



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY
Assembly Standing Committee

15 – 17 March 2024

DOCUMENT 12

Title	General Secretary Report
Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	For Information
Assembly or ASC Minute	
Consultation	National Directors of UnitingCare Australia, Frontier Service
Purpose	To advise the Assembly Standing Committee on Assembly progress against Strategic Plan, operations and issues relevant to its work.
Rationale & Findings Summary	
Attachments	Attachment A: Strategic Plan and Business Plan
Proposal/s	That the Assembly Standing Committee: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Receives the report;2. Approve the extension of Stuart Woodward's term as member and as Chairperson of AFARC until the August 2024 ASC Meeting.
Submitted by	Lindsay Cullen, Assembly General Secretary (Interim), gensec@nat.uca.org.au , 0408 000 165

GENERAL SECRETARY REPORT

Introduction

As members of Standing Committee may appreciate, the past few months have been intense, interesting and stretching. When I was briefed that I would need to step in as Interim General Secretary for a period of at least seven months, one of the first things I considered was whether it would be feasible or appropriate to engage a supply or interim provision for my regular role of Associate General Secretary. Unfortunately this seemed a difficult issue given the circumstances. Firstly, this is a role which requires a fairly detailed knowledge of the Assembly and its Agencies, its relationships with other Councils of the Church and its ecumenical relationships. It seemed a very difficult ask to find someone external to the Assembly with that kind of knowledge and experience and who would be available to take up a seven month appointment. In most cases an internal appointment might be a better option – asking someone to ‘act up’, however in this case, the most obvious options, being members of the ARU Mission and Ministry team, were all very new to their roles, a matter of 1 to 3 months. The security and stability of this new team was another factor in determining that it would be optimal if I could continue to be their team leader for the interim period. So I made the decision that I would need to cover both roles to the extent possible, looking for every opportunity to offload parts of both roles that could (at least for a time) be done by others.

Three months in, I believe that this was the correct decision, but it has not been without cost. I am sure that I am not performing in either role to the capacity I would like to do so. I am also aware that other staff have very graciously been trying to ensure that they support me in this time and I am grateful for the wonderful work done by all of the Secretariat/ARU staff, especially Leo Iosifides, Jenny Bertalan and Anna Catliffe. I believe that we will all survive the next four or five months until a new permanent General Secretary can begin, but we are also eagerly look forward to that time!

Task Groups and Other Reports

Many of the issues which might otherwise be covered in this report are in separate reports to the ASC: Associate General Secretary, ARU and Circles; Preparations for the 17th Assembly; reports from Task Groups such as the LGBTIQA+ Apology TG, the Toward Net Zero TG, the Continuing Witness TG and the Disability Royal Commission TG.

Financial Sustainability TG

In connection with my need to prioritise, mentioned above, I have made the decision that until at least after the 17th Assembly, the work of the Financial Sustainability Task Group will be suspended. The Task Group met a number of times, and was able to (1) scope out a number of different options for increasing the revenue stream to the Assembly, (2) do some initial work at producing a ‘value proposition’ for the work of the Assembly, and (3) do the work to institute a system for online donations and an invitation to consider leaving a bequest to the Assembly. The online donation processing system is now operative and we have received a number of donations.

However, most of the ways forward envisaged by the Committee involved significant work in negotiating with other parts of the Church to work differently in collaboration or to support the Assembly more robustly, so it was my view that this work was better done following the Assembly decisions on Act2 which will give a much better view of the ways in which such conversations may best be pursued.

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SOGICE Task Group

After a slow start, the SOGICE Task Group has been meeting regularly and has a draft resource completed, with just a bit of further checking and layout and design work to be done. The TG intends to present the finalized resource to the April ASC meeting, with the hope that this can be approved to be launched in the leadup to the 17th Assembly. The TG will also present some proposals for further work which can be considered by the April ASC or by the August ASC if time does not permit in April.

AFARC Chair

The current Chair of AFARC, Mr Stuart Woodward, was appointed to AFARC in February 2015, and was appointed as Chair of the Committee in July 2017 (Minute 17.29.05) on the resignation of the former Chair. He was subsequently affirmed as Chair by the August 2018 ASC Meeting following the 15th Assembly (18.44.09), and by the August 2021 ASC Meeting following the 16th Assembly (21.46.11). It would be normal practice for a new Chairperson to be appointed by the (August) ASC following the 17th Assembly, and this would allow for continuity in the preparation of AFARC reports to the August meeting, as AFARC is due to meet and prepare its report for the ASC in July 2024. However according to the AFARC Charter, members of the Committee should serve a maximum duration of nine consecutive years. So for the avoidance of doubt and maintenance of propriety, I am proposing that the ASC should extend Stuart's membership of the Committee, as well as his tenure as Chairperson until the August 2024 meeting of the ASC. At that meeting, the full membership and the new Chair of the Committee will be approved.

Communications Unit

Members of ASC will probably be aware that Bec Beisler has for the past several years been working part-time, four days per week, while also retraining as a teacher. Bec finished her teaching qualification and the accompanying compliance training early this year and so is transitioning to a teaching career. The transition arrangements have been discussed and agreed beforehand by first Colleen, and now myself.

So as at 1st March, Bec has dropped from four days per week to two days per week. In order to ensure that Comms still has the resourcing it needs in these new circumstances, two changes have been implemented. Firstly, from 1st March, the role of National Manager Media and Communications will be jointly shared by Bec and Bethany Broadstock. Secondly, a new part-time member of the Comms team has been recruited to work for two days per week. This role has been offered to Abbey Sims, who is a Uniting Church member and currently works in part-time roles for Leichhardt Uniting Church and for Common Grace. Abbey has worked before for the Assembly last year during a month period where Bec was doing a teaching placement.

The plan for the shared role of National Manager is that Bethany will continue as the communications lead with the Act2 team two days a week and will manage Comms three days a week, while Bec will lead for two days per week. In terms of focus areas, for content production and daily management of the Assembly's communication channels (National Update, social media, etc), Bethany will take primary responsibility, while Bec will focus on projects with a longer deadline, media, admin and 17th Assembly. Bec's current plan is to finish up with the Assembly after the 17th Assembly meeting and I will be working with her and with Bethany toward a post-Assembly plan for the Comms Unit.

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Frontier Services

Relocation:

Frontier Services has now completed its relocation to 262 Pitt Street. Staff share office space with the Assembly on Level 4 and share meeting room spaces on Level 3 and 4 with the Assembly and UnitingWorld. Generally, the relocation has gone well, and staff of each of the three Assembly bodies are to be commended for their effort and understanding through the process.

Governance:

Lisa Sampson, the Chair of Frontier Services Board has resigned from her role. The Board has nominated Rev Heather den Houting as Chair until the 17th Assembly.

The Board has successfully recruited and inducted three new members. An additional two new members will be sought as two current members will conclude their terms on the Board in July.

The Board of Frontier Services continues to meet quarterly. It has two sub-committees, Finance and Risk and Development (focus on programs and fundraising/communications/marketing)

Strategy:

The Board is undertaking a mid-term review of its Strategic Plan. The first 18 months performance along with emerging possibilities will be considered.

Finance:

The organisation has a budget forecast showing a small deficit for FY24, a better result than budget.

Fundraising remains challenging and significant effort is being put in to diversifying income streams. Engagement with charitable Trusts and Foundations continues along with a new effort to engage with corporates that share similar values and areas of focus.

Financial reserves remain strong (\$9.3M).

Risk:

High risks continue to relate to potential Redress obligations and possible further civil claims in the future. Frontier Services remains confident that our provisioning is adequate to meet any obligations.

Significant risks relate to:

- Cyber security – an Assembly-wide review is underway to assist in this
- Synods and presbyteries not adequately addressing their WHS and HR obligations towards Bush Chaplains – renewed consultation is beginning as part of the next funding cycle
- Risks associated with decline in income through significant changes in donor support and underperformance of investments

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The Board believes it has the necessary controls in place at present to mitigate these risks.

Human Resources:

Staffing has remained stable, with two additional roles in the office recruited towards the end of 2023.

Program:

Frontier Services continues to work hard on having positive and productive working relationships with Synods / Presbyteries for each Bush Chaplaincy.

Some recent changes in Bush Chaplains has taken place with Rev Lindsay Parkhill concluding in West Arnhem, Rev David Jackson commencing in Pilbara, Pastor Yanima Bryant officially commencing in West APY Lands and Rev Erica Payne increasing her role in the Mid-west (WA).

The Outback Links volunteer program has had some successful group trips recently whilst also continuing our regular placements. Several new group trips for corporate partners are in planning, a positive development.

UCA engagement:

We are most grateful for the support we receive from congregations and individuals from across the Uniting Church. A significant number of congregations continue to hold services or events in support of our work. Our donors continue to be faithful in their financial support.

UnitingCare Australia

Parliament is back this week with a full agenda and our focus for the first part of the year will be on prosecuting the issues that we have laid out in our various reports and submissions, in line with our strategic priorities, and then leading into pre-election campaigning later in the year.

Already we have seen the Stage 3 tax cuts reworked and an allocation of an extra \$114.8m for financial wellbeing services. We were actively involved in advocating for this additional funding, using our unique voice to represent our network who run a significant number of financial wellbeing and capability programs, using my role as Chair of the National Coordination Group, and working intentionally across the sector to present a consistent, united position to Government.

The federal election is due by May 2025, but could be held as early as October or November this year.

The Board are currently recruiting a new Chair for UnitingCare Australia and have established a Governance Working Group to review our current arrangements and how to better involve the agencies in decision making.

Ageing to our Full Potential

The Department of Health and Aged Care released the Exposure Draft of the new Aged Care Act on 14 December 2023 with a call for submissions by 16 February 2024. To inform our submission

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the Aged Care CEOs met face to face in Canberra on 23 January, we have attended briefings from the Department of Health and we have consulted with a number of key stakeholders including ACCPA, COTA, OPAN, HSU, MinterEllison, AICD, NACA, Baptistcare, Catholic Health and Anglicare.

Our Pre-Budget submission, lodged on 25 January, included specific asks on aged care, informed by our Aged Care CEOs and Home Care Community of Practice.

The evaluation of the Uniting Friends of Ageing has commenced with the aim of analysing its effectiveness, efficiency and lessons learned.

The Aged Care national bodies including ACCPA, Anglicare Australia, Baptist Care and Catholic Health have met during the reporting period for a strategy discussion.

The Home Care Working Group has met regularly and is awaiting further advice from Government on the model and implementation plan for the new Support at Home Program.

Justice for First Peoples

Following the Referendum result it has been a period of reflection with the regular online meetings of the First Peoples Network and First Peoples Community of Practice providing this opportunity for all attendees. We also held an online Gathering on 30 November and again this was an opportunity for reflection and discussion about what organisations are doing across the network and what could be achieved together.

We are commencing work on next steps, have set up meetings of the Network and CoP for 2024 and are liaising with Rev Mark Kickett following his appointment as Chair of the UAICC. We have set a date for a face to face Gathering in late April 2024.

We continue to maintain the various relationships we have built with external stakeholders including the Allies of Uluru to inform our network and advocacy opportunities.

Economic Equality and Inclusion

Our Pre-Budget Submission has been a focus area for the team during the reporting period. It has been informed by many of our Networks and Communities of Practice and was lodged on schedule on 25 January.

We have also lodged a number of other submissions which were informed by the UnitingCare network through the various Networks and CoPs and also a number of specifically focused discussions:

- [Inquiry into Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee Bill](#) – Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee – November 2023
- Response to the Development a Not-for-Profit Blueprint Issues Paper – Department of Social Services – December 2023
- [Consultation on the Disability Royal Commission Response](#) – Department of Social Services (focused on recommendations in relation to the future of Australian Disability Enterprises (ADEs) - January 2024

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- Review of Financial Wellbeing and Capability Programs – Department of Social Services - January 2024

The team have delivered a Positioning Paper on the Escaping Violence Payment program for lodgement by the Consortium with the Department of Social Services. We worked closely with Uniting Vic.Tas to align the EVP recommendations contained in our Pre-Budget Submission with this Paper.

Stronger Community Services Network

The various Networks, Working Groups and Communities of Practice have continued across the reporting period. They are well attended and contribute significantly to our submissions and advocacy in general.

Two new groups have been formed in the reporting period in response to requests from the network: Aged Care Quality Standards Working Group and a People & Culture Community of Practice.

The Quality, Risk and Compliance Community of Practice met face to face in Sydney on 27 November with a focus on Service Excellence Frameworks, Policy and Procedure Systems and Data Governance – this was their third face to face meeting to date.

The LGBTIQ+ CoP is planning another online workshop in March for the UnitingCare network and Church, this time focused on Managing Discrimination in Residential Services.

The Advocacy and Government Relations Network met in Canberra for the first time last December.

Effective Communications and Public Affairs

Our communications and public affairs activities this year should be viewed through a pre-election lens. The Government's 'reset' over Christmas demonstrates they are now on an election footing, and the Opposition, Greens and crossbenchers are also developing their election pitch and platforms.

In this context, there is an opportunity for UnitingCare Australia to focus even more on engaging in discussions, both public and private, that leverage our unique voice and offer a constructive, evidence based approach to policy making.

Our Pre-Budget Submission put forward three targeted and costed policy proposals. We have begun the process of engaging with Government Ministers and parliamentarians, Departments, and will engage key Opposition, Greens and Crossbench politicians when we publicly launch the PBS in late February / early March. We will also work with ACCPA and our network on a strategic engagement program for the new Aged Care Act.

Ahead of the PBS being submitted with Treasury, we wrote to the Treasurer proposing cost-of-living measures, responding to the Government's call for ideas ahead Prime Minister's Press Club Address. We were pleased to see the reworked Stage 3 Tax Cuts and the additional funding for financial wellbeing and capability grant programs which we asked for.

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The Child Social Exclusion Report will be launched on 27th March in Parliament House with our network consortium and the University of Canberra. We have secured the Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP, Assistant Minister for Charities, Employment and Treasury to officially launch the report. A media and launch strategy is being finalised and we look forward to this exciting event. The report has been produced through a Consortium comprising the University of Canberra, UnitingCare Australia, Uniting NSW.ACT, Uniting Vic.Tas, Uniting Communities, UnitingSA, UnitingCare Queensland and Wesley Mission.

Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement

The 2024 Leaders Forum is planned for Tuesday 10th September at Old Parliament House. Given the political context there is an opportunity for CEOs to engage in political advocacy the day after the Leaders Forum. An agenda and theme will of course be developed closer to the time, including a discussion on Act2.

We will attend the Triennial Assembly in Parramatta this July and look forward to sharing the 30th anniversary content with our Church family more broadly.

Conclusion

I wish to again pay thanks to the hard work of all the Secretariat and ARU who in this uncertain time (both with the vacancy of the permanent General Secretary and with the possibility of significant changes with Act2), continue to give generously of their time, energy and commitment for the good of the Assembly and of the whole Church.