

## The Assembly - the national council for the Uniting Church

The 15<sup>th</sup> Triennial Assembly of the Uniting Church National Assembly will meet in Melbourne at Box Hill Town Hall from 8-14 July. The President-Elect (to be installed as President) is Dr Deidre Palmer (a past Moderator of the SA Synod) and her theme is *Abundant Grace Liberating Hope*.

The Assembly is made of members primarily elected or appointed by the Synods and Presbyteries. The number of voting members at an Assembly has varied, but for 2018, it could be about 260. It is a smaller gathering than the larger Synod meetings, though Synods are also changing with decreasing Synod attendance. The base of membership is equal numbers of ordained members and confirmed lay members, so only a small number of ordained members will ever be a member, and proportionally this represents a very small group of lay people. Membership is a serious task and all other members should pray for those attending the Assembly.

There are non-voting members of the Assembly, but for this article the focus will be on voting members. The breakdown for voting membership is outlined in Regulation 3.3.8. Each presbytery technically appoints one ordained member and one lay member, though because some Synods (SA, WA) have adopted a one Presbytery and effectively a one Synod model, compensation has been provided so those Synods maintain their overall numbers. Victoria and Tasmania are now combined as one Synod and thus have a joint membership.

Officers of the Assembly are voting members (4):

- the President of the Assembly;
- the General Secretary of the Assembly;
- the ex-President of the Assembly;
- the President-elect of the Assembly;
- Two officers of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, and 16 UAICC members. (18)

The breakdown for Synod/Presbytery membership is interesting (2017 Revised Regulations):

SYNOD	No.
NSW & ACT	54
NORTHERN	10
QUEENSLAND	36
SOUTH AUSTRALIA	34
VICTORIA & TASMANIA	58
WESTERN AUSTRALIA	20
TOTAL	212

As well as the Assembly officers and UAICC members, the Assembly Standing Committee appoints the following (*Note: numbers are from 14<sup>th</sup> Assembly 2015*)

- Youthful Members (6)
- Migrant-ethnic Congregations (8)
- Members providing special skill and expertise (3)
- Six Assembly Bodies (agencies) are represented (6)

### **A comment on the Membership**

The membership numbers for Assembly bears no relation to contemporary confirmed membership or even attendance as these figures are difficult to determine in any case. I believe there needs to be a substantial re-working of the make-up to help the Assembly be truly representative of the church. This is different to the idea that the Assembly should be made up of 'representatives' as it is a distinct council making its own decisions. One of the difficulties for the Assembly is its increasingly distant connection to the local congregation. Synod numbers should be revised so that the Synods like Victoria (now with Tasmania) that have much smaller numbers now can be provided a membership that reflects their actual present attendance/membership of the Uniting Church. Presbyteries could appoint 2 lay people. This would help to broaden out the church employed/quasi-ordained/professional members that are elected as lay members now. There was never a thought at union that the lay members of the national decision-making body would also be employed by a council or part of the church.

**What does the Assembly do?** There will be worship, contact and greetings from ecumenical guests and many proposals and reports from Assembly agencies, other councils and Assembly members. 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.*

### **Decision-Making.**

The Assembly will follow the Manual for Meetings. As with any meeting, the co-ordination of the meeting arrangements is connected to smaller groups, and for the UCA Assembly the Facilitation Committee and the Business Committee are the prime committees. The Business Committee will essentially control the agenda and will work with presenters about the timing of presentations, and also with the Facilitation Committee about the re-arrangement and presentation of proposals. Major matters will be introduced in a plenary session and then considered initially in the Assembly groups. Marriage will be one of these matters. A summary of the views of each group on the matter/proposals is provided to the Facilitation Committee and the committee collates material from the groups and reports to an information plenary session at the Assembly. This process provides the base for consideration of which proposals proceed to formal plenary consideration and/or the possible re-arrangement or amalgamation of proposals or parts of proposals to form one new proposal. Prayer for good governance and wisdom for those involved in the control of the Assembly process would be appreciated.

*Peter Bentley was a member of the perhaps now infamous 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly held in Melbourne in 2003 (remember Resolution 84?), as well as a keen observer at Assembly meetings in 1994 and 1997 (attending as an Assembly staff-person), and 2000, 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2015 (for personal interest or the Reforming Alliance or ACC).*