



## UNITING CHURCH NATIONAL HISTORY SOCIETY

**Executive Summary:** A record of the UCNHS's activities and progress toward its objectives is given. These include details of current UCNHS Board membership, conference and webinar activities, publications, the Geoff Barnes Memorial Prize, progress towards the establishment of a UCA Biographical Index, as well as membership and financial information.

Greetings to all members of the Uniting Church, in whose name the UCNHS pursues the following objectives, as specified in our constitution:

- 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 Uniting 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 records 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 on matters of wide public interest that relate to the building and safeguarding of a just society that encourages abundant life for all. In the reporting period, chief amongst these matters was the October 2023 referendum that sought constitutional change to recognise First Nations Australians and establish a First Nations Voice to parliament. The Board of the UCNHS joins with other Australians who were dismayed and distressed by the defeat of this referendum, and reaffirms its commitment to work for justice, reconciliation and truth-telling in this matter of urgent national concern.

The UCNHS Board records its thanks to the President of the Assembly, the Rev. Sharon Hollis for her patronage of the society, the encouragement she has given to our work, and her insight into the importance of history to the church's reflection on its priorities. She has demonstrated this especially in relation to truth-telling and the church's commitment to first Nations Australians, as was very apparent in her contribution to our biennial conference in August 2023.

**Board Membership:** The current membership of the UCNHS Board, following resignations, election, co-option, and extension of terms as approved by Assembly Standing Committee, is as follows:

Resignations: Richard La'Brooy (NSW), Lauren Merritt (NT), Glen O'Brien (Vic)

Continuing members: Ken Barelli (Vic), Alison Longworth (WA), Steve Orme (NT), Damian Palmer (NSW), Judith Raftery (SA), Robert Renton (Vic).

New member: Patricia Curthoys (NSW).

Confirmation of previous co-option: Clive Jackson (Vic)

Office holders (elected/appointed at AGM, September 2023): Judith Raftery (Chairperson), Patricia Curthoys (Secretary), Robert Renton (Treasurer), Clive Jackson (Membership Officer).

We note the absence of a member from Queensland on the board, and are seeking to rectify this.

The fourth biennial UCNHS Conference was held on Larrakia country, in Darwin, from 24-27 August 2023, on the theme of *Truth Telling: from Colonising to Covenanting*. The conference was hosted by the Northern Synod and supported by a generous financial gift from the Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation, and by the hospitality of Darwin Memorial Uniting Church and Nungalinga



College. Its impact was enhanced by timing: it coincided not only with the 150th anniversary celebrations of Darwin Memorial Uniting Church and the centenary of the establishment of the Milingimbi Methodist Mission in Arnhem Land, but also with heightened community awareness (connected to the imminent Voice referendum) of issues relevant to the conference theme. It was a splendid conference which attracted registrants from all over Australia (58 in attendance, and 11 on line), and a suite of papers and presentations which, relying variously on scholarly analysis and storytelling about lived experience, encouraged fruitful engagement with the conference theme. The UCNHS is very grateful to members of the Darwin planning committee – Steve and Judy Orme, Lauren Merritt, Wendy Beresford-Maning and Gwen Warmbirriri – for their commitment, hard work, imagination and attention to detail.

Our previous report to Assembly outlined the process whereby the administration of the Geoff Barnes Memorial Fund, established in recognition of the late Rev. Dr Geoff Barnes' contribution to the study and teaching of church history, had become the responsibility of the UCNHS. The purpose of the fund is to offer, in each academic year, a monetary prize for the best church history essay submitted by an undergraduate student enrolled at a UCA theological college. Essays nominated for the prize will have already been assessed by the college and awarded a result of 75% (Distinction) or higher. Nominations received by the UCNHS Board will be evaluated by a judging panel chosen from among suitably qualified board members. We are delighted to report that we received nominations at the end of the 2023 academic year, and that the winner of the Geoff Barnes Memorial Prize for 2023 is Deborah Lancaster, of Pilgrim College, University of Divinity, for her essay entitled 'Ripples of Transformation: Anna Jansz and Anabaptist metamorphosis during the sixteenth century'. We congratulate Deborah on her achievement and look forward to nominations from all our UCA theological colleges for the 2024 prize. The monetary value of the prize is currently \$250. The UCNHS Board has topped-up the existing fund from its own resources to \$10,000 and invites contributions to the fund from UCA and UCNHS members, to ensure that it is not depleted, but continues to grow, enabling us to increase the size of the prize in the future.

The society has accepted a proposal from UCNHS member, Rev. Dr Dean Eland (SA) 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. It is envisaged that 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, and that a second phase include those who contributed insights and support for union prior to 1977. Each entry will include a list of references and resources accompanying a 500-700 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, and Robert Renton. Progress has been slow, but the group has begun sharing files to facilitate the collation of collected material, and considering who the likely audiences/users will be and the best ways to make material available to them, e.g. through linkage with the UCNHS website, and potentially, via Illuminate.

The UCNHS 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. The editor is always keen to receive publishable articles, book reviews, letters, notices about upcoming events etc. from UCA congregations and members. We also publish edited volumes of proceedings from each of our biennial History Conferences. These are available in PDF on our website, and in hard copy to members. Hard copies can also be purchased directly from our Treasurer via our website.

Membership of the UCNHS currently stands at 109, which is up from 107 reported in 2023. Membership breakdown by Synod is as follows: NSW&ACT 45, NT 5, QLD 7, SA 7, VIC/TAS 34, WA 7, Unknown 3. Clive Jackson, the UCNHS Membership Officer, is pursuing various strategies to recruit new members. He is also revising membership and contact lists to ensure they are accurate and up to date, and that they provide the society with a sound basis from which to encourage timely subscription renewal. Recently we have made efforts to get synods that do not have their own history societies to add a link to the UCNHS web page to their websites, and hope that this will further extend



our reach and draw in new members. All members of the UCA, including members of the Assembly Standing Committee, are invited to become members of the UCNHS, 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/>

The Society's only means of income is membership renewals and donations. On 23 April 2024, the balance held in our account was \$46,427.45. This includes \$13,360.62 held as surplus from the Darwin Conference, and \$10,000 held for the Geoff Barnes Memorial Prize, leaving an operating account of \$23,066.83.

The UCNHS remains committed to historical reflection, not out of antiquarian interest, but because it understands that the church's present mission both flows out of history and makes history. As we were reminded at the 150th anniversary celebrations in Darwin last August, history is about honouring the past, transforming the present and creating the future. We are well aware that history is currently not a high priority for many people in the churches, in academia, including in our theological colleges, or in society at large. This is a source of frustration for those of us who understand the study of history as highly valuable to the maintenance of broad, informed, generous and imaginative perspectives on what makes for a good society that optimises chances for human freedom and flourishing, and what threatens those common goods and thus our future. Believing that these are things that Christians and the churches ought to take seriously, we remain committed to flying the flag of history wherever and whenever we can. And we value the collaboration of our UCA community in that endeavour.

Yours in hope,

**Dr Judith Rafferty**  
**Chairperson, Board of the Uniting Church National History Society**

