

Christian Education

NB: The Operational Guidelines for the Christian Education work of the Assembly appear elsewhere in the Assembly papers, associated with Uniting Faith and Discipleship.

1. ENCOURAGING INSPIRED AND COMPETENT EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Assembly Christian Education is committed to the encouragement of inspired and competent educational leadership. Educational leadership is an important vocation within and beyond the life of the Church. Competent and inspired educational leaders assist the Church to embrace its faith and mission and to engage in the ongoing work of nurturing members in their discipleship with Christ as the Spirit moves.

This nurturing work includes the perennial need to study, reflect, teach and interpret the Scriptures, creeds, confessions and practices of the faith with each new generation. This work is profoundly intergenerational, requiring leadership that understands the difference between providing information to individuals and nurturing a living faith in the midst of diverse Australian communities.

1.1 National Lay and Leadership Educators' Network

In 2008 Assembly Christian Education, following conversations with Synod colleagues, convened meetings of persons engaged in work variously labelled as 'lay education,' 'leadership and ministry,' 'discipleship,' 'learning community,' 'resource ministry' and other designations associated with the Uniting Church.

The emergence of this network has led to a number of formal and informal collaborations in the sharing of ideas, publications, and teaching and learning materials. The whole Church benefits from the free and energetic debate, discussion and cooperation that occur through this network. Various persons associated with educational ministries in the Synods, Synod/Presbyteries and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) have connected with this network to date.

1.2 Church Councils and Elders

Responding to imperatives arising from the 10th Assembly and implied in the Christian Education Report to the 11th Assembly, it was decided to conduct a survey of selected Congregations across the Uniting Church (late 2006 – 2007) in order to identify the nature of relationships between

Elders and Church Councils and their perceived needs and concerns in pursuing their mission.¹

Assembly Christian Education, in consultation with relevant Synod and Presbytery personnel, commissioned the Rev. Dr. David Merritt to conduct the survey, which concluded in August 2007. There were forty completed surveys obtained from an initial sixty-two congregations contacted. The forty congregations reflected a wide variety of church locations and communities. A report of the survey's findings was given by the National Director, Christian Education at the November 2007 meeting of the Assembly Standing Committee. Ongoing evaluation of outcomes and implications from the Survey has continued from that time, in consultation with lay education leaders and, more recently, members of the National Lay and Leadership Educators' network (see item 1.1).

The most important findings of the Church Councils and Elders Survey (2007) centre upon the following facts:

- There is no "one size fits all" model approach for the leadership of congregations;
- Some congregations are struggling to clarify the working relationship between Elders and Church Councils and whether it is always desirable to have a particular role for Elders;
- Some congregations (larger ones) find the Regulations for the election of Elders and Church Councillors frustrating (3.1.14);
- Congregations are more concerned about dealing with their leadership requirements and less about access to resources.

Copies of the full survey results are available from the Assembly Office.

1.3 Covenanting and Reconciliation

The Uniting Church National Assembly is committed to the renewal of the Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC or 'The Congress'). Reports and information regarding the progress of Covenanting will appear elsewhere amongst the Assembly Papers.

Christian Education, however, engaged in the compilation and editing of the resource, "Building Partnerships: A guide to covenant renewal with Indigenous people throughout the Uniting Church in Australia." This guide is supported by several internet-based resources, including

¹ This activity is linked to Assembly Key Direction 06.08 (d) ii & iii

updated contact lists for UAICC contacts and Synod Covenanting Coordinators.² We pray that individuals, congregations and faith communities will see the Covenanting process as part of their natural and continuing approach to living as Christian disciples in partnership with the Congress.

1.4 Participation in other collaborative projects

1.4.1 The National Director is working with a small team in preparing a resource for the Baptism of children which will revise and update the popular booklet by Keith Pearson, "Baptism and Our Children."

1.4.2 The National Director was involved in discussions which led up to the writing of "A Brief Statement on Ordination," at the invitation of the National Consultant for Theology and Discipleship, and more recently in the co-writing of a discussion guide to be used in conjunction with this Assembly publication.

2. RESEARCHING AND DEVELOPING CREATIVE APPROACHES TO CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION FOR THE DEEPENING OF AUTHENTIC SPIRITUALITY

Assembly Christian Education is dedicated to creative approaches in Christian Religious Education that reflect the Uniting Church's inclusive values and its ecumenical, collaborative ethos. Given the plethora of educational resources available from many different sources in the world, Assembly Christian Education seeks to encourage approaches to this work that are open to Australian and UCA participation and publication.

2.1 "Seasons of the Spirit"

"Seasons of the Spirit" is a Bible-based, international, ecumenical, lectionary oriented teaching and learning resource for worship and learning. The International Editor for Seasons is Susan Burt, an Australian Uniting Church member. Assembly Christian Education endorses Seasons as a valuable source of materials and curriculum planning for all ages. The national Christian Education Reference Committee and other networks of the Church have continued to encourage Australian participation in the formation and review of this resource. The invitation for Australian contributions to this resource has been taken up by a number of Uniting Church members and in

² This activity is linked with Assembly Key Direction 06.08 (a)

a variety of ways. Volunteer reviewers (at the pre-editing stage) of age-group and worship materials are always welcome, and enquiries about substantial contributions to writing, music, articles, and other aspects of "Seasons of the Spirit" are invited. Information on how to do this is available upon enquiry to the National Director.

2.2 "The Spirit of Gen Y" – National Youth Spirituality study

As anticipated in the report to the 11th Assembly, the broad survey and study of the spirituality of Australian young people (at the time aged between fifteen and twenty-five) concluded in 2007, followed by several related publications.³ The Uniting Church Assembly was an important co-sponsor of the research project.

Young people from all walks of life, and all parts of the population took part in interviews and answered questions about their lives: beliefs, values, activities, priorities, practices and relationships.

Among the many things learned from the study were insights that the churches have previously heard from culturally alert and socially aware youth leaders, school chaplains, children's group coordinators, ministers, Christian parents and grandparents for years:

- That those young people who are nurtured in faith as children are more likely to retain a spiritual orientation.
- Denominational labels mean even less to Gen Y than to their parent or grandparent generations.
- That young people who identify with faith communities are more likely to show social concern and act for others' benefit.
- The spiritual values, faith stories and testimony of lived experience are resources for the nurture of young faith.
- If there is any notion of transcendence, for this generation, it is found in the quality, tragedy, beauty, enjoyment and danger of relationship formation.

The Gen Y study also revealed:

- High levels of eclectic individual choice in what one believes/does not believe, yet low levels of what may be called 'spiritual experimentation.'

³ Publications by the members of the research team include: Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton & Ruth Webber (2007). *The Spirit of Gen Y: young people's spirituality in a changing Australia*. John Garratt Publishing; and Philip Hughes (2007). *Putting Life Together: findings from Australian youth spirituality research*. Melbourne: CRA.

- Little significant gender difference across the range of beliefs and practices.
- That most Australian young people are unmoved by insistent dogmatism and authoritarian teaching. They are critical of rigid values.

As also indicated in the Christian Education report to the 11th Assembly, the study would only be of value to the Uniting Church, if significant follow-up work began as a result of it.

2.3 The “Next Gens” Project

The Next Gens project endeavours to pick up learning and insight from the “Spirit of Gen Y” study and apply it to real experience in the Uniting Church. The new project broadens the age range to encompass work with children through to young adults and the older generations who relate to them. One important aim of the project is to grapple with what Powell and Jacka (2008) have called “forty years of missing generations in the Church.”⁴

The Next Gens project is not a single study or survey. It will have as many components as project partners. Project partners already include (since 2008) individuals, groups, and synod agencies. It may grow to include congregations, faith communities, presbytery teams, or schools.⁵ It is not about turning individual and group efforts into one, but creating links and mutual learning opportunities and helping them happen, and/or arranging for their publication in an appropriate manner.

What emerges will take different forms: some may lead into workshops or learning processes; others, as printed publications or DVDs; and some as narratives, essays, academic studies or ethnographies. In each case, the mode of partnership with Assembly will be negotiated (and funding shared) in a way that enhances the value and accessibility of the project for the whole Church. An important partner in this project is the National Faith Development Consultant (youth and young adults).

The project will succeed if it encourages knowledge, dialogue and action across the generations about what it means to connect with the Church and its teachings and to participate in its re-shaping. The project will succeed if it also initiates collaboration across the Church in connecting with and facilitating the voices of younger generations.⁶

⁴ Ruth Powell and Kathy Jacka (2008). “Moving Beyond 40 Years of Missing Generations” in *Pointers Volume 18-1*, March, pages 13-15. Melbourne: Christian Research Association.

⁵ The project is expected to run until 2011.

⁶ This project is linked with Assembly Key Directions 06.08 (c) and (d).

3. EXPLORING CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OPTIONS BEYOND CHURCH PRECINCTS

One of the measures of the confidence and health of the Christian Church would surely be the degree to which it acts in ways that demonstrate that its beliefs, faith proclamations, stories, traditions and practices are of value to the wider community, beyond Church precincts. Such an assertion is no longer based upon any illusion that the Uniting Church in Australia is or should be a church that wields great power and influence in the secular sphere. However, many Uniting Church members and officers have found from time to time that there are sectors within the community that welcome input from and/or partnership with the Uniting Church in the pursuit of common goals. There are also expressions and dimensions of the Church’s life that clearly intersect with the public realm and the concerns and needs of those who are not its members. How the Church conducts itself in these spheres of life, and is seen to operate according to authentic Christian values, is a matter of great importance and interest.

3.1 National Uniting Church Schools Consultative Group

This group was convened in late 2008 and held its first face-to-face meeting in January 2009. The group consists of the National Director, Christian Education and those persons who relate to Uniting Church schools directly on behalf of their Synods. Key objectives for this group include:

- Building relationships between the Uniting Church and its schools;
- Supporting initiatives that strengthen identity, addressing the question, “What does it mean to be a Uniting Church School?” (In doing so, this group also acknowledges the value and learning gained through several school communities that are based upon ecumenical relationships); and
- Encouraging informed discussion of school educational issues across the Church.

The creation of this group enables collaborative work on the implications of the growing national agenda in school education, which includes national curriculum, national goals, school funding, and relationships with independent and non-government schools organisations. Of continuing concern also are matters relating to Indigenous scholarships, religious education (see item 3.2), interfaith education (see item 3.3), human rights issues, and school chaplaincy.

The National School Chaplaincy Program of the Australian Government was introduced through the then Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) in 2006, offering schools, upon successful application, up to \$20,000.00 per annum for three years. Since the Federal Election of 2007, the new Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) broadened the guidelines for the program to include 'support workers or counsellors,' if necessary, and added to the pool of funds available. Although not heavily utilised by Uniting Church Schools, this program has had an important impact upon the climate of schools ministry in government and non-government schools generally.

Many Uniting Churches and their members have participated in community groups, inter-church boards and para-church agencies which have combined resources to employ chaplains or to supplement existing school ministry work (which in some states, prior to the chaplaincy program, centred upon the provision of religious education). In some regions the program is regarded as controversial and complex (particularly in multi-faith contexts). In December 2006, the National Director prepared a briefing paper for Uniting Church personnel, examining these issues.⁷ The future of funding for the National School Chaplaincy program is uncertain. Members of the consultative group will continue to monitor the situation.

Currently of interest for the work of the consultative group is the relationship-building work of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania through its continuing "Towards a Charter" process. The group has also recommended that the National Education Charter (published by the Assembly in 2002) be refreshed and re-published.

3.2 Religious and Values Education in Schools

The Commission for Mission in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania has been producing religious and values education curriculum materials for the past several years (organised by Margaret Scanlon, now retired). At the time this report was written, the project is close to completion. It has components for school grades from Preparatory to Year 10 (P-2; 3-4; 5-6; 7-8; and 9-10).⁸

The curriculum material has attracted some interstate interest and deserves wider usage. This is a valuable resource

⁷ See the Assembly website at <http://www.assembly.uca.org.au/education/resources/66-papers.html>.

⁸ See the Synod of Vic-Tas site <http://victas.uca.org.au/education/education-in-schools/curriculum>

for the Church, towards which the Assembly contributed funds between 2004 and 2007. It is designed for purchase by school communities.

3.3 Interfaith Education in Schools – a collaborative project

Members of the Schools Consultative Group have expressed interest in and support for appropriate and contextual interfaith learning opportunities in schools (3.1). The Assembly Working Group on Relations with Other Faiths (ROF)⁹ is engaged in a collaborative project with Assembly Christian Education to explore approaches to interfaith education in schools in a manner which complements other forms of religious education and/or education in one's own faith tradition. It is expected that this project will seek input from teachers in the field and people of other faiths.

3.4 National Support for Tertiary Ministry initiatives

Since the eleventh Assembly, conversations with leaders in the field of tertiary chaplaincy and ministry have continued intermittently. There are national opportunities through various avenues that nurture many persons engaged in this field, including the annual School of Discipleship. Participation in the Next Gens Project may well prove to be another (see item 2.3).

The National Faith Development Consultant (youth and young adults) and the National Consultant for Theology and Discipleship also share an interest in promoting support for tertiary ministry initiatives. Moreover, it is also important for the whole Church to learn more about the public nature of this ministry, to hear the stories of those who share in it and to discover the ways it may encourage Christians to live as disciples of Christ beyond church precincts.

4. FOSTERING FAITH NURTURE AND PRACTICES THAT ARE FREEING, HEALING AND LIFE-GIVING IN THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST

Assembly Christian Education is consistently concerned to connect persons and groups with opportunities for learning and growth. Sometimes the urgency of the Church's mission and the motivation of Christian disciples can seem overwhelmingly task oriented and busy. Sometimes faith in Christ can appear to be about subscribing without question to a set

⁹ Refer to Assembly Papers for the ROF Working Group's Report

of beliefs or propositions. Yet this is not the way to grow and flourish.

4.1 **National Spirituality and Spiritual Formation Network**

Assembly Christian Education is a partner with those who seek deeper encounters in spiritual reflection, spiritual direction and the practices of faith for adults, through a variety of expressions and contexts. Members of the Spirituality and Spiritual Formation Network are keen to share their skills, guidance and processes with those who are open to them.

A variety of opportunities are made available by network members throughout each year in a number of settings around Australia: urban, rural, coastal, and outback. The December 2008 edition of Assembly Update outlines several of those opportunities and provides information for making contact.¹⁰

4.2 **Godly Play and Good Shepherd learning processes**

Assembly Christian Education advocates for the adoption of “Godly Play” (originating in the USA and founded by Jerome Berryman) and “Good Shepherd” (originating in Italy and founded by Sofia Cavalletti and Gianna Gobbi, who first inspired Berryman) learning processes. Based upon Montessori approaches, these learning processes deserve the attention they have gained as a steadily growing movement in Christian Education. The National Director seeks to share in equipping persons as exemplary trainers and adapters, linking them with Godly Play worship centres or Catechesis of the Good Shepherd atriiums as appropriate. These learning processes reward careful and timely preparation by the people who choose to use them.

Engagement with this work often leads to ecumenical cooperation, especially for training purposes. Assembly Christian Education invites interested persons to make contact if they would like to link with others in the Uniting Church who practise either of these learning processes. It is a creative movement which has the potential to re-invent church-based and other forms of Christian religious education, starting with the children and the adults who work with them. It is a movement that requires all persons involved to take responsibility for their learning. As a profoundly reflective approach to Christian discipleship, it encourages curiosity, wonder and imagination.

¹⁰ Go to <http://assembly.uca.org.au/resources/37-update/390-update1208.html#10> (Assembly Update, December 2008)

4.3 **Other collaborative activities**

4.3.1 Assembly Christian Education at times initiates and/or maintains links with national and international networks that open worlds of ideas and approaches to the nurture of faith and discipleship. One of the privileges of working nationally is that it provides opportunities to encourage those who minister in diverse fields of service, regionally and locally. One such opportunity, in September 2009, will be a symposium with Brendan Hyde, Australian scholar and author of insightful works on children's spirituality. It will be held for synod/presbytery children and family ministry consultants and persons whom they invite.

4.3.2 The Assembly Secretariat worked with Christian Education and Synod networks to set up the “National Youth Activities Reference Committee (NYARC),” which began its work late in 2006 and had its first meeting in February 2007. NYARC reports to the Assembly Standing Committee and is part of the work of Uniting Faith and Discipleship.¹¹ Together with the National Consultant for Faith Development (youth and young adults), NYARC has oversight, on behalf of Assembly, for the National Christian Youth Convention (NCYC), About FACE, Order of St. Stephen, the National Youth, Children and Family Workers Inservice and other matters which require collaborative organisation across and beyond the Uniting Church in Australia.

Assembly Christian Education, through networks and collaborative activities, invites the Church to deepen its commitment to life-long learning throughout the pilgrimage of faith: “for the love of Christ urges us on” (2 Corinthians 5:14).

5. **ASSEMBLY CHRISTIAN EDUCATION REFERENCE COMMITTEE**

Details regarding the nature, purposes and composition of the Reference Committee appear elsewhere in Assembly papers (see Christian Education Operational Guidelines associated with Uniting Faith and Discipleship).

5.1 **Acknowledgement and Appreciation**

Assembly Christian Education wishes to acknowledge and express appreciation for the long service and dedication to this Committee, and its predecessors, of the Rev. Dr. Adrian Brown and Dr. Rosemary Johnston (both retiring 2009). Their thoughtfulness, diligence and support through times of upheaval and transition in

¹¹ See elsewhere in the Assembly papers.

the life of the Assembly has been most appreciated over many years.

More recent appointees, Bradley Fenner, Mark Lawrence and Mata Havea have stepped aside from reference committee work and are not available for re-appointment. We thank them for the time they were able to give to our work. Current members of the committee are Elizabeth Nolan (Chairperson), Wendi Sargeant, Joyce Marcon (Anglican, NZ), Rod Dungan, Rick Morrell, Craig Mitchell, Sandy Boyce (ex-officio), and Glenda Blakefield (ex-officio).

Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Nolan
Chairperson, Assembly Christian Education
Reference Committee

Rev. Dr. Mark Hillis
National Director, Christian Education