



Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress

UAICC Report to the 17th Assembly

Parramatta NSW

11 – 16 July 2024

INTRODUCTION:

As you would imagine, a great deal has happened in the life of the UAICC since the 16th Assembly in June 2021.

As for my personal situation following the 16th Assembly, I was formally ordained as a Uniting Church Minister of the Word on 21st July 2021 and then moved from being Interim Chair of UAICC, a position held from March 2020, to being appointed full time Chairperson from 1st March 2024, following an extensive interview process for the next three years.

This is welcome news as Congress seeks to consolidate its presence in the Uniting Church and Synods and to also determine and discern a new way forward for growth and development.

I was formally commissioned into the role of National Chair in Melbourne on the 23rd of May, after a lengthy apprenticeship. I was very grateful to Auntie Roberta Stanley who conducted the commissioning along with the members of the New Executive.

ISSUES THAT HAVE IMPACTED CONGRESS:

Grief and Loss

Since our last gathering as an Assembly in 2021, Congress has farewelled quite a few of our key leaders and members, which if we were to try and name everyone, we would no doubt cause offence by omitting some. We do pay our respect to all those individuals, their families and communities.

However, it is important that we mention a few:

Auntie Lucy Lester: Auntie Lucy had a long-term role in the life of the Uniting Church and the UAICC. She was one of the first members who attended the Elcho Island meetings in 1983, and as the wife of Yami Lester (a man who as a child was blinded by the Maralinga Atomic Bomb tests) had significant ministry throughout the APY Lands and even into her 70's was still visiting Anangu in prison at Port Augusta Jail.

Mr. M Wunungmurra: Mr. Wunungmurra was a long-term Congress and NRCC member. He was a former Chair of NRCC, having served 2 terms and in recent times serving as the Deputy Chair, a position he held up to his passing. In addition, he was also the Chair of Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA), also a position he held until his passing and has served on the board of the Traditional Credit Union.

Ms Lurleen Blackman: Ms Blackman is the wife of former National Administrator, Rev Shayne Blackman who made significant contributions to the life of Congress both within the previous QLD Calvary Presbytery and at the UAICC National level.

Mr. R Hoosen: Mr. Hoosen is a significant loss to the NRCC and the UAICC, but more so to the people of the APY. Mr. Hoosen was known for his strong and committed leadership and his passing has left a massive void in the APY. He was also a former NRCC Chair and at the time of his passing was the Chair of the Central Land Council.

Rev Dr Gondarra: Words cannot express or even do justice to this incredible man. His loss will be felt for years to come with his lifetime achievements being well documented. Rev Dr Gondarra was instrumental in the founding of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and provided visionary leadership to Congress, the Uniting Church and the global Church for over four decades. He was the first Yolŋu minister appointed to a congregation and the first Indigenous Moderator of a Synod.

COVID19

Living with and through the challenges that COVID 19 brought with it, impacted every facet of our lives, including monitoring our movements locally, nationally and internationally. In addition, the debates over to be immunized or not divided the world, particularly as the world experienced the loss of incredible numbers of people who lost their lives because of it and others talked widely of conspiracy theories.

Covid did teach us new skills, particularly the use of technology that allowed us to meet on small or big screens in the comfort of our homes.

We praise the Creator God who cares and sustains us, particularly in time of trial, we are grateful that many within our communities came through the Pandemic relatively unscathed.

UAICC National Conference:

The Congress National Conference was held in Darwin from April 13th – 19th at Nungalinga College, with the theme of “Weaving and Awakening: A Renewal of Faith, Community and the UAICC.”

Although the meeting was smaller in number than usual, all Regions were well represented. We also had a good number of visitors with the General Secretary of the Assembly, President of the UCA, President Elect, Gen Secretary of Victoria, some Moderators, the Director of Uniting Care Australia as well as other Assembly staff from Communications, Frontier Services & ACT2, were all in attendance.

Highlights of the National Conference included:

- The opening worship, which was held at Darwin Memorial church on Larrakia land. We were welcomed on country by Lynette Fejo, daughter of our late Congress minister, Rev. Wali Fejo.
- Two more public events at Darwin Memorial, including a forum on the Uluru Statement with a presentation by Nathan Tyson, and a paper prepared by Anne Patel – Gray about the “Legacy of Justice left by Don Brady and Charles Harris.”
- Bible studies led by Sean Winter on the theme, “Life in Christ on Stolen Land: reading Paul in Australia.”
- A presentation by Ken Sumner on why Congress matters to him, and what questions this raises today.
- Presentations on what it means to be a First Nations Christian, and the relationship of culture with following Jesus in Australia today. Three presentations were made by Maratja Dhamarrandji, Denise Champion and Tim Matton – Johnson, with the last two being made by video and zoom. (These are available for viewing through the UC National Update in the Reconciliation Week edition).
- Worship on the Sunday morning, during which Congress honored three past Chairpersons and an Elder who have died, recognized eight people as life members, and conducted a Closure of Ministry for Rev Garry Dronfield as a formal end to his time as President in March 2020. Members were also invited to light a candle to remember people close to them who had died.
- The Chairpersons were: Pastor Bill Hollingsworth, Rev. Sealin Garlett, Rev. Ronang Garrawurra. The Elder was Rev Dorothy Harris-Gordon, wife of the late Rev. Charles Harris.
- The Life Members were Rev. Dr. Gondarra, Aunty Yanyi Baker, Rev. Bapa Ken Garrawurra, Aunty Mary Anne Coconut, Rev. Dennis Corowa, Rev. Dr. Denise Champion, Uncle Vince Ross and Aunty Marilyn Garlett.
- A presentation and small group discussion on the ACT2 project during which Congress members were invited to consider what new arrangements would best support (i) maximum self-determination, (ii) proper resourcing for Congress’ work, and (iii) a place for Congress in the Church that would give Congress real authority over its own ministry.
- A report from the President, Rev. Sharon Hollis
- A presentation from Rev. James Bhagwan of the Pacific Council of Churches, who shared about the work of the Pacific Churches, and their desire to work in partnership with the UAICC.
- A session on the core values that should shape the life of Congress, which was led by Alison Overeem. The core values suggested as a starting point were self-determination, wholistic evangelism, affirmation of culture, the equality of women and men (and respect for the voice of both), the importance of Indigenous theology and worship, and the centrality of service to the wider community of First Peoples.
- The Assembly Communications team conducting video interviews with Congress members on “Why they love Jesus?”, and “Why they love Congress?” The first three of these interviews were made available in NAIDOC week through the UC National Update.

The Conference Members made the decision not to appoint a Chairperson at the Conference, but instead engage in a process whereby interested people could apply for the position, and

members who were at the conference could vote for the incoming Chairperson by postal ballot, with the close of voting to be at the end of the NRCC meeting in mid-October.

Referendum

For many in the UAICC we were naturally disappointed with the outcome of the 'Voice Referendum', however upon reflection, were encouraged that 40% of Australians voted Yes. We still believe that the invitations that come from the Uluru Statement from the heart is still relevant and continues to invite all Australians to journey together for a better future.

It is with a heartfelt thanks that we offer our sincere appreciation to the wider Church for not just your words but also your actions in supporting the 'Yes' campaign.

Strategic Planning Support Group (SPSG):

It is important to acknowledge the commitment and quality of work that this group, the SPSSG, bring to the table to ensure that the challenges facing the National Congress and the National Executive is followed up promptly and with any recommendations for the National Executive to decide on matters vital to the life of the UAICC and the Uniting Church.

It is important to note that this is not a decision-making group, but it is a group that has been endorsed by the National Executive (with Terms of Reference) to assist in projects or tasks. The most significant, has been the work done to ensure that the National Conference went ahead as planned during a difficult time of coming out of COVID.

We are currently dealing with the following issues:

- NSW/ACT – Acting on behalf of the National Executive to support restructuring and re-instating of the NSW/ACT Regional Council, focusing on a sound and solid governance structure.
- WA – Support for and affirming current membership and the provision of good governance training for all Regional Council members and monitoring and managing other matters vital to the life of UAICC in WA.

Raising Our Tribal Voice Conference

This conference was held in Melbourne from February 5th – 8th at Box Hill. It was run by the School of Indigenous Studies, which is part of the University of Divinity, with the full grandiose title of "Raising our Tribal Voice for Justice: An Indigenous Theological Revolution."

Australian First Nations leaders and theologians mostly presented the conference papers, with just a few Pacifica voices. Papers were presented on a wide variety of topics, with people coming from quite different viewpoints and backgrounds.

Well-known names among the speakers included the conference organizer, Anne Patel – Gray, Rev Dr Garry Deverell, Rev Dr Glen Loughrey, Naomi Wolfe, Professor Stan Grant, and Brooke Prentis. Uniting Church leaders presenting papers included Nathan Tyson, Denise Champion (in a lunch time recorded video), Hohaia Matthews, Katalina Tahaafe – Williams, Lilliani Tahaafe – Williams and myself (as a last-minute replacement speaker).

On the last afternoon students from Nungalinga College led a session of worship and prayer. Allen Edwards from Adelaide gave a moving tribute to the late “Auntie” Dr. Lowitja O’Donoghue. Allen’s mum had grown up at Colebrook Home with Lowitja and her sisters.

Also on the last day, leaders of the churches had the chance to respond to what they heard. We were blessed with our President’s response, which included an acknowledgement that we (the UCA) are not yet an honourable partner in our Covenant.

Following the Conference, I stayed on for another 4 days, with other invited guests to discern what an Indigenous Ecumenical Theological Network would look like.

Partnerships National and International:

I continue to represent Congress on Local, National & International platforms, which can be via zoom or in person. Since the 16th Assembly, I have been privileged to attend and connect with the following on behalf of the UAICC:

Attendance at the **World Council of Churches** in Karlsruhe, Germany 30th August – 8th September 2022. Here I had the privilege of attending **the Pre-Conference Indigenous Assembly** with other First Nation leaders around the world and presented a session relating to UAICC and Indigenous Spirituality. The main **Theme: Restoring Wholeness in Creation:**

- Indigenous Rights and Climate Justice.
- Indigenous Cosmology and Spirituality.
- Land Rights Activism in Context of Indigenous Youth.
- Reconciliation and Unity.



At the WCC with the President Sharon Hollis and General Secretary Colleen Guyer.

- Attendance at **Asian Christian Conference**, Kerala State, India from 28th September – 4th October 2023. It was also an amazing experience to present on behalf of the UAICC and Uniting Church to the ACC on the YES campaign. It was encouraging that the ACC strongly endorsed their support and encouraged the diaspora in Australia to get behind the YES campaign.



Speaking to the ACC regarding the Referendum on behalf of UAICC and the UCA

- **Pacific Conference of Churches 12th General Assembly** Noumea, New Caledonia



I had the pleasure attending along with Sean Weetra the 12th General Assembly in Noumea from 16th to 23rd November 2023. Unfortunately, Sean became very unwell and as a result returned to Australia earlier than expected.

The theme of the Assembly spoke of - **Do Kamo: Christ Transform Us into Your New Humanity**. The message of Transformation was the key presentation point as our Plenary sessions highlighted: Transformation as Ecumenical Fellowship; Transformation as Self-Determination; and Transformation as Stewardship.

I was also able to do a short presentation with a panel of other Pacific Nations on Self Determination and tell the UAICC in our 'Struggle for Justice'.

What impressed me most (along with everything that was impressive), was the structure and organization of the PCC, the incredible Pacifica Youth, the PCC's commitment to excellence in education and Theology and the cry for justice with Climate Change and Sovereignty for the ongoing colonization within the region.

Pacific Church Partnership Advisory Network (PCPAN) 19th – 21 March. UAICC is privileged to be a member of PCPAN and is committed the support and growth of this partnership. Both Alison Overeem and I attended this gathering and connect into conversations impacting the Pacific Nations, the Pacifica Diaspora living in Australia and issues relating to First Nations through the UAICC lens.

The Purpose of PCPAN: Is to act as a coordination, advisory and partnership-building forum for the Australian Government, Pacific and Australian churches and church-based aid and development agencies working in the Pacific region funded by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Further National Responsibilities:

- Ongoing planned meetings with the President of the UCA
- Uniting Care/Uniting First Peoples Network
- Frontier Services
- Standards for Ministries Committee
- VicTas Walking Together Group.
- Attendance at **Uniting Church Synod** meetings (when invited)

In addition, it has been great to work with members from the Northern Synod and Assembly in putting in a joint submission with NRCC on the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Amendment (Economic Empowerment) Bill 2021.

Covenant 30th Anniversary.

We are privileged to be celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the covenant as we meet at the 17th Assembly in Parramatta.

An excerpt from the UCA Preamble to the Constitution reminds us that, in 1985 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Uniting Church in Australia formed the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

In 1988 the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress invited the other members of the Church to join in a solemn act of covenanting before God.

After much struggle and debate, in 1994 the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia discerned God's call, accepted this invitation and entered an ever-deepening covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

This was so that all may see a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

So, the Church celebrates this Covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

The Covenant promised so much to the life of The Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress and the Uniting Church in Australia, however the question remains how far we have come together on this journey.

There are 3 key elements to the Covenant:

1. Central to the Covenant is a **Self-determination**, the right for the UAICC to "live freely in decision making as we minister with first peoples and engage all peoples in theological, cultural and holistic ways".
2. Living **Justly** or **Doing what's Right**. That the Church acknowledges the 'sins of the past' and seeks to do the right thing in acknowledging and making amends.
3. **Reparation** or **Paying the Rent**. Recognizing the wealth of the Church has been built upon stolen lands that were never ceded and were taken by brutality and force.

What is the simplicity of the Covenant?

- 1) Task of the UAICC: 'Take the message of the Good news of Jesus Christ to Aboriginal & Islander People by Aboriginal & Islander People' and 'to go from being a Mission Field to becoming a Mission Force'.
- 2) Task of the Church: To Resource the UAICC (Congress) to adequately fulfil its call to Ministry.

What has happened?

- Synods are swallowing up Regional Councils identity, self-empowerment and self-determination in the administrative minefield of Church governance and infrastructure.
- Some Synods are Controlling and appeared to have returned to the '**old days**' of **Mission Management**, particularly of the UAICC Regional Councils and are destroying the autonomy of the Councils.
- It is evident that there is disinterest and even disrespect of the Covenant – by people who don't know or don't want to know, or maybe have just forgotten it.
- Ministers are not living out their agreement as a part of their Ordination that they will live out the covenant as Ordained Uniting Church Ministers in their ministry settings.
- In saying what I have just outlined, I do know that we have good allies and advocates, however we need more of you to help the UAICC to "**Keep the Fire Burning**".

I firmly believe that we are at a crossroad in our relationship and on behalf of the UAICC Nationally, I call upon the Assembly and the Synods to take a good look at yourselves and to commit to a new conversation with the UAICC, with the challenge to Revive, Realign and Renew the Covenant story.

Newly Formed National Executive

I am pleased to announce the following who make up the National Executive until the next UAICC National Conference:

NRCC: Rev DjwanyDjwany Gondarra and Pastor Jill Doolan. Bapa Rev Ken Garraway represents as our National Elder.

QLD: Rev Roberta Stanley and Sono Leone with support from Kym Korbe.

NSW/ACT: Pastor Tom and Mrs. Stella Sloane

VIC: Rev Will Pickett and Rev Duncan Turuva

TAS: Ms. Alison Overeem and Ms. Ayla Williams

SA: Mr. Jordan Sumner and Mr. Sean Weetra

WA: Rev Robbie Jetta and Rev Mitchell Garlett

NEWS from the REGIONS:

NORTHERN REGION COUNCIL OF CONGRESS (NRCC):

Grief & loss of Rev Dr Gondarra. We have been advised that a State Memorial has been arranged for the 29th of August at 11.30am, at Nungalinya, Darwin.

On a more positive note, I was privileged to attend the Northern Synod and NRCC full Council meeting from third – 10th April in Darwin. It was at the Northern Synod meeting that Janet Staines from Queensland was appointed as the General Secretary for the Northern Synod.

Following the Northern Synod, I attended the NRCC full Council meeting, and it was during this time that I chaired the JNC for the position of Resource Worker for the whole of NRCC. Rev Dr Peter Hobson (the husband of Janet), from Queensland was appointed by the full Council of the NRCC to the position of NRCC Resource Worker.

Also, at the full Council Meeting of the NRCC Rev DjwanyDjwany Gondarra was appointed as the Chairperson for the NRCC for the next 3 years. We thank Jamie Nyaningu for his committed and faithful service to the NRCC as Chairperson for the previous 3 years.

Please pray for this new beginning for the Northern Synod with the appointment of the General Secretary and the NRCC Resource worker. I particularly call for the whole of the Church to uphold **DjwanyDjwany** as he not only navigates through the position of NRCC Chairperson, but more so as he works through his own grief with the loss of his father the late Rev Dr Gondarra and as he seeks to support and encourage his family, community, other members of the NRCC and the Northern Synod.

We have unfortunately received the resignation of APY Resource Worker Ben Howland. Ben and his wife Emily were doing a wonderful job working with the communities in the APY, in particular the Anangu Area Ministry Council, however an expanding family has meant they have needed to focus their attention on family matters and so we wish Ben, Emily, Solomon, Clancy and the new addition to come God's blessing and thank them for their efforts in the APY.

QUEENSLAND

There has been much to celebrate in QLD with the re-establishing of the QLD Regional Council. Congress National is indebted to the commitment and work that past Moderator Rev Andrew Gunton did in supporting and journeying with UAICC QLD and to Rev Bruce Moore for continuing that journey.

As a result of all the challenging work, the QLD Regional Council is now functioning and we are proud to announce that Kym Korbe, previously with Uniting Care QLD, has been appointed to the role of Executive Officer for UAICC Qld. I also wish to acknowledge the work and commitment of Rev Auntie Roberta Stanley who is now the appointed UAICC Chair of Congress QLD.

There has also been more sorry business in Queensland. Our former chair of the Napranum Church, Aunty Florence Charger passed away on Boxing Day. Her funeral was held in late January.

An important book on the history of First Nations ministry in Queensland was released early this year. It celebrates the life and ministry of Pastor Don Brady. It is called "Yalanya: That's the Way It Is." Pastor Don was a minister in the Methodist church in the 1960's & 1970's. Pastor Don had a significant influence on those who followed him in the founding of Congress such as the Rev. Charles Harris.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Oodnadatta Church: The builders were hoping to have the new Oodnadatta Church completed around Anzac Day. Unfortunately, due to many unforeseen challenges, we have had to postpone the celebration of the opening to a date yet to be advised.

Rev Uncle Ken Sumner has been appointed to continue to lead Congress ministry in SA. The four ministry centres in SA continue to function and operate in line with the SA commitment to growing UAICC within the state.

Murray Lands Ministry: Rev Hohaia Matthews has been appointed to the role of Murray Lands Minister and is providing ministry support to the people of Murray Bridge and the surrounding areas.

Ms Melissa Sumner is the Children's and Youth Worker in Murray Bridge and is supporting Rev Matthews as they provide ministry and support to the Ngarrindjeri people in the area.

We offer our Congratulations to Rev Dr 'Aunty' Denise Champion for being awarded the South Australian NAIDOC Scholar of the Year. A proud Adnyamathanha woman Aunty Denise is a significant thought-leader in the conversation between her people's ancient wisdom and that of the Christian faith. The first Aboriginal woman to be ordained in South Australia, she was awarded a Doctor of Divinity (Honoris Causa) in 2020 by the Adelaide College of Divinity in recognition of her scholarly and service contributions. She is a gifted storyteller who weaves her people's 50,000-year-old Muda with contextual and faith issues today, helping people to discern their lessons for our relationship with the environment, our relationship with others, and our relationship with the spiritual realm. We extend our hearty congratulation to Rev Dr 'Aunty' Denise on behalf of all in the Uniting Church.

VICTORIA/TASMANIA

VIC: After an incredible amount of work by Greg Crowe, Rachael Kronberger and members of the VIC Oversight committee, along with Uncle Will Pickett, the UAICC National Executive have **endorsed the re-formation of the Victorian UAICC Regional Council**. This is wonderful news for celebration.

The Regional Council will now have four First Nations people on their committee which is a wonderful result. This includes Will Pickett, the minister at Bendigo who is now the new Chair of the Victorian Regional Council.

In February I was able to speak at a Q & A with the President at Pilgrim Theological College in Melbourne, to welcome new students on the topic, "What does it mean to do theology and ministry on stolen land?"

After well over 25 years of UAICC commitment to the Narana Creations Cultural Centre in Geelong, and after much conversation and discussion, the VIC UAICC Regional Council has negotiated a hand over of Narana to the traditional owners, the Wathaurong Co-operative.

Any financial transactions (sale or lease) will be re-invested to sustain and support the ongoing work of UAICC Victoria.

TAS: Tasmania continues to move forward positively with its focus being on: Ongoing Mission and Ministry; Governance and Self Determination; Whole of Church Sustainability and Future Directions.

I was privileged to have participated in Cultural Awareness and an outreach to Bruny Island from 16th June to 21st June. The Bruny Island experience has opened opportunities to partner with Weeta Poona

It is without a doubt that the highlight of my trip, was the Cultural Awareness Program conducted by Dewayne Everett t-Smith, that unfolded the Tasmanian Story. It reminded us of the Palawa story,

A major issue of concern is a significant reduction in funding which impacts on how well the Region can manage its current objectives.

NEW SOUTH WALES

NSW continues to be without a Regional Council, with ongoing challenges for the NSW UAICC Task Group as it seeks to find a productive way forward for the re-establishment of the NSW Regional Council.

The Ministry Centers continue to impact their communities in Wellington and Condobolin. Broken Hill is still a necessary Ministry Centre and requires a new proposal for funding for this for this ministry center to re-start.

There are still great ministry needs for the greater Sydney area, the Norther Rivers and many other parts of NSW that continue to contain the largest population of Indigenous people in the country.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

WA is maintaining a commitment to two ministry centers, with Mitchell Garlett at Maaman "O" Miya (Coolbellup) and Uncle Robbie Jetta at Waroona.

WA is hampered by limited funds, however, is receiving solid support and encouragement from the WA Synod. It is evident that National Congress will need to continue to work alongside Mitchell, Uncle Robbie and the WA Congress members to achieve appropriate governance training and strategic planning,

The Bernaning Kwert Institute (BKI) continues to provide major challenges for Congress, Synod and the BKI members.

Development of a National Strategy for Good Governance and Leadership

The newly formed National Executive had its first executive meeting from 24th – 26th May this year in Melbourne.

As well as gathering together to share reports we spent time working with a governance and strategic planning consultant, to start work on developing plans for the future work and ministry of Congress. Part of this is a new way forward in governance and leadership training.

We look forward to the National Executive developing these plans in future meetings, and seeing how they might also be implemented across the Regions.

The following pictures show our work in developing our purpose, priorities and plans

OUR PURPOSE: "For First Peoples to be autonomous and live freely in decision making as we minister with First Peoples and engage all peoples in theological, culturally safe, and holistic ways."

OUR PRIORITIES & PLANS

PRINCIPLES
of the National Executive

- Many Voices Heard
- Support & Safe Spaces
- Respectful Debate
- Focus on Good Practice
- Honesty & Transparency



PRACTICES
of the National Executive

- Operating Manual
- Operating Calendar
- Documents & Reports
- Communications
- Rhythms & Reviews

Our purpose: "For First Peoples to be autonomous and live freely in decision making as we minister with First Peoples and engage all peoples in theological, culturally safe, and holistic ways."



**Rev Mark Kickett
UAICC National Chair
17th Assembly**

July 2024