



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY
Assembly Standing Committee

21-23 July 2023

DOCUMENT 2-CA1

Title	Report of the Chairperson of the Uniting Church National History Society
Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	Information (with one proposal for decision)
Assembly or ASC Minute	Report requested by General Secretary
Consultation	The General Secretary, Members of the UCNHS Board
Purpose	To inform the ASC of the activities of the UCNHS
Rationale & Findings Summary	Transparency of the activities of the UCNHS and accountability of the Society to Assembly
Attachments	
Proposal/s	That the Assembly Standing Committee 1. receive the Uniting Church National History Society report; 2. extend the terms of Dr Alison Longworth, Dr Judith Raftery, and Rev Robert Renton as UCNHS Board members for a further term of two years, accordance with the provision made in 14.6 of the UCNHS Constitution.
Submitted by	Rev Prof Glen O'Brien, Chairperson of UCNHS glenaobrien@gmail.com ; glen.obrien@salvationarmy.org.au Mob: 0451 010 799

Report of the Chairperson of the Uniting Church National History Society

Executive Summary: A record of the UCNHS's activities and progress toward its objectives is given. These include Conference and Webinar activities, publications, extension of the Geoff Barnes Memorial Fund, and the establishing of a UCA Biographical Index. Membership and financial information is provided. There is a request for approval from the ASC to extend the terms of three Board members.

Grace and peace to you all in the name of Jesus Christ, Word, and Wisdom of God. The members of the ASC and the UCNHS live, work, and play on lands and waters that have never been ceded and where First Nations people encountered Christ through law and ceremony in ancient times. We pay our respect to the custodians of those lands, and to their elders past and present. We celebrate the recent passing through Parliament of a question to be put to the Australian people that will amend the Constitution to recognise First Nations people and establish a First Nations Voice to Parliament. The UCNHS supports a Yes vote on the Voice and in its next newsletter urges its members to vote in the affirmative for this historic change, an important and necessary step in the journey toward reconciliation and justice.

I am grateful to current members of the UCNHS Board – Ken Barelli (VIC), Richard La'Brooy (NSW), Alison Longworth (WA), Lauren Merritt (NT), Steve Orme (NT), Damian Palmer (NSW), Judith Raftery (Secretary, SA), and Robert Renton (Acting Treasurer, VIC), each of whom has faithfully volunteered their time to ensure the smooth operations of the Society. Ken and Damian are the most recent additions to the Board. The late Bob Coote who recently passed away, served as Treasurer in an interim capacity and I would like to express the Society's gratitude to Bob for his contribution to the UCNHS as well as our sympathy to his family and friends. Robert Renton has taken on the responsibility of the Treasury until a more permanent person can be found. Julia Pitman represented Queensland on the Board until stepping away due to the pressures of congregational ministry. Clive Jackson from the VicTas Historical Society has recently been recruited as an Acting Membership Recruitment Officer until that office can be filled on a more permanent basis and we are grateful for his assistance. I would also like to record my thanks to the President of the Assembly, the Rev Sharon Hollis for her patronage of the Society and for the enthusiasm she has shown and encouragement she has given to our work.

The Society's objectives are to

- promote and advance the study of the history of the Uniting Church and its predecessor churches
- encourage and facilitate research into and publication (by any means) of the history of the Uniting Church and its predecessor churches
- organise conferences, public lectures and workshops
- establish connections with other national and international historical organisations
- award prizes and scholarships which advance public knowledge of Uniting Church history, including the Geoff Barnes Memorial Prize for excellence in Church History
- draw to the attention of the Assembly significant dates, events, and people in the history of the Church and its predecessor churches with the aspiration that appropriate resources may be provided for their celebration, commemoration, or reflection on the contemporary life of the Church
- do all things necessary, including fund raising, to enable the Organisation to meet its objectives

This report will record success in most of the objectives. Since its establishment in 2017, the UCNHS has focused its work on the *relevance* of historical study to the present witness and mission of the Church, as well as matters of wide public interest, such as the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the Church's response, through Uniting Redress, to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to the Abuse of Children. In July 2022, the UCNHS drew 163 registrations for a webinar on *History, Truth Telling and the Uluru Statement from the Heart*, the recording of which has so far attracted over 1,800 views on YouTube <https://youtu.be/L4UemSpCyEE>. In association with the University of Divinity and its School of Indigenous Studies, the Society brought together an expert panel to engage in a respectful and robust discussion around the Statement and explored the place of history and truth telling in working toward a more just and self-determined future for First Nations people. The theme of the webinar was an appropriate extension of the Uniting Church 16th Assembly's renewing, in May 2022, of the Covenant between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. A free copy of a booklet can be downloaded here: <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/253301627> This resource is already being used by individuals and church groups as a resource for the upcoming referendum on the proposed constitutional amendment.

Our Fourth Biennial UCNHS Conference will be held on Larrakia country (in Darwin), from 24-27 August 2023, on the theme of *Truth Telling: From Colonising to Covenanting*. It will include 150th anniversary celebrations at Darwin Memorial Church as well as commemorating the Centenary of the establishment of Mililingimbi Methodist Mission. The Conference is hosted by the Northern Synod and is generously supported by a generous financial gift of The Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation. We are grateful to Steve and Judy Orme and members of the Planning Committee for the work they have done in planning what promises to be a very valuable Conference. Registrations stand at 38 at the time of writing but remain open: <https://uniting.church/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Event-flyer-UCNHS-CONFERENCE-2023.pdf>

Originally managed by the now defunct Historical Reference Committee of the Assembly, The Geoff Barnes Memorial Fund (originally the 'Congregational History Fund') has now become the responsibility of the UNCHS. The fund was established to offer a monetary prize for the best church history essay by a First-Year student at United Theological College (UTC), Sydney. The terms of this have now been broadened to a more national basis under the auspices of the UCNHS, and in dialogue with UTC. The Rev Dr Geoffrey Barnes (1926-2005) was born and educated in Melbourne and ordained a Congregational minister in 1951. In 1967 he moved to Sydney, to serve as Principal of Camden Theological College and later as Lecturer in Church History at UTC from 1975-1993. He was Moderator of the NSW Synod from 1987-1988. He earned a master's degree in theology from Hartford Seminary Foundation, USA, and a doctorate in history from Macquarie University, NSW. The Prize was renamed in recognition of Geoff's significant contribution to the study and teaching of church history.

The UCNHS is now seeking to promote the fund in two ways: First, nominations have been invited for the best essay in history undertaken by an undergraduate student in any Uniting Church theological college. While essays about the Uniting Church or its precedent bodies are welcome the prize is not limited to those themes but may be on any historical period or aspect of historical study. The essay should already have been assessed by the college and received a grade result of 75% or higher. Nominations are to come from any member of academic staff, with the consent of the student, and should be received by the end of each calendar year for evaluation and awarding in February of the following year. The essays will be evaluated by a judging panel of the UCNHS. The amount of the prize is currently \$250 subject to increase as the fund grows. The Board reserves the right not to make an award in any given year if no essay of appropriate standard, as determined by its judging panel, is received. Second, we have topped

up the existing fund from our own resources to \$10,000 and we are inviting contributions of any amount to the Fund to ensure that the fund grows into the future and to increase the size of the prize.

The Society has accepted a proposal from Dean Eland to develop a *UCA Biographical Index*. The aim of the project is to provide an online accessible data collection of information about those in UCA leadership over its first fifty years, 1977-2027. The first phase will include those who were involved as officers and leaders of the Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries and Congress and who are now deceased. A second proposed phase to include those who contributed insights and support for union prior to 1977. Each entry will include references and resources accompanying a 700-word summary along the lines of *The Australian Dictionary of Biography*. A working group reporting to the UCNHS Board has been formed which includes Dean Eland (convenor), Alison Longworth, Damian Palmer, Robert Renton, and Glen O'Brien.

Membership of the Society currently stands at 107, which is up from 90 reported at the 2022 AGM. Membership breakdown by state is as follows: ACT 2, NSW 43, NT 7, QLD 7, SA 7, TAS 0, VIC 30, WA 7, Unknown 3. South Australia and VicTas Synods have their own very active History Societies. On the 19 June 2023, the balance held in our account was \$49,918. This includes \$19,870 held on behalf of the Darwin Conference, and \$10,000 held for the Geoff Barnes Memorial Prize, leaving an operating account of \$20,048. The Society's only means of income is membership renewals and donations. Plans are under way to invite Synods without their own History Societies to add a link to the UCNHS web page on their websites. It is hoped that this will further extend our reach and draw in new members. Members of the ASC are invited to become members of the Society for only \$25 per year by visiting its page on the Assembly website, where there is a payment link. <https://uniting.church/uca-national-history-society/> Perhaps you would also like to come and yarn with us in Darwin.

Our regular newsletter, *Uniting Church History and Heritage*, edited by Robert Renton, is published four times a year in March, June, September, and December, and is circulated to all members and posted on our web page as a free download. Edited Conference Proceedings volumes with papers from each of our biennial History Conferences are also available in PDF from the website. This practice will continue with publications arising from each Conference. We are grateful to staff of the Assembly Communications team, Bethany Broadstock and Bec Beisler, for their help in updating and revising the UCNHS page on the Assembly web page. They have also run a short article in *National Update* highlighting our activities. We had a problem with google searches for some time, where a search of our name would lead to a 'zombie' site attached to the previous Assembly webpage which had been decommissioned and contained long outdated information. One practical result of this was a loss of income as people were renewing their membership at an earlier, lower rate. A recent search resulted in landing on the current page so hopefully that has now been resolved. We have found social media a good means of keeping interested people updated on our activities, with 550 Facebook followers, and 70 followers on Twitter.

The UCNHS remains committed to historical work, not merely out of antiquarian interest, but because it understands that the Church's present mission both flows out of history and makes history. It seeks to empower and equip the people of today's Uniting Church to engage meaningfully in historical study, and to recognise the power of memory, as well as both the pitfalls and value of commemoration. There are a number of high priorities for the upcoming AGM on 14 September 2023 – the election of a new Chairperson of the Society, the appointment of a Treasurer, and the recruitment of a Membership Recruitment officer. A number of the members of our Board are reaching the extent of their terms under our Constitution and it has proven difficult to recruit new Board members. According to 14.6 of the Constitution of the UCNHS – 'A Board member who has held office for a continuous period of six years or more may only be re-appointed after Assembly has provided approval for the re-appointment.' A request for approval from the ASC to extend the terms of three Board members is included at the end of this

report. This will be my last report as Chairperson of the UCNHS, after two terms in the role. It has been a privilege to have served the UCA in this way and my prayers will be with my successor and with Board members as the Society moves forward.

Yours,

(Revd) Professor Glen O'Brien
Chairperson, Uniting Church National History Society

26 June 2023

Recommendation: That the Assembly Standing Committee extend the terms of Dr Alison Longworth, Dr Judith Raftery, and Rev Robert Renton as UCNHS Board members for a further term of two years, in accordance with the provision made in 14.6 of the UCNHS Constitution.