilitation and respectful authority throughout the Assembly.

Such presidency, within the norms of Canon Law, invites the ACC to consider ways of skilled leadership and decision-making practice that would involve women at a co-equal level with the bishops in their pastoral leadership.

#### **3. Inclusivity**

Inclusivity characterised the Assembly. Indigenous and non-Indigenous, women and men, gay and straight, ordained and lay, younger and older, Australian-born and those from other countries constituted the two hundred members of the Assembly. All were involved in the consensus process of decision-making.

The ACC might reflect on, and ensure, the cultural, gender, racial, intergenerational, ministerial, intercultural and Indigenous composition of its decision-making body in the Plenary Council and other ACC processes.

#### **4. Sexuality and Gender Representation**



The UCA in general and the Assembly in particular reflected the respect and spirit of inclusivity of those from the LGBTQI+ community. Their involvement was explicit and integral to the Assembly's decision-making process.

The ACC has much to learn from this in its acceptance and involvement of LGBTQI+ Catholics.

#### 5. *Interculturality*

The Assembly looked to reflect on interculturality.

“Australia is one of the most multicultural countries in the world. Yet our congregations still lag far behind our neighbourhoods in reflecting cultural diversity in the life of the church.

We seek a move to a truly intercultural church living faith and life cross-culturally in our worship, witness and discipleship – a two-way process of reciprocity.

How can our congregations connect in the spirit of loving our neighbours, so we can be in relationship and partnership in shared local mission and ministry together?”

- Rev Paul Goh [<https://uniting.church/atrulyinterculturalchurch/>]

This question might guide the ACC in its mission and practice as it embraces interculturality.

#### 6. *Consensus Decision-Making*

The Assembly's work began well before the Assembly took place. The issues that emerged for decision-making were clearly articulated with accompanying rationale. The work in the Assembly was to move towards consensus in a process that was respectful, inclusive, non-combative and open.

The ACC has much to learn from the process and approach in coming to decisions on major pastoral and missionary aspects of the life of the UCA.

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A published summary of the Assembly concludes with the following: “We have dwelt together in love because the Holy Spirit has dwelt with us, and guided us, and remained with us” [<https://uniting.church/dwelling-in-love-at-the-16th-assembly/>]. This encapsulates the nature and aura of the Assembly which the Catholic representatives observed. We are grateful for that privilege.

Gabrielle McMullen, Michael Trainor and Michael Vial  
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