

General Secretary

1. A FASCINATING AND FULFILLING TWELVE YEARS

1.1 My first thought in presenting this, my final written report to the Assembly as General Secretary, is to give thanks to God and to the Uniting Church for allowing me the privilege of serving for 12 years in this key position. It is a demanding role, with plenty of work, big responsibilities, lots of absence from home, the danger of foot-in-mouth at a church meeting or media interview, and the odd hour or two of tension and stress. But far outweighing the demanding and occasionally wearying side of the job, is all the enrichment and joy and hope in being at the heart of the church's national life: the staff colleagues, the church's celebrations, members who pray for me every day, synod secretaries, tasks achieved, the Presidents and Moderators, the inspiring ecumenical contacts, uplifting services of thanksgiving for former church leaders, congregations and members who go out of their way to support the Assembly, working with the Congress, self-giving and talented committee members, the growingly multicultural church, conversations with government leaders, church members who phone in with words of affirmation, the sense of being part of the worldwide family of God.... privilege indeed.

1.2 Ninety-nine percent of the role of General Secretary is faith-affirming. My faith in the living Lord Jesus Christ, my perception of the realm of God and my sense of church have all grown over the 12 years. I leave this role as a more mature Christian, and I thank the church for being such a good and gracious teacher.

1.3 Let me single out five special people for particular thanks. During the whole of my time with the Assembly Gillian Stone has been a tremendously efficient and supportive assistant. Despite significant health difficulties, Gillian keeps going, giving of herself in service to God and God's church. Then there are the four Presidents with whom I have worked so closely since 1988 – Ron Wilson, D'Arcy Wood, Jill Tabart and John Mavor. What a gifted bunch of saints! I praise God for giving the church such great people. And I'm already enjoying the development of a close relationship with James Haire.

2. THREE YEARS OF CHANGE

2.1 The period of 1997-2000 has brought big changes to the Assembly, its agencies and staff. The review of Assembly structures is well-documented elsewhere in these reports. Such a far-reaching review touches deeply all those involved, no-one more than the staff members who have to cope with months of wondering if their agency and their job will survive.

2.2 In the same period the Sydney Assembly office shifted floors within 222 Pitt St. The Assembly

deliberately decided to move to a work-station configuration, in the interests chiefly of economy but also to enable all Sydney agencies to fit together on the one floor. While there was much initial difficulty with the new office set-up, adjustments have been made, and to have all Sydney agencies on the same floor is very beneficial to team-building, coordination and national cohesion.

2.3 Among the senior staff, the national directors and equivalents, there have been many changes in the past three years. I think it's true that the church has more difficulty in identifying church leaders these days than 20 or 30 years ago – but the church has done very well indeed in this new generation of Assembly senior staff. The more deliberate focus in the new Assembly structure on the responsibilities and leadership of senior staff, on trusting staff to do their jobs while ensuring accountability, and on staff working together as part of the one organisation rather than as widely-separated agencies, is bearing fruit. I believe the church will be very well served over the next period by the staff appointed since 1997.

2.4 Staff members have coped remarkably well with these changes. I affirm both the long-standing and the newer staff, in Sydney, Brisbane, Townsville, Canberra and Melbourne. An innovation in the past three years has been gatherings of all staff on two occasions, in August 1998 and again in April 2000. In addition, all national directors meet together at least once per year. There is a much greater sense of all being part of the national church team than existed 12 or even 5 years ago.

3. THE NATIONAL SECRETARIAT

3.1 Staff of the Secretariat, in April 2000, are:

- Accounting: Vincent Castro, May Chang, Amy Elizes and Edna Higginson;
- Communications: Stephanie Johnston and Ruth Sandiford-Phelan;
- General: Jill Bickford, Gwenda Davies, Rosa Dinsa, Gregor Henderson, Stephen Pearson, Gillian Stone, Margaret Taylor and Wendie Wilkie.

3.2 As well as serving the triennial Assembly and the Standing Committee, staff of the Secretariat provide various services to other agencies of the Assembly, the only exceptions being the Beneficiary Fund, Coolamon College, and, largely, Frontier Services. The Secretariat also provides direct staff support to the Legal Reference Committee, National Finance, Relations with Other Faiths and the Strategic Planning Unit.

3.3 One of the little-known national functions of the Assembly is administering the National Disaster Relief Fund, whose trustees are appointed by the Standing Committee. The Administration Services Manager in the Secretariat is the executive officer. The substantial funds are available to assist in the event of any natural disaster in Australia, with immediate emergency assistance and with funding longer-term pastoral rehabilita-

tion programs. Over the past three years over \$200,000 of assistance has been given, to assist after events like cyclones and floods in Western Australia, bushfires in parts of Victoria and NSW, floods in northern Qld, Wollongong, NSW and Katherine, NT. The fund also sponsors an annual meeting of synods' disaster recovery coordinators.

4. CHURCH POLITY AND LEGAL REFERENCE COMMITTEES

4.1 The Church Polity Reference Committee, based in Melbourne with several corresponding members interstate, meets most months to provide advice to the Standing Committee, the Legal Reference Committee, other Assembly agencies and the General Secretary on matters of polity. They are among the unsung heroes of the Assembly, doing most of their work tucked away in the back-rooms of Deepdene church. They receive no staff support from the Assembly, with committee members, especially Graham McAnalley, accepting responsibility for ensuring the agency's work is done efficiently and promptly. Although in the new Assembly structure they now have the right to report directly to the Assembly, Church Polity has not been required to do so this year. Any questions or comments about their work should be made when this report is before the Assembly.

4.2 Similarly, the Legal Reference Committee has not been required to report directly to this Assembly. They too are back-room workers of marvellous commitment and faithfulness to the best interests of the church. This group of six lawyers and two ministers are supported by the National Secretariat, but their members and chairperson, Malcolm Gledhill, undertake many detailed tasks for the church. Their service is invaluable. Again, any questions or comments about their work should be made when this report is before the Assembly.

5. STATISTICS

5.1 Comparative statistics concerning church membership, attendance at worship etc., will be included in the second mailing of Assembly working papers, in late June. The collection of information from congregations took place late in 1999 and early in 2000, with synods working closely with the National Church Life Survey to gather the information for the Assembly.

6. MY ACCOUNTABILITY AS A MINISTER OF THE WORD

6.1 I report to the Assembly that over the past three years I have tried to fulfil faithfully the duties of a Minister of the Word. Of the 11 duties of a Minister listed in Regulation 2.3.10, 7 or 8 of them fit neatly with the role of General Secretary. Those which do not figure largely are presiding at the celebration of the sacraments, nurturing

candidates for baptism and confirmation, and directly serving in the community.

6.2 I am conscious of other shortcomings too. Regular contact with my home congregation in Burwood simply does not happen, because of absences elsewhere. Nor am I much of a Presbytery member, usually accepting only one small responsibility per year for my Presbytery, Sydney. The ongoing workload and the pressure of urgent issues mean that some administrative duties, including routine correspondence, is not done as quickly as I'd like.

6.3 One of the special privileges of this position is receiving invitations to share in worship in congregations all over the country. I thank the many congregations who've given me the opportunity to join with them in Sunday worship over these past 12 years.

6.4 Since the office relocation in Sydney and the advent of the new Assembly structure, the Sydney Assembly office has renewed the practice of weekly staff worship – just 15 minutes or so every Tuesday morning. Although not all staff members participate regularly, the fact of weekly worship with a solid core of participants from across the staff, is a very good reminder of who it is we serve in and through the life of the Assembly.

7. THE NINTH ASSEMBLY

7.1 I very much look forward to the Assembly in July. I believe that our celebrations, our fellowship together, our mixing with church leaders from across the world, our business agenda, our working groups, our Bible study and our worship will serve well the Uniting Church's aspirations of a church effectively at mission. Here we are... send us.

Gregor Henderson