

a la carte

Daily menu for the 10th Uniting Church Assembly, July 12-19 2003

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See also: <http://nat.uca.org.au/assembly2003>

President-elect: 'we are a terrific church'

The new president-elect of the Uniting Church is Rev Gregor Henderson. He will serve as president from 2006-2009.

His initial response to the announcement was to acknowledge respect for the Aboriginal and Islander people.

Then he expressed gratitude to the Uniting Church which had given him many opportunities and privileges, and said: "I owe an even greater debt to God. I find tremendous purpose and joy for myself and for the church and world in God's gift of Jesus Christ."

His involvement ecumenically and overseas has shown him the high regard people hold for the Uniting Church.

"We are a terrific church," he said. He then went on to list about 15 reasons for this respect including our willingness to address hard questions, our breadth of services to the Australian community, our multi-culturalism, our solidarity



with Aboriginal and Islander people, our comparative lack of factionalism, and our consensus-decision making process.

Mr Henderson would like to add to this list that the Uniting Church has brought thousands of new converts, that declining numbers have been turned around, that we are famous for our spirituality, biblical and theological perspicacity.

"I would love to say that we've influenced the political powers to change their positions on reconciliation, on refugees and asylum seekers, on our blind acceptance of American leadership in international affairs and on welfare and health and employment policies," he dreams.

Mr Henderson was Assembly general secretary for 12 years and he assured the present incumbent, Rev Terence Corkin, he knew the difference between the two roles.

"I have no desire to be general secretary again," he said, "but if I ever cross the line please tell me - graciously!"

Grateful for three years to prepare for the presidency, Mr Henderson thanked Assembly for this further opportunity to serve Christ and Christ's church.

KUCA-A: ready to change light bulbs for the church

KUCA-A (Kids of the Uniting Church in Australia at Assembly) gently poked fun at the church in their presentation to the whole Assembly yesterday.

The presentation included reflections by the children, prayers, and short skits that depicted the relationships between young people and adults in the church, in which young people were often not listened to or recognised as important.

This was balanced by a section in which the children shared the things they enjoyed and appreciated about their congregations - such as when older people, children and different cultures come together peacefully, and when everybody recognises you and smiles at you.

Alice Ridge, from Canberra, reflecting on what kind of world she would like to live in, said: "I hope that people could work towards a world where everyone is given an education and as many people as possible have the opportunity to be Christians."

"The last thing we want is a world where everyone is forced to be a Christian, or is only one because they were brought up that way. I believe it is important for everyone to hear the 'good news' in a safe environment, even if they choose not to believe it," she said.

The KUCA-A presentation finished with a visual prayer about using our hands to reach out and give, rather than grabbing and pointing and withdrawing.

KUCA-A coordinator Bill Lidgett has been involved in children in Synod and Assembly programs since first seeing the idea in Canada in 1990. He said KUCA-A offered the 15 young people (aged 11-13) the opportunity to experience the wider church at work.

He said the Uniting Church was already seeing the benefit of children in Synod and Assembly programs, with many participants in those programs going on to take leadership roles within the life of their congregations and the wider church.



Fiona Holt (Victoria) and Alice Ridge (ACT), two of the KUCA-A participants.

Sexuality: the road ahead

Assembly members were asked to take many roads yesterday during the debate on sexuality – some of them through uncertain territory.

There was *New Terms Road*. CISAFIM (celibate in singleness and faithful in marriage) and “right relationships” are both still on that road, even though they’ve been used for a few years.

In her facilitation group report, Rev Sharon Hollis acknowledged “right relationships”. There was no other brief way to describe the position it involved. It had become accepted as a shorthand description.

After that came *Policy Making Road*. Could a congregation exclude homosexual people from its membership? Well, the statement that all people could be elders and members was “more stating what was a reality than setting down a policy”, said Rev John Mavor.

Truth Road drew some concerns. First, Rev Dorothy McRae-McMahon saw the church “on a costly journey in the search for truth”. She described some of the cost to her own life before her ministry opened up after that travel.

Truth Road later merged with *History Road*. That was when Mrs Wendy Turnour could not accept abandoning the church’s path over the last 2000 years if the Uniting Church were to declare what had been wrong was now right, or at least OK.

Mrs Mary Hawkes agreed: It would be “a very bold move for this Assembly to say the church has been wrong for 2000 years”, that homosexuality was God’s will and purpose for some of his people.

The road became a staircase when Rev Rod James expressed his concerns about the proposal on sexuality before the Assembly.

One step on the staircase opened up the possibility of taking the next one, and abandoning Paul’s warnings. First, promiscuity, then homosexuality, then unbounded perversion: that was the direction he saw ahead.

Rev Alistair Macrae had a different image, perhaps more freeway than staircase. Adopting the proposal, he believed, would let the Uniting Church “experience the freedom we have not known for a long time to just get on with ministry”.

But Miss Anne Harley opposed going in that direction. She compared her situation with that of Ms McRae-McMahon, and explained that she had been “led down another road to wholeness”. At stake was an issue for the moral future of Australia.

Rev Judy McLeod wanted to use a more complex directory to find *Together Road*. She had been created a heterosexual woman in the image of God, she said, but her ex-husband, as a homosexual man, had also been created in the image of God.

“My request to this Assembly is to journey together, with all the difficulties that entails,” she added.

Eventually, however, members decided to delay any journey for a little while. Rev Robert Johnson urged a stop-over to talk more with indigenous people: “We need to do more than hear a speech.” People agreed.

Now it’s a matter of looking ahead to see if the next part of the road is paved with orange and blue cards or formal votes.

Unsafe buildings to be made safe ... or disposed of

John Preston from the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania introduced the Unsafe Buildings proposal on July 16 with a recollection from the President’s service of installation:

“Then the Word of the Lord came to Elijah ... there was a great wind ... an earthquake and a fire ... but the Lord was not in them.”

Mr Preston said the passage caused him to think of recent experiences of fire, wind and earthquake that had destroyed church buildings – “But the Lord was not in them!”

One was a fire that destroyed the Cairns Memorial Church in East Melbourne. Another was wind that blew down Gembrook Uniting Church. And the third was not an earthquake but a semi-trailer that crashed through the Chapel of the Lake Uniting Church at Nagambie.

Mr Preston said it was such damaged or otherwise unsafe buildings that synod property boards and property trusts had identified as a major area of risk in their risk management programs.

“The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania had estimated the cost of deferred maintenance of church buildings within the synod as approximately \$100 million and this estimate is increasing each year as building consultants assess and report the cost of maintaining individual buildings.”

He said poorly maintained and structurally faulty buildings had been identified as risks, as well as those that did not meet such legislated government standards as the provision of disabled access and toilets, compliance with occupational health and safety requirements, workers



Not an earthquake, but still devastating.

compensation, essential services, heritage and food handling.

Assembly passed the proposal, authorising the amendment of regulations to enable synod secretaries or property officers to close down unsafe church buildings or properties, require occupiers to undertake audits, require that remedial work be undertaken, and make safe or recommend disposal of property on the grounds of safety or non-compliance with relevant requirements.

Dennis Chapman from South Australia expressed reservations about the proposal. He suspected half the churches in his synod wouldn’t meet the requirements of all legislation.

Glen Powell from New South Wales asked if Assembly could require unsafe buildings to be made safe, could it also produce regulations that required churches to make all unmissional buildings missional.