

The road to the assembly

Peter Bentley begins a series of reflections and comments in the lead-up to the next Assembly.

The 14th Triennial Assembly of the Uniting Church National Assembly will meet in Perth from 12- 18 July 2015. The location is Winthrop Hall at the University of Western Australia and Trinity Residential College and Conference Centre. The President Elect is Stuart McMillan (from the Northern Synod) and his theme is Hearts on Fire!

The Assembly is made of members primarily elected or appointed by the Synods and Presbyteries. Very few people in the the Uniting Church will ever be a member and membership is a serious and somewhat onerous task and all other members of the UCA should pray for those attending the Assembly. I was a member of the perhaps now infamous 10th Assembly held in Melbourne in 2003 (remember Resolution 84?).

The numbers at an Assembly meeting vary, but many Assemblies have been ½ to 1/3 of some Synod meetings (though this is changing due to falling numbers attending Synods). The breakdown for membership is outlined fully in Regulation 3.3.8, but a summary is:

- one Minister and one confirmed lay member appointed by each Presbytery;
- Ministers and confirmed lay members appointed by the Synods, the total number appointed by each Synod being equal to the number appointed by its Presbyteries;
- ex-officio members – officers of the Assembly, UAICC
- and ‘other members’ – people appointed to fulfil certain categories.

The breakdown for Synod membership is interesting (2012 Regulations):

SYNOD	No.
NSW & ACT	54
NORTHERN	10
QUEENSLAND	36
SOUTH AUSTRALIA	38
VICTORIA & TASMANIA	58
WESTERN AUSTRALIA	20

What does the Assembly do?

The Assembly will receive and consider proposals and reports from other councils and agencies of the Uniting Church.

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.”

Political speak

Any member who has attended a council of the church will know that there are terms and phrases that have taken on their own life and meaning. Before the 11th Assembly held in Brisbane in 2006, I provided a series of comments on political speak in the church. It is timely to re-visit some of the terminology and ideas again, some of which have now become part of the Uniting Church language.

Political Speak 1. “We need to live in the messy middle”

One of the main problems with the idea of the ‘messy middle’ is that very few people in church leadership actually live there, and some have not even visited the place, even though they may say it is a great place to be. Most people take sides, even if they say they do not. I was intrigued when a minister told me that he loved being in the ‘messy middle’, because I had noted that he had been more than happy to endorse a particularly

one-sided liberal proposal on sexuality at a Synod meeting. I believe it is more consistent for people who call others to live in the ‘messy middle’ to lead the way in abstaining in any debate on matters of defined policy, and certainly take no active part in the promotion of the more liberal alternatives in matters of sexual standards. Surely the only path for ‘messy middle’ people when confronted by proposals that call for a categorical position is to abstain. (*ReForming Newsletter* No. 11 December 2005)

Political Speak 2. “We (‘the liberal side’) do not caucus!”

An interesting reaction to evangelical gatherings for prayer, support and information over the last two years has been the response – “how dare you”, usually coupled with “we do not do these things”. One could probably argue that the liberal response is at least partly true, because when you have so much power you don’t need to overtly caucus.

If you already start with 20-25% of the votes at major councils of the church because of the number of paid employee representatives and co-options, then you have an excellent starting point for the first decision-making process.

When you add the present system of appointments which has a tendency to produce an ever-increasing theologically-liberal orientation as one moves toward the Assembly meeting, then you have an excellent foundation for directing the whole decision-making process.

In reality, however, many of the ‘theologically liberal’ members and groups in the church constantly caucus. It is sometimes termed ‘having coffee’, other times it is ‘a sharing meeting’, and some times it is ‘worship’. Rarely is a term such as ‘political meeting’ used, but the nature of politics makes the caucus a constant reality because of the experience and orientation of many overtly ‘theologically liberal’ members of the church toward political life. Everyone caucuses, and if you think you don’t then, you are in power. (From *ReForming Newsletter* No. 12, March 2006.)