

General Secretary

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 2009 is my ninth year as the Assembly's General Secretary. If Ministers in local congregations find that it can take about three years to really get embedded in, and oriented to, a ministry context it certainly takes a little longer in a national role as wide spread and diverse as that of the Assembly General Secretary. Over the time of my current extension it would be fair to say that I have felt more settled and clear about the contribution I can make and the most helpful way to make it. Once again the Assembly will have before it a proposal that I receive a continuation of my call as the Assembly General Secretary for another three years. I await the call of the Church afresh in this decision.
- 1.2 Occasionally I am asked to explain what my role is as General Secretary for the Assembly. As I frame that role for people it seems to me that there are three broad areas of responsibility. Perhaps the most obvious is that I have a responsibility to support the work of the meetings of the Assembly and its Standing Committee, ensuring that the meetings and other work are appropriately resourced and its decisions are implemented. In this context I have oversight of the Secretariat, which includes the Associate General Secretary, the Accounting unit, Communications, and support staff, comprising approximately 12 full time equivalent (FTE) staff. Post the 1998 restructure of Assembly Agencies the General Secretary became the CEO for all Assembly work. There are about 10 Agencies / major areas of work and numerous committees and working groups; some with staff support and many voluntary. Such a responsibility, alongside other expectations would be impossible to fulfil without the excellent co-leadership offered by the Associate General Secretary, Rev Glenda Blakefield, and the exceptionally capable National Directors who are such great leaders in their own right. Finally I have a responsibility for general leadership in the life of the church, which includes being alternate head of church when the situation arises. This encourages me to have a wide vision and engagement with issues as they develop in the life of the church and also draws me into significant ecumenical representation and engagement – a role that has increased significantly over the last three years and which can be very time consuming.
- 1.3 Given the breadth of responsibilities it is not always possible to be as available to the wider church as might be hoped. To the extent that I have been able to respond satisfactorily to many requests that come my way has been due in no small measure to the unqualified support and professionalism

of my PA, Ms Jenny Bertalan, the Assembly Communications Manager, Ms Penny Monger, and the often unnoticed staff of the Secretariat who provide the foundations upon which it is possible for the office of General Secretary to function effectively.

- 1.4 Although the ASC has its own report it does not include an acknowledgement of the important contribution that the members of the ASC make to the encouragement and support of Assembly staff. In particular I express my appreciation to those with whom I have ongoing engagement over the course of the triennium, of which Mr Bruce Binnie as Chairperson of the Assembly Audit and Finance Committee is one. I also take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the contribution of the President. Gregor has not only offered significant leadership within the church and to the wider community, he has also been a pastor to many members of the Assembly staff, including myself. The work of the Assembly between its normal meetings could not continue without the service of the people who are members of the Assembly Standing Committee. Significant demands are placed upon the ASC and there has been an exceptionally large load to be borne between meetings. The Assembly has been well served by the hard working members of its Standing Committee.

2. THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE

- 2.1 In my report to the 11th Assembly I noted the significant structural changes that had taken place in a number of synods and the potential implications for the way in which the Assembly related to other Councils as well as members of the church. We continue to work with the implications that arise when there is one Presbytery in a synod and with further reductions in the number of presbyteries, the most recent example being the reduction to eight for presbyteries in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.
- 2.2 It is irrefutable that the Councils of the church are, for the most part, finding it an increasing struggle to attract people to serve on their voluntary committees and task groups. This is a reflection of a reduction in the number of people with appropriate skills with whom our church is in relationship, the increased demands on people's time, fewer Ministers and the simple fact that many people do not want to work and make decisions the way that it has been done in the past. While not immune from this development the Assembly has been blessed by the quality of people that continue to make themselves available to work on its various Reference Committees and Task Groups.
- 2.3 It is probably self evident to say that the prevailing negative economic environment will have a significant impact on the capacity of the church to financially resource its many ministries. Already there are synods that have cut back on their staffing and there will

be much more of this in the next few years. Sat alongside the need for synods to refocus their priorities for other reasons this means that very few synods now have staff that cover all the traditional areas of synod work. Accordingly there are gaps in areas such as social justice, Christian Education and other congregational resourcing, support for multicultural ministry, faith development and formation for young people and direct synod staff involvement in international mission. Yet these areas remain critical to a balanced understanding of the church and the support of ministry within the bounds of a synod. The Assembly does not have the capacity to cover all these bases in the life of the church, yet where those skills and experience are present in the Assembly the Assembly is increasingly finding that it is being looked to to support people within the bounds of a synod for whom local structural supports are no longer in place. This is unlikely to be a diminishing demand and raises questions for the Assembly about where resources should be directed and the priorities that should be put in place.

- 2.4 Embedded in this experience of reduced capacity to “cover the field” in potential ministry areas is a question of justice. The Uniting Church positively embraces its commitment to the just and equitable distribution of resources in society. It recognises that those with capacity should assist those who, for a variety of reasons, lack the capacity to live a “full life”. Yet the church seems to have struggled to find ways in which it redistributes its resources from those synods in the historically and socially privileged states of the Commonwealth. Yes there are examples of generosity but the systemic issue of the redistribution of the church’s wealth remains unaddressed. Perhaps at a time when the Henry Tax Review is addressing itself to the most effective tax and transfer system for Australia the church might be bold enough to entertain a similar discussion for itself.
- 2.5 A positive development in the last decade has been an increased attention to the opportunities for national co-operation. This has served the church well in enabling significant savings in time and money through the creation of national contracts. Even so such arrangements remain vulnerable to being undermined by self interest overcoming the interests of the whole church, or through the asserted and defended “we are different” claims that regularly surface. From my perspective these claims to difference may be true in fact but may not be required in practice if there is a will to find a new common way.
- 2.6 National co-operation is much more likely to be “on the radar” in the next few years than at any time in the life of the Uniting Church. The challenge is to consider how to move collaboration to areas other than administration and procurement contracts, and to extend the focus of national networks

from mutual support, in servicing and occasional resource sharing into vehicles for strategic and effective co-operation.

- 2.7 One of the major changes to the landscape of Australia in the last decade – and it is a trend that has only gained momentum since the election of the Labor Government in Canberra - has been the increased expectation that the inefficiencies of the states in service delivery will be addressed by increased involvement of the Commonwealth government. While not raising issue with the efficiency of the delivery of synod services it is difficult to make the case that the church is well served by doing some things six times rather than once. The trend in Australia’s public, corporate, legal, media and educational life is to recognise the limitations that a federated system imposes on the wellbeing of the country. The future is national. There have been a number of major pieces in national papers on this issue over the last months. None of them, and I would agree, are advocating for the abolition of the states. However in them there is a serious invitation to question whether some things that were once thought to be best reserved to the states might be better delivered through a national vehicle. The polity of the UCA is essentially a federal system. On occasions I wonder what could be achieved if we organised and funded our church’s work so that it was genuinely national, as we so often assume ourselves to be.
- 2.8 The jury is still out on the long term implications of the global economic crisis for the church’s capacity to fund itself at previous levels. As the Assembly receives 82% of its funding from the annual synod grants (ex Government grants for specific purposes and donations raised by UnitingWorld and Frontier Services) it is in a very vulnerable position should the synods need to reduce their level of financial support. Other places are more appropriate for an extended discussion of this matter. Nevertheless in considering the changing landscape it would be remiss not to acknowledge this once in a lifetime financial crisis that has the potential to have very significant ramifications. Whether this “obstacle” in our path proves to be an insurmountable mountain around which we must wander or a chance to scale a new vantage point to find a fresh way forward, time will tell. I hope it will be the latter.

3. MAJOR FOCUS OVER THE LAST TRIENNIUM

- 3.1 Given the range of responsibilities involved in the role of General Secretary it is difficult to imagine how one can speak of a major focus. However the church has, in my view, had a recurrent theme in its life that has surfaced in various ways. It has certainly been a theme to which I have returned and sought to make a contribution over the last triennium.

3.2 Whether the issue be the reorganisation of the Church's lay specified ministries, regular requests from synods for exemption to the operation of certain regulations because they don't fit anymore, major discussions about constitutional and regulatory change, or Ministers' Conferences run by the President the undercurrent issue is about how we understand ourselves as a church and how we shape our life together for the vocation that we share as the people of God.

3.3 Frequently over the course of the last triennium the word "identity" has arisen as different issues are addressed. This discussion is far from over and it is appropriate for this conversation to continue in an open, transparent and expectant way. Just as those generations of thinkers who framed the *Basis of Union* were a gift for the church, the church needs such thinkers today. Perhaps it also needs to provide the opportunity for its members to name and claim their identity as it is articulated with fresh words for these times.

4. MY ACCOUNTABILITY AS A MINISTER OF THE WORD

Regulation 2.4.2 lists the 12 duties of a Minister of the Word. From time to time I am asked how it is possible to be a Minister if I don't have a congregation. Or more commonly whether being a General Secretary is really a responsibility that is appropriate to the vocation of an ordained person. A review of that list of 12 items does allow me to see where these things are done as General Secretary. Yet this list of 12 things is problematic when it comes to considering the vocation of a Minister of the Word. Principally because it presents the vocation of a Minister as a set of tasks - almost an ecclesial set of KPI's.

At its heart this list of 12 responsibilities is a list of strategies through which Ministers give expression to their vocation. The vocation of a Minister of the Word is to assist the church to be faithful to its Lord by enabling it to know its true identity and sustaining the character that is appropriate for the Christian community. This is something that the best secular management programs and business plans cannot achieve. It has been my intention, alongside others, to hold the parts of the Assembly for which I am responsible faithful to Jesus Christ, the head of the church. Sometimes that has been done through the 12 points in Regulation 2.4.2 and sometimes in other ways.

I participate regularly in my home congregation at Revesby as often as possible. Presbytery attendance suffers from the impact of my travel commitments.

The Sydney Assembly office is committed to the practice of weekly staff worship 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 are called to serve through the Assembly.

Rev Terence Corkin
General Secretary