



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

**15 – 17 March 2024**

**DOCUMENT 8**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Continuing Witness Task Group Report to ASC (including proposed Report of the Task Group to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly)</b>
Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	Information and Decision
Assembly or ASC Minute	2018 - Minute 18.31  2022 – Minute 22.05
Consultation	Continuing Witness Task Group
Purpose	To present the final report of the Continuing Witness Task Group to the 17 <sup>th</sup> Assembly  To make proposals regarding the adoption of three documents as Continuing Witnesses.  To resource the ASC to plan for engagement and proposals at the 17 <sup>th</sup> Assembly.
Rationale & Findings Summary	The 16 <sup>th</sup> Assembly resolved to ask presbyteries to consider three documents for adoption as Continuing Witnesses, and to resource the 17 <sup>th</sup> Assembly with feedback from the church when it makes a decision about whether to adopt these three documents.  Only one presbytery has submitted such feedback.  Nevertheless, in the light of the strong support shown for this proposal at the 15 <sup>th</sup> and the reconvened 16 <sup>th</sup> Assembly, and such feedback (informal and formal) that has been received the Task Group proposes that the documents nevertheless be considered, as planned, at the 17 <sup>th</sup>

	<p>Assembly. The rationale for their adoption was already laid out in the Task Group's Report to the reconvened 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly. The Task Group's final report to the Assembly is, therefore, a modified version of its report to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly.</p>
<p>Attachments</p>	<p>Task Group Report</p>
<p>Proposal/s</p>	<p>That the Standing Committee</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. receive the report;</li> <li>2. Approve the proposed Report to the Assembly to be forwarded to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly;</li> <li>3. Approve the Proposals for the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly to be forwarded along with the Report;</li> <li>4. noting that the intended process of feedback did not eventuate, request that in the planning of the Assembly meeting consideration is given to the following means of resourcing the discernment during the meeting: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. use of the some of the liturgical material already prepared by the Task Group;</li> <li>b. use the questions prepared and intended for the Presbytery process as a basis for formulating the questions to be asked in Working Groups;</li> </ol> </li> <li>5. request the ARU to ensure that the short video endorsements of the three documents are completed and added to the existing Continuing Witness page of the Assembly website as early as possible;</li> <li>6. thank and discharge the Continuing Witness Task Group</li> </ol>
<p>Submitted by</p>	<p>Rev Rachel Kronberger,  Convenor,  Continuing Witness Task Group</p> <p>0408731208  rkronberger@wesleychurch.org.au</p>

## Report:

This Task Group was appointed following the decision of the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly to explore the possibility of adopting various statements or confessions of faith from other churches in different contexts as part of the Uniting Church's own acknowledgement of "continuing witness[es]" (Basis of Union, para 11). This was an opportunity to act on the commitments in para 11 for the Uniting Church to "sharpen its understanding of the will and purpose of God." Tasked with bringing recommendations about any such statements or documents to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly, the Task Group established relevant criteria, and identified the following three documents for the Assembly's consideration.

- The Belhar Confession
- The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification
- Laudato Si'

In the course of its work leading up to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly, and noting how other churches around the world had engaged and received these and other documents, the Task Group was especially struck by the practice of discernment that accompanied the adoption of Belhar by the Presbyterian Church (USA). The decision to adopt it as one of that church's own confessional statements followed several years of church-wide engagement with the document through a range of local and regional discussions. Following this example, and convinced of the ecclesial and theological significance of adopting these documents, the Task Group proposed that a similar process of intentional and widespread engagement should precede any decision of the Assembly to formally adopt any or all of them. Hence, as well as identifying and presenting these particular three documents to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly, the Task Group proposed that a final decision on the documents should wait until the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly. Equipped with a process designed by the Task Group, presbyteries were invited to provide feedback through the Assembly office that would inform the Task Group in the preparation of its final recommendations to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly. This proposal was passed by consensus. Following the meeting of the reconvened Assembly, a Continuing Witness page was added to the Assembly website. It contains a video introduction to the work, the decisions of the Assembly, access to the three documents, and the resources prepared for use by presbyteries. A further proposal commissioning the Task Group to explore other forms of witness, especially from Asia and the Pacific, which might at some future stage be adopted as forms of "Continuing Witness" was also passed, and also by consensus.

The Task Group regrets to report that the process which it designed has not gained traction in the 20 months which have passed since the meeting of the reconvened 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly. Although there have been informal reports of other engagement, the Assembly office has received formal documented response from only one presbytery. Our growing awareness of this lack of traction was reported to at least two of the ASC's 2023 meetings. We are unable to identify specific reasons for this lack of traction, but we make the following observations.

- In terms of their engagement with the Assembly, presbyteries (unsurprisingly) prioritised Act2.
- The contraction of the available time from three years to two because of the postponed meeting of the reconvened meeting of 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly restricted the period in which the process could be promoted and implemented.
- The capacity to keep the Continuing Witness work before the presbyteries and the wider church (in line with Assembly Minute 22.05.03) was limited by the depleted resources and transitions in the ARU throughout 2023 until the appointment in December 2023 of Rev Dr Sunny Chen as the ARU team member to liaise with this Task Group. This reduced the capacity to monitor the feedback process, and to adapt the communications strategy when the lack of engagement became apparent. A video resource was planned but did not eventuate. This included

endorsements of each of the three documents from UCA leaders. We believe that the production of these video should be a high priority in order to assist Assembly members in their decision-making in the absence of the intended process.

- The Task Group's own resources were reduced through the resignation of three of its members due to workload or retirement since July 2022.

This final point also explains why the Task Group was not able to give itself to the work of exploring other forms of witness from Asia and the Pacific which might at a future date be presented to the Assembly.

For all this, however, the consensus support for the proposals at both the 2018 and 2022 Assembly meetings and the generally highly positive engagement we have *informally* received (from presbytery leaders and members, and other UCA leaders) suggest to the Task Group that the proposals to adopt the documents should still be taken to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly. No explicit rejection of the rationale for introducing the category of Continuing Witness or that for adopting these particular documents has ever been communicated to us. The Task Group itself remains convinced of the rationale and arguments presented in its report to the reconvened 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly. This being the case, the Task Group is confident to present to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly what is essentially a modified and shortened version of its report to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly. The informal feedback has also, however, brought to attention three issues about the status and function of these documents. They are as follows:

#### *Who will read and use these documents?*

The point has been put to us that the documents are technical and, in the case of *Laudato si'*, are very long. The Task Group has never assumed that every member of the Church will or should read them, just as not everyone in the church reads the *Basis of Union*, the Confessional documents listed in paragraph 10 of the Basis, or the UCA's other post-union authoritative and identity-defining documents. While the documents should be easily accessible to the whole church, and while they may from time to time be studied in various local and regional contexts, they will be more likely to be read and used by those who in their various capacities are charged with shaping the theological vision of the UCA.

#### *How will the documents be used?*

As indicated in our report to the reconvened 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly, we cannot stress enough that in adopting these documents in the category of 'Continuing Witness' they do not in any way replace the Basis of Union; they do not constitute a fresh confession of faith by the Uniting Church; they are not policy statements which directly determine UCA practice. The closest parallel to existing UCA documents are those of the Reformed and Wesleyan traditions named in paragraph 10 of the Basis, and from which the UCA is exhorted to "continue to learn." If that is an historically-oriented exhortation, these documents would be those from which we "begin to learn" in the present. They do not detail positions to be adopted by the UCA. Rather they are identified and trusted as privileged – but neither definitive nor exhaustive – sources of wisdom upon which the UCA would call from time to time and when relevant to issues at hand. They could be introduced in the various "Introducing the UCA" courses offered across the church.

#### *What of future documents?*

As indicated above, the Task Group was not able to attend to the task of engaging other forms of continuing witness from Asia and the Pacific. It is our view that this work – and the longer term work of listening for such other witnesses, including First Nations witnesses – should be an ongoing task of the Assembly. As reported to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly, there are other factors at work in such contexts that mean that the form of continuing witness will not be confined to the sorts of documents being proposed here. To

this end, we are proposing that the Assembly ask the Assembly Standing Committee to appoint a new task group to explore the future directions and possibilities of recognizing other forms of continuing witness.

These matters have been integrated and/or highlighted in the Report of the Task Group (attached).

Finally, in the absence of feedback data from the church the Task Group suggest that the process of discernment at Assembly could be enhanced by selected use of the resources its prepared for the intended Presbytery-based feedback process. For the same reason, we ask the ASC to ensure that the set of video endorsements of three documents is completed as soon as possible and added to the Continuing Witness page on the Assembly website.

Rev Rachel Kronberger

Convenor

Continuing Witness Task Group

February 2024

# NAME OF THE GROUP PRESENTING OR TITLE OF THE REPORT

## Formatting

1. Reports are in Arial 10 point with no special indents, left justified and no page numbering. Paragraphs are numbered with a single line only between paragraphs. The report title should be 14 point capital letters. Each paragraph should contain one significant point although it may be more than one sentence long.
2. Use of headings: they are used to identify major sections in a report, eg Executive Summary, process, or where there is a very complex paper moving through a range of information. See this document for an example of how headings might be used.

## Order and Content of a report

3. An Executive Summary is encouraged, especially for reports longer than a page. The Executive Summary should indicate the status of the document, eg a preliminary report; the key points that are made in the report; and the kind of decision sought eg feedback to the Task Group, decision, referral, etc.
4. The first couple of paragraphs should remind readers of what the issues are, why they are before the ASC at this time and where this report fits into the whole process for addressing the issues. For example reports often commence with a reference to an Assembly or ASC minute establishing the group and its terms of reference. This may be followed by a brief outline of the process undertaken and reference to the stage reached, eg this is an interim report seeking feedback from the ASC on X, Y, and Z; or decision on next steps, etc.
5. The report presents material that is relevant to the decisions that the Standing Committee has to take. It is not necessary to provide great levels of detail, eg the questions that were asked of people in a survey.
6. Do not include recommended courses of action in the body of the report unless they also appear as specific proposals at the end of the report. If the group is seeking to raise a conversation or seeking a view from the Standing Committee then include it in the process or proposals at the end of the document. Do not put proposals in the body of the report.
7. For complex issues think about alternative ways of presenting them, eg mapping which identifies who are the affected groups and issues that are relevant for them; diagrams; images; etc.

## Final elements of the report

8. All groups must include the following elements at the end of their report
  - The name of the report writer and underneath the role or position that is relevant to this report (in bold). Underneath put the email and mobile phone number of the writer so that members of the Standing Committee may raise questions and offer comments to the author before the meeting of the ASC. The Standing Committee expects that any questions raised by a member prior to the meeting will receive a response before the ASC meets.
  - Indication of the process that will be followed. This can be as simple as the report will be taken as read, questions answered and be received; through to advice about the way in which the material will be presented and use of table group discussion. If there is to be group discussion the questions are to be provided with the report. See also paragraph 7 above.

