

Adelaide scoreboard: UCA's 13th assembly

PETER BENTLEY reports on the National Assembly

15-21 July 2012.

It is difficult to summarise a week-long event with as many activities and proposals as the Assembly and for short reports on each matter discussed it is best to look at the news section on the 13th Assembly website: <http://www.assembly2012.uca.org.au> Members can also refer to my blog posted on the ACC website.

The Assembly and ACC were blessed to have the Liverpool UC ministry of prayer team led by Rev Anne Hibbard based at Maughan Uniting Church in the city.

Opening Service

The opening service on Sunday Night July 15 revealed the new UCA Assembly President, Rev. Professor Andrew Dutney in a fuller way. The President took as his text: John 10:10b-16. The focus was more of a reflection on the UCA, taking into account some of the issues in the church today, and key features or elements of the UCA (highlighting the Basis of Union of course given Andrew Dutney's substantial publications in this area), including consideration of his personal involvement in introducing staff in the large and developing social and community sector to the Uniting Church.

One key aspect of the President's address referred to data from the 2011 National Church Life Survey (the Assembly had been able to obtain advance information). Denominations often have specific questions in the survey and among the UCA questions was one asking members to choose three options from among a large number of suggestions about what they liked about the UCA. He highlighted the largest option chosen: 71% of Uniting Church attendees most valued its "inclusiveness of all types of people", though it is difficult to know what each member meant



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when they chose this. Certainly one could not hold this statistic captive to a certain theological perspective as I have always commented that most ACC members endorse the idea of an inclusive church, though they do not endorse certain practices that some UCA members may endorse.

Andrew's sermon, while short, raised a number of interesting questions for me:

What does inclusiveness mean in a post-modern context?

How strong really is the continuing ecumenical connection and focus in a denomination that is facing post-denominational questions and also in some ways sees itself as a leader in an institutional church scene, and yet seemingly also does not want to publicly say it is also the best church, but may perhaps imply it sometimes?

What is the status and place of the Uniting Church in the wider ecumenical scene?

What practical issues arise from the discussion about the identity of the Uniting Church in a post-modern context, especially in relation to promoting its ethos or key features (Or its DNA - the term Past-President Alistair Macrae highlighted in his retiring address).

What are the key or central elements for the UCA? Does UCA understanding or perception vary between members in leadership and members in many of our congregations, especially in this increasingly post-denominational context?

Does the Uniting Church want to become more of a movement, or perhaps even an association of community and faith-based groups?

A fuller reflection on Andrew's sermon will be provided on the website in the future, but he has certainly prompted discussion and his address is available on the 13th Assembly website.

Marriage

Sexuality and Marriage issues were keenly anticipated, even if they did not have a significant public profile and came onto the agenda late in the program: Thursday afternoon (19th July). Before the debate started a greeting was presented from the President of the Lutheran Church, Rev Mike Semmler, and there was comment from the UCA dialogue Co-Chair, Rev Dr Anna Grant-Henderson. These comments helpfully set out what issues were before the UCA in the world of dialogue and

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meaningful relations with another denomination.

The marriage proposals were considered in numerical order based on receipt, with the arrangements being an introduction of the proposal, then questions and comments. The President clearly outlined that no decisions were to be made at this session and the facilitation group was 'charged' with collecting comments in order to bring a report to the next session.

The proposal from the Presbytery of Port Phillip West Presbytery (No. 31 -Developing a UCA position on same-gender marriage) was presented by Rev Dr Avril Hannah-Jones who argued (along with other points) that while there was ecumenical concern about this matter, it was less because the key debate in the area of ordination and same-gender relationships had already been held in our church. The ordering of the church was highlighted above marriage.

An amendment was proposed by another member to add 'and Uniting Network', to the groups who would consult on the matter. The rationale read "We could not, nor should we, make theological decisions about our indigenous, multicultural, female, ministry candidates and others without specific reference to others. We must ensure such consultation is made with our gay and lesbian members."

For the Presbytery of South Moreton (Proposal 43), Rev Lulu Senituli presented a brief message of faith first, outlining the need for compassion in a struggle we all shared, and highlighted the need to have clarity with regard to what we believe as a church, saying that it was important our pastoral response is consistent with truth. The seconder said it was necessary to reaffirm our understanding of marriage because the UnitingJustice submission on same-sex marriage had raised some doubts about what the UCA believed.

The General Secretary Rev Terence Corkin defended the church's public position on marriage arguing that statements had been made, but that the media had not highlighted them in a public way. Debate on this aspect did not continue.

Proposal 46 from the Presbytery of Tasmania which focussed on the role that the Basis of Union should have in preparation of a discussion paper



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on same-sex relationships raised a few questions about its intent and focus, and during discussion also perhaps unwittingly revisited a previous debate about the nature and authority of the Basis of Union.

In general discussion Past-President and General Secretary Gregor Henderson commented that all of the proposals had issues or concerns, but all had elements that could be helpful if worked into a single proposal. It was clear to me from the response of cards shown that this approach had sympathy.

The next day (Friday 20th July), the facilitation group brought a proposal to the Assembly based on the proposals already received. Proposal 71 was entitled: Discussion Paper on Marriage. The wording spoke to a change of emphasis and the President's 'summing up' of where the Assembly was at, outlined his belief that there were two main points:

- Acknowledging the UCA position on marriage
- The importance of having a conversation

Debate started again after 4 pm on Friday 20th July, and continued until the dinner break, and then resumed at about 7.45 pm. The line-up to speak was considerable at times and the debate went back and forth, initially on the meaning or helpfulness of certain words proposed to highlight the current UCA position on marriage (e.g., reaffirm – which had been used in the new proposal 71, affirm, remind, acknowledge).

It was clear that the Assembly was going to make a decision that night as the proceedings moved past the normal closing time for the night session and other business was not considered at the session.

Avril Hannah-Jones indicated she

would have withdrawn the proposal she had introduced (Proposal 31), if she still could have done so. She also seemed to indicate that she had underestimated the present mood of the church, or at least the Assembly, and put the view that the church was not at the place to have the consultation she had envisaged. My reading of the direction of Proposal 31 was to lead the church toward same-gender marriage, or to introduce another way of blessing and celebrating life-long faithful same-gender relationships.

The Past-President in speaking to the discussion and agreeing with the proposal to acknowledge and begin a discussion, suggested that the Holy Spirit may be leading us to a third way – a new place we do not know yet.

Agreement (not consensus) was eventually reached, though it was almost unanimous.

The full text of the proposal is printed on the next page, but it was very helpful to have the Assembly acknowledge the current position of the UCA on marriage. In the mention of specific bodies, councils and groups to specifically receive the paper from the Doctrine Working Group, the ACC was introduced into the mix of groups to be part of the process. This was not included at the instigation of the ACC (obviously as ACC was not part of the Assembly), though one ACC member did also comment on ACC involvement at one stage. The Doctrine Working group will receive and summarise responses and bring recommendations to the November 2014 Standing Committee for an eventual report to the 14th Assembly, which will be held in WA in 2015.

The Retiring President's address

In his retiring address, the Past-President, Rev Alistair Macrae

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delivered a very wide-ranging and substantial reflection on his time as President highlighting some of the significant areas of ministry that have developed, and issues that the church has faced and is facing and signs of hope. It is worth reading his full address. Alistair was thanked for his Presidency and committed to the continuing care of the Presbytery of Port Phillip West. I found it interesting that Alistair did not address marriage or sexuality issues in his report. It is worth noting that Rev Alistair Macrae will be the new chair of the Assembly Working Group on Doctrine, taking on the role past-President.

Agency reports

There were not as many proposals from agencies as in previous Assemblies. Among proposals approved, was a resolution to engage Uniting Church congregations and faith communities in a shared season of teaching and learning about the Christian faith and discipleship during 2014. A paper from Relations with Other Faiths, *Friendship in the Presence of Difference: Christian Witness in Multifaith Australia* was received and will be drawn upon for further

use in developing resources. There were some questions about the meaning and use of 'common spiritual language' at some points, but for most people, its status as a paper being received and not adopted was enough for the resolution to proceed. The statement, *One Body, Many Members - Living faith and life cross-culturally* (from the Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Ministry) aims to help UCA members to actively live in a healthy cross-cultural church community.

Indigenous relationships

There was a significant focus on indigenous matters and relationship with the UAICC, with the Assembly establishing a working party to evaluate and continue the covenanting process. Assembly agreed to take further action supporting opposition to the Stronger Futures legislation. Assembly members held a lunchtime prayer vigil on the steps of the South Australian Parliament following a resolution that called for a week of prayer and fasting, culminating in a vigil at Parliament House, Canberra. Presbyteries are encouraged to send at least two representatives and other Christian churches will be invited.

Special Events, the Cato Lecture

There were also special sessions or events at night focusing on the UCA and its relationship to the congress (Monday night), and the Korean church (Tuesday), with the Uniting Church in Australia and the Presbyterian Church of Korea celebrating 120 years of partnership and mission. The Cato Lecture was presented by Dr Kirsteen Kim who provided an overview of the changing philosophy and nature of world mission since Edinburgh 1910, though I thought an opportunity was missed to directly evaluate and critique the different theological underpinnings that have developed.

Appointments

The 13th Assembly reappointed Rev. Terence Corkin as General Secretary of the Assembly until 31 December 2015.

President-elect: Stuart McMillan was elected President-elect of the Assembly [term: 2015-2018], following the second ballot. Pastor McMillan and former moderator Victorian-Tasmanian Moderator Rev Jason Kioa were the two nominees to go through to the second round.

Stuart McMillan is the 17th Moderator of the Northern Synod. He and his wife Ros (11th Moderator of the Northern Synod) are the only husband and wife to have both held the position of Moderator.

Pastor McMillan will be the 14th President when installed, the first President from the Northern Synod, the third lay person (the others being Sir Ronald Wilson - WA and Dr Jill Tabart - Tasmania), and the 13th male President.

It was difficult to see a clear candidate from the initial five nominees, as they all 'represented' different areas in the life of the church, and different Synods. From my previous study of Presidents (*The Magnificent Seven*, Church Heritage. March 1996), there were certainly key elements that people looked for in voting (such as being a Moderator), but there are many other factors, and it is difficult to know the mind of Assembly members.

I see Stuart's election as an affirmation of the Covenant and highlighting the relationship Congress as his relationship with Aboriginal and Islander people was a centrepiece in his presentation.

Peter Bentley

The Marriage resolution

The Assembly resolved:

1. To acknowledge that the current position on marriage is set out in Assembly Minute 97.31.12
2. noting the desire for respectful conversation within the diverse community of the Church, and the current public debate about same-gender marriage, to ask the Doctrine Working Group, after appropriate consultation across the Church and with ongoing liaison with the Standing Committee:

- to prepare a discussion paper on the theology of marriage within (the) Uniting Church, and explore its implications for public covenants for same-gender relationships;
- to circulate the paper widely, and specifically to UAICC National Committee, synods, Chairpersons of National Conferences, presbyteries, UAICC Regions, Uniting Network, The Assembly of Confessing Congregations, congregations, agencies and institutions of the Uniting Church, requesting responses to

the Working Group by a date to be determined by the Standing Committee; and to summarise responses and bring recommendations to the Standing Committee by November 2014, to enable the Standing Committee to bring a report to the 14th Assembly in 2015.

Note that this is an interim draft.

Reference

(extract from) 97.31.12 to approve the following policy Statement on Marriage:

"The Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia declares that 1. Marriage
Marriage for Christians is the freely given consent and commitment in public and before God of a man and a woman to live together for life. It is intended to be the mutually faithful lifelong union of a woman and man expressed in every part of their life together. In marriage the man and the woman seek to encourage and enrich each other through love and companionship.