

a la carte

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

Issue 4: Wednesday, July 16, 2003

Assembly votes for closer relations with Anglicans

The 10th Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia yesterday took the first step toward union with the Anglican Church of Australia.

Having received a report on mutual recognition of ordained ministries, "For the Sake of the Gospel", the Assembly approved a statement on the essentials of faith and ministry.

It also approved summary statements on apostolic faith and ministry and a declaration of agreement on the essentials of faith and ministry as a basis for further conversation with the Anglican Church.

It decided to "take all possible and necessary steps toward a covenant of association and inter-communion".

Because a key sticking point for Assembly members was the different understanding of "deacon" in the two denominations, a Uniting Church deacon will be a member of a newly appointed joint working group.

Rev Professor Robert Gribben, a Uniting Church member of the working group, said the churches' decision to work together to resolve differences would help to address the problem of diminishing congregations and clergy, and better serve the needs of local churches, particularly in rural communities, he said.

Rev Professor Chris Mostert, co-chair of the joint working group, introduced the report to the Assembly. He said clearly there were differences between the churches but there was an enormous amount of agreement in their understanding of ministry. "In particular, we recognise differences in polity (the way we exercise authority and government), but we affirm that through the ordained ministries of our churches the Word is truly and effectively proclaimed, the sacraments are authentically celebrated, and a pastoral ministry is exercised in an accountable way."

The report recommended four stages for progress:

- A statement of agreement on essentials of faith and ministries (part of what the Assembly was asked to approve.)
- A covenant of association and inter-communion (the Assembly was asked to take the necessary steps toward entering into such a relationship.)
- A concordat of communion (the fullest kind of communion possible between separated churches; the Assembly is *not* asked to consider this.)
- Full organic union (the churches are not at this point.)

Professor Mostert said entering into a formal covenant of association on the mutual recognition of ordained ministries might seem a rather large step but considering the Uniting Church's history, its commitments and hopes, it was an important first step, without which the more important and

more difficult *second step* could not be taken!

He said, "Clearly, the fact that we don't have bishops is a very significant difference between us, which has to be overcome in some way. That is a discussion we have to have, but within an on-going dialogue!"

Other members of Assembly had concerns about the recognition of ministries, for instance of ordained women and lay ministers. Professor Mostert said the report was primarily about the mutual recognition of ordained ministers. There would be no compromise on the ordination of women.

When the proposal came back to Assembly after deliberation, Malcolm Gledhill, from the Assembly legal reference committee, was concerned that it did not acknowledge the seriousness of differences in the two churches in their understanding of the diaconate. He said deacons were subordinate in the Anglican Church when they were not in the Uniting Church, that Uniting Church deacons had a focus of service to the community, and that in the Uniting Church they were able to preside at the eucharist.

The proposals was passed only after an adjournment when the proposal could be rewritten. It then excluded reference to the report's broad discussion of ordained ministries and approved for further discussion only the summary references to "apostolic faith and ministry" and the "declaration of agreement on essentials of faith and ministry".

The Assembly decision came shortly after news that the Church of England and the Methodist Church in England had agreed to enter into a similar covenant.

'Come meet the neighbours'



Among the "neighbours" in the "Come meet the neighbours" session last night were, from left, Ms Mirmala Harasimhan, Ms Peta Jones Pellach and Rev Dr Margaretha Hendriks.

Theological education thriving in UCA

“Each congregation should be a hotbed of discussion and learning,” said Rev Allan Thompson presenting the report of the Assembly task group on theological education. “Every congregation must take seriously its role as a theological educator. If that were so, we would have 1800 centres of theological learning.”

At present theological education is thriving in the six UCA centres where more than a thousand students are enrolled in formal courses. Disappointingly the task group received only 32 responses to the paper they circulated last year with four proposed options.

“The responses showed people were reluctant to make changes to the present delivery of theological education,” explained Mr Thompson, “but they agree gradual changes need to be accelerated.”

Mr Stuart Cameron (South Australia) and Rev Dennis Robinson (Queensland) voiced concerns regarding the number of people training for specified ministry.

“There is a shortage of specified ministries especially in rural areas,” Mr Cameron said. “The number of retirements likely in the next 5-10 years together with a shortage of youthful candidates — the average age of ordinands is between 42-46 — are matters of concern.”

Study of the lists of ordinations and deaths recorded in the Assembly papers show 103 people were ordained and 102 ministers died in the last three years. Only the Queensland Synod has ordained more ministers than it has lost through death.

Rev Christine Moimoi from the Canberra Region Presbytery highlighted the need to be very intentional in providing for the changing ethnic mix of both the Uniting Church and Australian society.

“Cross-cultural education is more than simply talking about it,” she said. “Those in the dominant group must have a desire to learn from those in the minority.”

Assembly agencies present united report

Assembly agencies offered four themes to describe their work, in a report to Assembly that wove together reporting, stories, meditation, discussion, dance and worship. For the first time, the agencies presented a joint report.

The four themes were ‘hearing truth and sharing pain’; ‘nurturing and forming the gospel community’; ‘living and working in solidarity’; and ‘being bearers and witnesses of hope’. The agencies offered these themes “for inclusion in Assembly’s discernment of the values and commitments the church might pursue during the next three years”.

For a biblical reference point, the presentation used the incident from Mark chapter 5, in which Jesus encounters and heals both the woman who had suffered bleeding for 12 years, and Jairus’s daughter.

Hearing truth and sharing pain: Rev Helen Richmond, Director of Multicultural Ministry shared stories of second generation migrants, young people who have “a nagging fear of being rejected by one culture and unwanted by the other”.

She highlighted the stories of second generation young people from Tamil and Tongan backgrounds.

The Tamil congregations in Australia have pledged to hold regular inter-generational conversations as part of their community life, to address the alienation their young people feel when excluded from worship and cultural opportunities by the language barrier.

And a young Tongan woman, Ofa Fotu, who had recently returned from a trip to Tonga now yearned to understand Tongan culture, its traditions, customs and values, Ms Richmond said.

“These young people are navigating themselves through uncharted waters,” Ms Richmond said. “They are modelling for all of us the risky and painful journey of cross-cultural sharing.”

Rev Elenie Poulos, national director of UnitingJustice, shared stories, pictures and poetry from refugees held in detention. She looked behind the razor wire and saw children. But others instead saw “an enemy who would one day rape their daughters and kill their sons” and would “take everything we hold dear: our homes, our jobs”.

“I looked behind the razor wire and I wondered what Jesus would have seen,” she said.

Nurturing and forming the gospel community:

Rev Dr Robert Bos, national director of Theology and Discipleship, told the story of Elizabeth and James of his local congregation, who followed the Becoming Disciples process leading towards baptism in one case and confirmation in the other. The process had culminated with a celebration in which the whole church community shared.

Associate general secretary Wendie Wilkie shared her experiences of leading the Uniting Church’s participation in inter-faith dialogues in the wake of the Bali bombing.

In these dialogues with Muslim and Jewish leaders, Ms Wilkie said, “we recognise in each other the image of God”.

“We have much to learn in this area of interfaith dialogue,” she said. “And we never know who God will use to nurture us in our faith.”

Living and working in solidarity: National covenanting co-ordinator Peter Lewis told the story of the indigenous hospitality project which operates in Carlton, near to the Assembly’s meeting place.

The idea came from indigenous hospital workers. An intentional Christian community, living in a house rented from the Church of All Nations, provides its two largest bedrooms for indigenous families to stay in while visiting sick relatives. More than 200 families have now experienced this hospitality.

National director of Frontier Services, Rosemary Young, told how a family which lived more than 700km from the nearest regional centre was helped by Frontier Services, through its Remote Area Family Service workers, and its patrol padres. “We continue to go where other services don’t or won’t,” she said.

Being bearers and witnesses of hope: Rev Bill Fischer, Uniting International Mission, described the “Closing The Gap” conference at which Christian and Muslim women from Ambon in Indonesia came together in a transformation of relationships from tension and conflict to close harmony and peace. At these workshops, participants themselves become bearers and witness of hope, he said.