

## UNITINGWORLD

### 1. WE ADAPTED OUR PLANS IN A WORLD OF UNCERTAINTY

Back in June 2021, as borders opened and lockdowns eased, many of us expected things to start stabilising. Our Strategic Plan for FY22–24 was created for a world focused on recovery after COVID. However, the day after we signed off on the plan, news of the new Delta variant made headlines and Sydney was plunged back into lockdown and international travel was once more off the cards.

The last triennium has been about adapting and responding to waves of change of unprecedented intensity. It has challenged us and stretched our organisation and our partners like never before. It has taught our staff and our partners important lessons in adaptability, resilience and communication.

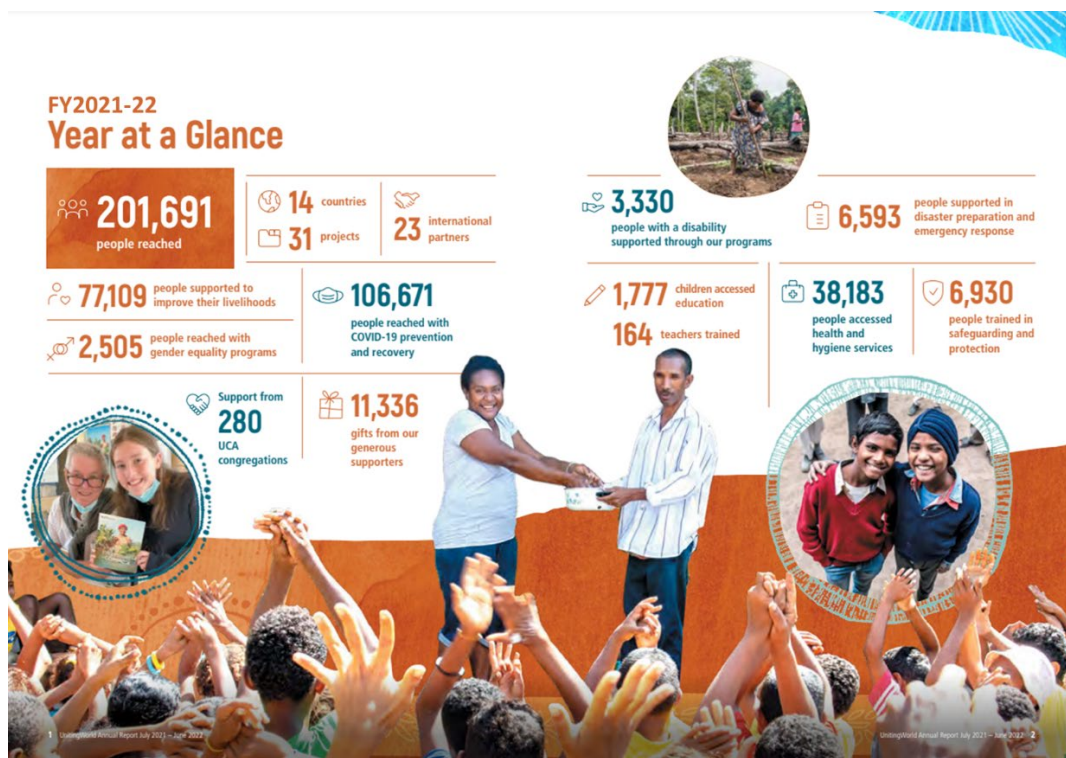
However, the heart of our strategy remains true. We remain focused on supporting our partners to respond to the needs of their communities in ways that bring lasting change. This unshakeable core of our identity has helped us to be flexible and responsive and keep making impact.

### 2. WE MADE A DIFFERENCE TO MANY LIVES

In line with our mission, we collaborated with the global church on projects that addressed the causes and consequences of poverty, injustice and violence.

FY21-22 was not the year we planned. Far from the end of a crisis, we faced a resurgence of COVID-19, floods at home, a war in Europe and the global phenomenon of COVID-fatigue.

It is a testament to the agility of our team and the resilience and resourcefulness of the people we work with that, despite the volatility of the context, we reached 201,691 people with tangible benefits, across 31 projects in 14 countries with 23 partners in FY22.



In June 2022, it was time to take stock and restore our strength after the pandemic, and re-orient ourselves for recovery and growth in a fundamentally changed world. FY22 was a year of re-building core capacity after the disruption caused by COVID-19.

We worked with our partners to do a full review of our collaborative projects, to test assumptions and refresh designs to be fit for the post-COVID world. We supported our partners to do fresh community consultations, baseline data gathering and gender and disability audits. We also rebuilt our own team after significant post-COVID staff turnover.

We were able to reach 257,502 people through 27 projects in twelve countries with 22 partners.



At the time of writing this report, the impact figures for FY2023-24 are not yet available. However, we can report project designs were refreshed based on the previous year's reviews and that implementation is afoot in the confidence that the work is targeting the express needs and challenges of the local communities.

### 3. WE SUPPORTED OUR PARTNER CHURCHES TO GROW STRONGER

Everything we do at UnitingWorld has impact at two levels:

- at the grassroots, in the lives and actions of everyday people; and on organisations, and
- in the structures and processes that enable people to work together to do more than they can do alone.

We cannot fund work in every community in a country. But when we support the strengthening of a partner church's organisational capacity, it transforms a whole national church, lifting every ministry in every geography.



Poverty alleviation is our key theme for our programs in Asia and Africa, while our Pacific partners chose to focus on gender equality and climate resilience.

But across all of our work, the objective of strengthening our partners as institutions and leaders remains a constant.

When COVID disrupted our partners' ability to travel and work out in the community, we took advantage of the time to help them build up their organisational capacity. We helped them develop strong policies and do staff training on the safeguarding and protection of vulnerable people and reinforcing financial governance systems.

Policy work may sound dull and dry, but we have discovered that the idea of robust systems that ensure that churches are safe spaces for vulnerable people is one that has been a liberating wind for many of our partners.

We have heard first-hand of the joy with which people have tackled old established practices that were unfair or exclusive; of previously unspoken prejudices are being debated and dismantled. It has been a true privilege to see God at work, bringing about transformation in such prosaic yet systemic matters.

#### **4. WE DELIVERED OUR MISSION IN ASIA, AFRICA AND THE PACIFIC**

Our poverty alleviation programs target structural barriers that prevent human flourishing. Depending on country and context, these barriers include access to education, health, capital or human rights.

- In Indonesia, rural communities received access to local government services to meet malnutrition and stunting, maternal and child health, and strengthening family incomes.
- In Timor Leste and Indonesia families established kitchen gardens to provide local access to healthy food.
- In India and Sri Lanka, families marginalised due to poverty, ethnicity or disability improved their family incomes and their children participated in formal education.

Our gender equality program in the Pacific is driven by engaging in theological reflection.

- Across the Pacific region, partner churches are engaging in theological reflection and practical action that addresses the major issues of gender inequality, child protection and climate change impact.
- Church partners appointed Church ministers as champions to teach and promote gender equality, and to drive the adoption of policies and processes within church institutions that provided protection and safeguarding for women and girls and promoted equal and inclusive treatment of women in leadership and employment.

Our climate and disaster resilience program combines the practical and the prophetic.

- Local theologians in the Pacific adapted the *Theology of Disaster Resilience in a Changing Climate* resources to incorporate local knowledge and context in PNG, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu; and delivered training in local communities.
- Communities in Fiji developed resilience plans as part of a pilot climate-informed disaster risk assessment program; and were supported to develop disaster chaplaincy networks.

We responded to humanitarian emergencies.

- In Tonga communities have been supported to rebuild livelihoods following the volcanic eruption and tsunami – including in fishing, sewing and weaving.
- We supported our partners to respond to cyclones in Vanuatu, cholera in Zimbabwe, flooding in India, and drought in Tuvalu.





- Through ACT Alliance we have supported responses to other disasters globally including the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the earthquake in Türkiye/Syria.

## 5. WE NURTURED A COMMUNITY OF CHANGE MAKERS

For ten years we have been bringing our partners together for regional forums each year. These conferences covered subjects of strong common interest, chosen by our partners. Our partners have discussed theology with practical application, shared what worked and what didn't in program initiatives and swapped strategies for strengthening their governance and management. Each conference has reinforced communities of shared learning and practice, cultivated connections and relationships, and encouraged direct collaboration between our partners.

We know that our partners are part of many ecumenical networks, so we asked them if our regional conferences offer anything different, as we don't want to waste their time. The answer is unequivocal – our conferences have two distinctives that make them different and valuable.

Firstly, they are attended both by heads of church as well as the program staff who implementing community work. This enables a breadth of perspective and a stronger cohesion between the theological leadership and practical outworking. The conversations during these gathering offers a stimulating environment where challenges are named and prophetic calls for action are immediately wrestled with.

Secondly, the conferences are heavily participant led, focussed on topics of direct relevant to their work, with enough time for rolling up sleeves and working together in workshop fashion. People feel they have gained practical value that is directly relevant to the work they're implementing in their own communities.

We often invite UCA leaders to attend these meetings, as an effective way to engage with our partners, building bridges, sharing stories and increasing trust and confidence.

We are committed to supporting these gatherings in the future, transitioning them to be more and more led by our partners and their priorities.

## 6. WE SUCCESSFULLY PROMOTED THE ROLE OF CHURCHES IN THE PACIFIC

Following Australia's 'step-up' in the Pacific region, we have consistently lobbied the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade (DFAT) to engage with Pacific churches, because they are strong civil society actors and development partners. We have partnered with the DFAT Office of the Pacific since its inception to support their engagement with the Pacific Conference of Churches.

Over the past three years, this journey has resulted in several new initiatives:

The Pacific Church Partnership Advisory Network (PCPAN) is a gathering of the leaders from the across the Pacific and Australia to act as a reference point for DFAT's engagement. UnitingWorld's role in facilitating the formation of this group, and the Uniting Church's strength in relational connections with the Pacific has meant that we have made a strong contribution to this network. The Australia Pacific diaspora representative is a UCA minister, and Indigenous Christians representative is the Chair of UAICC. The National Director of UnitingWorld has been a member of this Network as the representative of the Church Agencies Network for the first two years.

UnitingWorld also supports Micah Australia to receive Australian Government grant funding to run the Pacific Australia Emerging Leaders' Summit. Young people from eight of our partner churches in the Pacific, and from indigenous, Pacific diaspora and other Australian churches made up over 100 young people from 14 countries who came together to build a community that identified issues of shared concern, trained together in advocacy, and then met with Australian parliamentarians in a wide range



of meetings. UnitingWorld supporters helped us fund two young women from our partner church in West Papua to join the delegation.

We also partnered with DFAT and the Pacific Conference of Churches to build of the PCC's governance and management capacity so they can apply for direct funding from the Australian government in the future. We are currently collaborating on a similar project with the Pacific College of Theology.

## **7. WE ADVOCATED FOR OUR PARTNERS AND GLOBAL SOCIAL JUSTICE**

We do not have dedicated resources within UnitingWorld to pursue advocacy. Instead, we use our membership of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), of Micah Australia and of the Church Agencies Network (CAN) to work with others to bring attention to the issues that matter to our partners.

Back in 2020-21, the major focus of our advocacy was vaccine justice. We contributed to the successful #End Covid for All campaign, a coalition 200 of Australia's leading global health and aid organisations, as well as business, faith, union, tourism, and academic groups, calling upon the Australian Government to do more to support the equitable distribution of aid and vaccines. It resulted in funding for 60 million vaccines to lower income nations as well as significant increase in aid funding to support COVID relief work in our local region.

When Kabul fell to the Taliban in late 2021, we joined Micah to mobilise over 16,000 Christians, 300 churches and the leaders of all mainline denominations joined our campaign calling for a special intake of refugees from Afghanistan and additional humanitarian assistance. This resulted in 16,500 additional humanitarian visas for Afghan refugees and \$140M in humanitarian assistance over 2021-24.

In 2023, we once again joined Micah and ACFID in campaigning for humanitarian relief for East Africa as part of the Help Fight Famine campaign. The National Director went to Canberra with Rev Amel Manyon (Sudanese Australian from the SA Synod), past-President Dr Deidre Palmer and President Elect Rev Charissa Suli to meet with Parliamentarians to raise this issue. The campaign was successful in securing \$69M of humanitarian funding for Africa.

We are currently engaged in the Safe World for All campaign, challenging politicians from all sides of politics to take serious action to respond to the global 'polycrisis' – the unprecedented threat to human flourishing brought about by the conjunction of COVID, climate change and conflict.

## **8. WE HAD A SIGNIFICANT RENEWAL OF OUR BOARD MEMBERS**

UnitingWorld has always been fortunate in attracting many experienced and skilled volunteers to serve our Board. However, in the past three years, several long-standing Board members completed their terms of office, and the recruitment and appointment of new Board members has been a significant focus.

At the time of writing this report in April 2024, seven of the twelve Board members who were serving in July 2021 are no longer on the Board. We have however been fortunate in attracting new members who bring rich diversity in lived experience as well as strong skills.

Possibly the most significant change to our Board was the transitions in Board Chair. In July 2021, Dr Andrew Glenn stepped down after nine years. His time as Chair included some of the most significant strategic changes in UnitingWorld's governance. This included the amalgamation of the Church Connections National Committee with the Relief & Development National committee into a single Board under a new unified Mandate in 2018, and then more recently, the establishment of UnitingWorld as a registered charity with its own ABN with Public Benevolent Institution status granted by the Australian Tax Office. Andrew also played lead role in the recruitment of new Board members for UnitingWorld, investing great effort into increasing cultural and generational diversity.



In July 2021, Ms Lin Hadfield Dodds was appointed Chair of the UnitingWorld Board, however, she had to step down in 2022 due to changes in her own employment situation. Rev Dr Steve Bevis was appointed interim Chair in late 2022. A nomination for his appointment as Chair is being presented to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly.

With a new Chair, and with several new members beginning their terms in 2022, this has been an important time of stabilisation and renewing our Board culture. With the newly regained ability to travel freely, the Board has been meeting in person over the past twelve months, and is investing in building relationships, undertaking training together on cross-cultural competence, and developing a robust and collegial approach to decision making. In April 2023, the Board had an independent evaluation, resulting in findings that indicated strong performance and some recommendations for further development.

## **9. WE SUCCESSFULLY RENEWED OUR ACCREDITATION WITH THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT**

UnitingWorld has been accredited by the Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade since 2002, enabling use to access Australian aid grants for our partners.

Accreditation must be renewed every five years, and the process of re-accreditation is strenuous and detailed. The standards to which accredited agencies are held are constantly becoming more stringent, and cover every aspect of operations.

Firstly, governance, strategy, risk management, communications, fundraising, program delivery and partner relations are all reviewed through a Desk Assessment which required us to prepare and submit over 60 documents. This is followed by an organisational review, with three reviewers who attend our offices in person for three days and interview staff and demand to sight evidence.

We are pleased to say that we endured this trial by fire in 2023 and have prevailed. On the whole, the reviewers were very positive of both our work and our quality systems. They have required us to update one of our documents but otherwise support our reaccreditation.

## **10. WE'RE BUILDING OUR REPUTATION**

We live at a time when the motives and methodology of the international aid and development sector is being challenged by the need to come to terms with its colonial past, its racist practices and the clear and present need to transfer power to those who are the focus of the work.

UnitingWorld's highly localised partnership approach and strong relational networks gives us a rare advantage over more traditional models of development NGOs in the current climate. We must leverage this as much as possible.

Our ability to broker relationships and facilitate collaboration will be critical for finding partners, collaborators and co-investors.

We need to be ready to source more funding that flows directly to our partners and doesn't necessarily go through our books. Extending our reach and our impact doesn't always require us to grow financially.

We have been gathering research data on the impact of our work over the last decade that we believe will demonstrate that when development is locally-led and in respectful partnership, we catalyse greater impact than we fund directly. Unplanned spin-offs and tangential growth happen organically. We plan to demonstrate that UnitingWorld's way of working buys more than your money's worth.

We are slowly building up our profile in the aid sector. We are a very small NGO in comparison to giants like WorldVision, Oxfam and Fred Hollows. However, recruiting a Head of Operations has enabled the

National Director to spend more time engaging more widely. The National Director has leveraged her role on the ACFID Board, and UnitingWorld's membership of Micah to do more advocacy in Canberra, including meetings with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Minister for International Development, senior US government/USAID officials and senior DFAT officials.

The ND also serves as Chair of CAN DO (the Church Agencies Network Disaster Operations, an eight member consortium) which has facilitated widespread networking in the Pacific. UnitingWorld has been a partner of choice for the DFAT Office of the Pacific program for church engagement, and several of our advocacy engagements have been influential in shaping policy.

## 11. WE'RE DEVELOPING A NEW STRATEGY FOR COMING DECADE

FY23 is the third and final year of our current strategic plan. Over the course of the coming year, we will be developing a new strategy for the years ahead. The Board has identified the major contextual challenges that the UCA, her church partners and UnitingWorld will have to face. These include the following:

1. Climate change:
  - a. Frequent humanitarian disasters will set back developmental gains.
  - b. More time and money will have to be diverted to responding to disasters.
  - c. Disasters will attract more public fundraising income.
  - d. Disaster resilience will need to be designed into every project.
  - e. Partner communities become displaced.
2. Localisation & Decolonisation
  - a. Strong partnerships and networks with local actors will be an asset.
  - b. More funding will bypass NGOs and go direct to local actors.
  - c. 'Expertise' will become less important for NGOs.
  - d. Brokering will become more useful as an NGO role.
3. Geostrategic shifts
  - a. Internationalism is fracturing across the globe.
  - b. COVID, climate change and conflict is increasing socio-economic fragility.
  - c. India has large youth population and ongoing inequality issues but is more resistant to international aid.
  - d. AusGov's strategy and funding is strongly regional – SE Asia & Pacific.
  - e. Infrastructure development dominates over human development in AusGov strategy.
  - f. 'Securitisation' of aid with military considerations impacts aid strategy.
  - g. Aid directed to refugee resettlement, labour mobility, climate finance/loss & damage grow.
  - h. Traditional development aid declines as resources go to e, f and g.
4. Shrinking civil space
  - a. Authoritarianism is increasing in regional governments.
  - b. Social media is fracturing public discourse and making consensus harder.
5. Increase in displaced peoples.
  - a. Conflict and climate change will increase refugee numbers.
  - b. Climate migration in the Pacific will impact viability of states.
6. Donor support and fundraising.
  - a. Trust in institutions and organised religion will continue to decline.
  - b. Australian donors will suffer compassion fatigue with more local disasters and cost of living pressures.
  - c. UCA membership is likely to continue to decline.
  - d. Act 2 and changes to church polity may impact our governance.



We are currently going through a discernment process and the UnitingWorld Board will approve a new strategic plan at the June 2024 Board meeting. While the strategic plan will focus on the first three years, we anticipate that the strategic focus will remain relevant for longer.

## 12. WE ARE POISED ON A WATERSHED

UnitingWorld is at a moment in time where historical ways of working are under serious threat, and new opportunities are simultaneously opening up. However, UnitingWorld is ultimately an instrument of the Uniting Church, existing to embody and implement the church's missional intent.

How the future unfolds will depend as much on whether the people of the UCA are able to catch the winds of the Spirit into a new age of revival or continue to decline.

We believe that our overseas church partners have much to offer the UCA in prophetic truth that will help us. UnitingWorld will strive at all times to bring this voice back into our church, to inspire, encourage and challenge the UCA, in the hope that it will make a difference.

**Rev Dr Steve Bevis**  
Chair of the UnitingWorld Board

**Dr Sureka Goringe**  
National Director of UnitingWorld

