

Uniting Church: still seeking consensus by agreement

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The Ninth (Triennial) Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), held in Adelaide, 15-22 July, gathered nearly 300 members of the church from around the country.

It was hard to believe that three years had passed since the last Assembly in Perth. That Assembly had been a time of significant debate and extensive publicity due to the sexuality report, and several personal 'coming-outs'.

This Assembly in contrast was quite subdued, with perhaps one of the most controversial campaigns in the lead up to the Assembly being the competition to name the rose chosen to mark the Uniting Church's Silver Anniversary in 2002. The winning name was Gift of Grace.

The Assembly did witness some significant changeovers, especially in the Standing Committee, with a range of new members being elected. (This is the committee which meets between full Assembly meetings and carries on-going responsibility for administration.)

Also, a new General Secretary of the Assembly was appointed, Reverend Terence Corkin, who is presently Presbytery Minister with a region of congregations in the Central West of NSW. This is a significant change as the previous Secretary, Reverend Gregor Henderson, had been in office since 1988 - over half the life of the Uniting Church - and has been a significant figure in the wider church scene, particularly at the Australian Council of Churches and its successor the National Council of Churches in Australia.

The new President of the UCA, Reverend Professor James Haire, a theologian from Queensland (pictured), was installed. He will be in office until July 2003. Professor Haire received a significant amount of coverage at the Assembly because of his long-standing missionary links with parts of the

church in the islands around Indonesia (he had been a missionary in Halmahera for 13 years) where there are presently major on-going struggles and extended violence against the local people, especially in Ambon.

A personally significant moment for Professor Haire was the signing of the partnership agreements with the Protestant churches of Halmahera and the Maluku, and he took the opportunity to stress that "this was not some flippant gesture of ecclesiastical tourism" and to make the point that partnership could be very costly, especially when we are called to help.

The Assembly also continued its long work on reconciliation, endorsing "the idea of a legislated process of negotiation between the leaders of the indigenous and non-indigenous peoples of Australia towards a formal agreement (treaty) dealing with the 'unfinished business' of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's process for reconciliation".

The President-elect for the three-year period from July 2003 is Reverend Dr Dean Drayton, a former Moderator (State Leader) in NSW, and widely known for his mission and evangelism focus and promotion of projects such as the National Church Life Survey.

Overall though, judging from the reasonable level of muted frustration at the Assembly that I heard (not publicly of course, as most Uniting Church people have learned that it is better to at least appear loving and gracious on the floor), a major part of the difficulty for the Assembly this time was actually working out what was the critical business for such a meeting: Was it to -

- * spend most of the time hearing from overseas visitors?
- * resolve critical policy issues in the church?
- * hear reports from the Assembly committees and agencies, and then be left with little or no time to ask questions or adequately discuss their proposals?
- * debate proposals from the other councils of the church or perhaps refer them to the Standing Committee to consider?

Hanging over all these questions was the eternal procedural process and sometimes debate, prompted by the consolidation of the consensus method, but also by occasional moves to formal debate.

A question kept coming back to me: How do you make decisions on difficult and perhaps critical areas of business or church affairs using the consensus

procedures, or perhaps more to the point, can you? On this matter I had the same impression as I wrote after the Perth Assembly in the September 1997 issue of National Outlook.

As usual on matters concerned with sexuality, the Assembly resolved not to consider further proposals at the Assembly, except for a statement on Unity and Diversity and resolutions requesting councils of the church to take steps to ensure that vilification and harassment are dealt with (and for guidelines to assist councils to do so).

One visitor, Reverend Majory MacLean of the Church of Scotland commented:

"There was little blood shed over the question of diversity, and yet the outcome seems to have left people on all sides and in all situations unsure for what to expect."

To finish, I can do no better than quote Reverend Ross Oliver, Executive Secretary of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa who responded to the Assembly's greeting by providing a greeting in verse:

Consensus is nice,
A truly uniting device,
But not without price!
To agree is the medium, yet mind the tedium
Of reports to be received.
By objections we're deceived,
Round in circles to go,
Interrupting the proper flow.
This way and that, analysing.
That way and this, paralysing.
But Saturday's coming. Then at last
Every resolution's unanimously passed.