

# The Assembly

*the National Council for the Uniting Church*

*Peter Bentley provides a brief comment about who goes to the UCA Assembly and what happens.*

**T**he 15th Triennial Assembly of the Uniting Church National Assembly will meet in Melbourne at Box Hill Town Hall from 8-14 July. The President-Elect (to be installed as President) is Dr Deidre Palmer (a past Moderator of the SA Synod) and her theme is ***Abundant Grace Liberating Hope***.

The Assembly is made of members primarily elected or appointed by the Synods and Presbyteries. The number of voting members at an Assembly has varied, but for 2018, it could be about 260. It is a smaller gathering than the larger Synod meetings, though Synods are also changing with decreasing Synod attendance. The base of membership is equal numbers of ordained members and confirmed lay members, so only a small number of ordained members will ever be a member, and proportionally this represents a very small group of lay people. Membership is a serious task and all other members should pray for those attending the Assembly.

There are non-voting members of the Assembly, but for this article the focus will be on voting members. The breakdown for voting membership is outlined in Regulation 3.3.8. Each presbytery technically appoints one ordained member and one lay member, though because some Synods (SA, WA) have adopted a one Presbytery and effectively a one Synod model, compensation has been provided so those Synods maintain their overall numbers. Victoria and Tasmania are now combined as one Synod and thus have a joint membership.

## A comment on the membership

The membership numbers for Assembly bear no relation

to contemporary confirmed membership or even attendance as these figures are difficult to determine in any case.

I believe there needs to be a substantial re-working of the make-up to help the Assembly be truly representative of the church. This is different from the idea that the Assembly should be made up of 'representatives' as it is a distinct council making its own decisions. One of the difficulties for the Assembly is its increasingly distant connection to the local congregation.

Synod numbers should be revised so that the Synods like Victoria (now with Tasmania) that are much smaller now, can be provided an Assembly membership that reflects their actual present attendance/membership of the Uniting Church.

Presbyteries could appoint 2 lay people. This would help to broaden out the church employed/quasi-ordained/professional members that are elected as lay members now. There was never a thought at union that the lay members of the national decision-making body would also be employed by a council or part of the church.

## What does the Assembly do?

There will be worship, contact and greetings from ecumenical guests and many proposals and reports from Assembly agencies, other councils and Assembly members. For its responsibilities, I still believe it is best to quote from the foundational uniting document: Basis of Union Paragraph 15 (e).

*"...It has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline, including the promotion of the Church's mission, the establishment of standards of theological training and reception of ministers from other communions, and the taking of further measures towards the wider union of the Church. It makes*

*the guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils. It is obligatory for it to seek the concurrence of other councils, and on occasion of the congregations of the Church, on matters of vital importance to the life of the Church."*

## Decision-Making?

The Assembly will follow the Manual for Meetings. As with any meeting, the co-ordination of the meeting arrangements is connected to smaller groups, and for the UCA Assembly the Facilitation Committee and the Business Committee are the prime committees. The Business Committee will essentially control the agenda and will work with presenters about the timing of presentations, and also with the Facilitation Committee about the re-arrangement and presentation of proposals. Major matters will be introduced in a plenary session and then considered initially in the Assembly groups. Marriage will be one of these matters. A summary of the views of each group on the matter/proposals is provided to the Facilitation Committee and the committee collates material from the groups and reports to an information plenary session at the Assembly. This process provides the bases for consideration of which proposals proceed to formal plenary consideration and/or the possible re-arrangement or amalgamation of proposals or parts of proposals to form one new proposal. Prayer for good governance and wisdom for those involved in the control of the Assembly process would be appreciated.

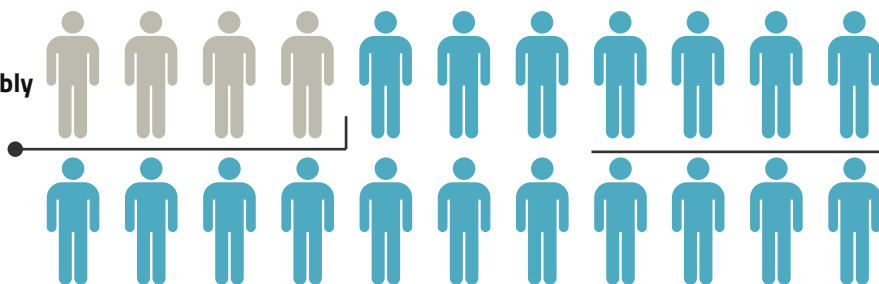
*Peter Bentley was a member of the perhaps now infamous 10th Assembly held in Melbourne in 2003 (remember Resolution 84?), as well as a keen observer at Assembly meetings in 1994 and 1997 (attending as an Assembly staff-person), and 2000, 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2015 (for personal interest or the Reforming Alliance or ACC).*



## Who can vote?

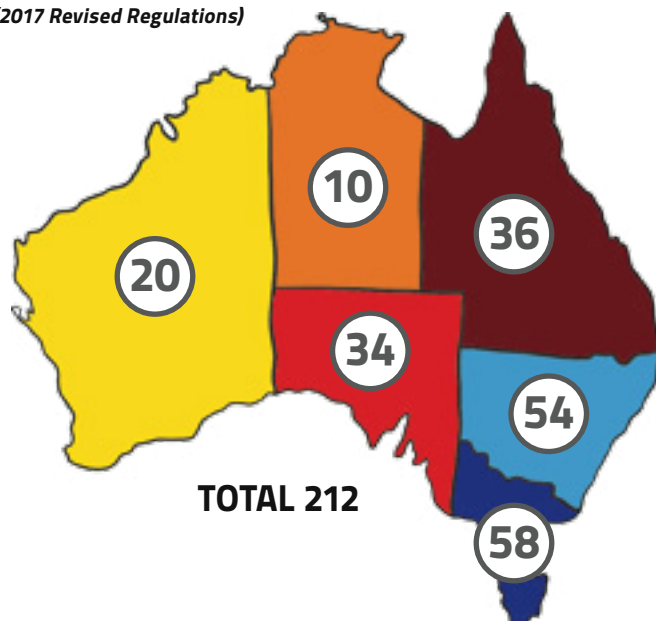
### Officers of the Assembly are voting members

- President
- General Secretary
- ex-President
- President-elect

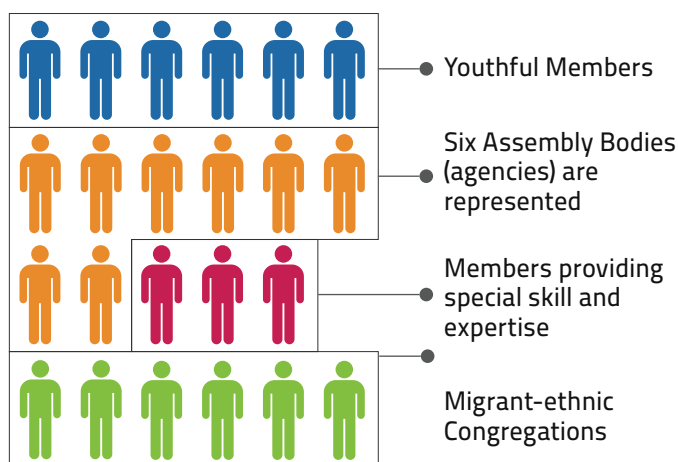


Two officers of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and 16 UAICC members.

### The breakdown for Synod/Presbytery membership is interesting (2017 Revised Regulations)



### As well as the Assembly officers and UAICC members, the Assembly Standing Committee appoints the following (Note: numbers are from 14th Assembly 2015)



## What are the Recommendations on Marriage going to the 15th Assembly?

For the full report see the 15th Assembly website:  
This extract is from page 61:  
**FIFTEENTH ASSEMBLY REPORT**  
- **B23 MARRIAGE AND SAME-GENDER RELATIONSHIPS 62**

That the Assembly resolve:

(a) To note that the Working Group on Doctrine Report documents a continuing and faithful struggle on matters relating to sexuality and marriage spanning several decades in the Uniting Church; and that the issue of same-gender marriage is one about which many Uniting Church people faithfully hold strong and at times mutually exclusive convictions;

(b) To adopt the following policy statement on marriage:

Marriage is a gift God has given to humankind for the well-being of the whole human family. For Christians, marriage is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of two people to live together for life. It is intended to be the mutually faithful life-long union of two people expressed in every part of their life together. In marriage two people seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship, experience the fruitfulness of family, contribute to the well-being of society and strengthen the mission of the church.

(c) (i) To affirm that Ministers and celebrants authorised by the Uniting Church in Australia may exercise freedom of conscience with regards to accepting requests to celebrate marriages, including same-gender marriages, according to the rites of the Uniting Church in Australia;

(ii) To request the Assembly Officers to direct the appropriate

Assembly body to prepare an authorised Marriage Liturgy suitable for opposite-gender and same-gender couples for approval by the Standing Committee at its August 2018 meeting;

(iii) To note that Church Councils:

- have the authority under Regulation 4.4.1 to permit or refuse the use of any property held for the use of the Congregation for same-gender weddings;
- do not have the authority to require a Minister in placement in their Congregation to, or prevent a Minister in their Congregation from, celebrating same-gender marriages.

(d) To adopt the following affirmation:

### 1. Marriage

Marriage is a gift of God, at the heart of human society and culture. In the life-long union of marriage people can know the joy of God in

## Soaring Like Eagles

Isaiah 40:31

*“Those who wait upon the Lord will find new strength,  
they will soar high on wings like eagles.”*

I like to think of these words as very personal.

*“I will wait on the Lord and will find new strength,”*

*“I will soar high on wings like eagles.”*

God recognises us as His personal ones.

*“I have called you by name, and you are mine.”*

Every Sunday we address Him with the words *“Our Father”*.

For us this is our personal request, our deliberate action.

We must wait upon the Lord in anticipation  
and we will not be disappointed.

We must believe that He will supply us with  
*“new strength”* day by day.

This is not about sustaining our human bodies.

It is God who supplies us with *“new strength”*.

Then we can expect to *“soar high on wings like eagles”*.

Every day is a new day

and for that we need *“new strength.”*

The writers of the Old Testament encourage us  
to experience new lives as free as the soaring eagles.

Did you know that the eagle is the only bird  
that can look into the brightness of the sun  
and not be blinded?

The Lord is waiting to supply our weak spiritual needs.

All we have to do is to

*“wait upon the Lord”* just for a few moments each morning.

We forget that we are human beings  
but rather children of God and soar with Him,  
feed on Him and grow in Him.

*Reverend Bob Imms is a member of the  
ACC Southern Cluster in Tasmania.*

## The Assembly

*from pg 5...*

whose image we are made, male and female. In giving themselves to each other in love, two people reflect the love of Christ for his Church.

In marriage, two people are called to live together faithfully, and to love each other with respect, tenderness and delight. They share the life of a wider family and community and may be entrusted with the gift and care of children. They help to shape a society in which human dignity and happiness may flourish and abound.

Marriage is not to be entered into lightly or selfishly, but responsibly and in the love of God. It is a gift of God and a way of life that all people should honour.

### 2. Separation, Divorce and Re-marriage

An inability to sustain the marriage relationship breaks the commitment to be together for life and may be painful for the couple, the children in their care, as well as for parents, friends and the Church community.

In cases of the irretrievable breakdown of marriage, the Church acknowledges that divorce may be the only creative and life giving direction to take.

The Church has a responsibility to:

a) care for people, including children, through the trauma of the ending of a marriage;

b) help people where appropriate to grieve, repent, grow in self understanding, receive affirmation, grace and forgiveness;

c) support them as they hear God's call for new life.

The grace and healing of God are available to people who are divorced, which may free them to marry again.