

# Historical Reference Committee

Sitting on the lounge room floor at the Wilson's home in Applecross, surrounded by boxes of papers, the Assembly Archivist savoured the moment. She had been invited by Lady Leila to sort through the Presidential papers of Sir Ronald Wilson. Ron's capacity for work, his humility and generosity exuded from these papers. Not only were the Presidential papers collected but files were also sent to the WA Synod from Ron's Moderatorial Year; Murdoch University where he was Chancellor for 15 years; The Human Rights Commission; World Reconciliation for Peace and Justice and the rest were sent to the National Library in Canberra which included "Bringing Them Home" and "Deaths in Custody" reports and papers. Leila was very generous in the telling of her stories of life with Ron and it was a privilege for her to be immersed in the life of such an amazing man.

An important part of the work of the National Assembly Historical Reference Committee (NAHRC) and the Archivist is *to oversee the care and collection of all records of the Assembly and Assembly Agencies* and the past three years have seen an unprecedented influx of materials from agencies and task / working groups. This has been a result of agencies changing premises, National Directors moving on and the 'word' being spread of the necessity of accurate, well-kept records.

Once the papers are collected it is necessary *to co-ordinate the cataloguing of Assembly archival material*. The files need to be sorted, processed and catalogued so that they are well documented and accessible when needed; an ever more important aspect of archiving as the Mitchell Library, where the bulk of our records are kept, are becoming (predictably) more stringent with what is deposited as storage room becomes scarce and more costly. This necessitates continual *negotiating as to the terms of access, care and preservation of Assembly records with approved repositories*. It is also the case with the National Library, the National Archives, The National Film and Sound Archive and the AIATSIS Library in Canberra all of whom hold and preserve records on our behalf.

As a result the question of electronic archiving has become more pressing than ever and the Committee has worked hard to write a proposal for keeping long-term electronic records. This will enable us *to circulate advice throughout the Church on appropriate methods of keeping records, in the light of modern archival techniques*. The proposal is in its costing phase and it is hoped that it can be commenced in January 2011. The proposal also considers the possibility of extending the process to different levels of church administration.

In June 2007 the Uniting Church celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> Birthday and the Assembly Historical Reference Committee along with the School of Continuing Education, and the United Theological College

sponsored the conference entitled "Hidden Histories: Untold Stories of the UCA".

The conference opened with a Multicultural Musical Evening which culminated in a piece of music commissioned to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UCA for the opening of the Hidden Histories Conference. Composed by David Hood as a resource for congregational use, the piece was written for 2 Choirs and a Chamber Orchestra, and featured words from the *Basis of Union*.

The keynote speaker for the Conference was Prof Barbara Brown Zikmund. Barbara has taught and been a leader in theological education for the past 25 years. Her presentations followed the theme "Four Questions for Contemporary Christians" which was a look at the development of the ecumenical movement and its contemporary expression in "united and uniting churches".

There were many and varied papers presented during the week, ranging from our Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational heritage, stories from the time of Union and more contemporary histories of our struggles to become a recognised and relevant Church. These shared stories show the need to be honest not just about our triumphs but also our past hurts. It also highlighted the significance of keeping alive our corporate memory.

The Past President's Forum at the conference was a wonderful occasion when past Presidents Ian Tanner, 1985-1988, D'Arcy Wood 1991-1994, Jill Tabart 1994-1997, James Haire 2000-2003 and Dean Drayton 2003-2006 were asked to speak of their time as President. John Mavor 1997-2000, who was overseas at the time, also sent a message. Each one was asked to highlight one achievement of which they were proud and one thing they regretted. It was thrilling to hear snippets from these servants of the Church who each dedicated three extraordinary years of their lives to work and live for the UCA in such significant ways. This session was filmed professionally and a DVD is available to all UCA Congregations as inspiration and encouragement.

A number of the papers of the conference will be published in a special issue of "Uniting Church Studies". This publication and sponsoring of the seminar has allowed the Committee *to continue to foster interest in the Church's heritage*. The conference was a wonderful journey back for this pilgrim people, where young and old alike delighted in being part of the history of the UCA and looked forward to what the future will hold.

The Executive of the NAHRC has met nine times since last Assembly. The Triennial meeting of the NAHRC which consists of the Executive and Synod Archivists was held in November 2008. The Assembly Archivist and each Synod Archivist reported on the progress of their Archives. The Assembly Archivist had discovered the whereabouts of the gifts presented to the Assembly at the Inauguration of UCA in 1977 including the vase from the Korean Church that Dr Phillip Potter had referred to in his speech. The Committee had

the opportunity to see and discuss these gifts and other significant memorabilia.

In NSW, the Archives and Historical Society has had a major review. This will culminate in the Archives being moved to a larger, more suitable building and the possibility of a full-time Archivist. At the present time all NSW / ACT records are sorted and stored by volunteers at "Eskdale" in North Parramatta. Currently this is where the Assembly Archivist has a work station and holds records to be sorted and catalogued. An issue for NSW that has emerged is the lack of baptismal registers dating from the 1980s, since the present "marrying" generation are seeking their baptismal records. This is an ongoing frustration for the Archivists as Church officials or members of committees hold onto some Church records that are rightfully the property of the Church. As a response to this, it was suggested that ministerial candidates should receive training on record-keeping as part of their formation program.

The Northern Synod requested copies of mandates from other Synods for the further establishment of work in archives on a more formal basis. The bulk of the Northern Synod records are held at the NT Government Archives.

In South Australia records and registers go to the Mortlock State library via the Synod office. Memorabilia, photos and books are held at the UCA Historical Society's Archives in Malvern. The South Australian representative thanked the Assembly Archivist for her work in identifying the plans for the church in Ernabella at the Mitchell Library - this work was done effectively to assist the South Australian Government. It was suggested that the South Australian Synod be requested to appoint a representative to the Church Historical Committee to improve communication between the Historical Association and the Synod.

Synod resolutions pointing out that church records belong to the Synod often have very little effect so an initiative of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania has resulted in an 'Archives Evangelist', a representative from the church, visiting local parishes and talking to people, winning their confidence and securing some very valuable documents. A similar initiative to the above applies to material held by families. It was also mentioned that the Victorian Archives are producing statutory declaration certificates in which parents vouch for the baptism of their child, giving the year and/or the name of the minister who conducted the baptism. An Archival Centre and museum-display is located in the old church building at Elsternwick where all Vic / Tas records are kept.

The Western Australian Synod Archivist reports directly to the Synod General Secretary and the bulk of church records in WA are sorted at the Archives and sent to the Battye Library. It was noted in particular the near completion of a project to design a database of the children in the care of church-run homes in Western Australia.

Some time at the Triennium meeting was spent on reviewing the Mandate. In relation *to consulting with*

*Synods on the designation of buildings and sites of national importance to the Church* it was decided that the Executive, with the expertise of the various Synod Archivists, draw up guidelines to identify criteria for retaining buildings and sites of historical significance as a vital part of the heritage of the Uniting Church, while recognizing the belief that – for the sake of the gospel – not every building or site can be retained. It was also agreed in regards *to drawing attention to significant dates, events and people in the history of the Church* that the Committee invites suggestions from the state bodies regarding events of historical importance for the following year which will enable a list to be circulated to each Synod and the Assembly. The Committee would like to thank the Chairperson and long time Committee member (1998→), the Rev Dr William Emilsen, for his time and sharing his historical knowledge and his editing / publishing abilities all of which have helped to make the work of the NAHRC more effective and contributed to this small but vital Assembly Agency.

**Mrs Christine Gordon**  
**Assembly Archivist**

**Rev Dr William Emilsen**  
**Chairperson NAHRC**

## HISTORICAL REFERENCE COMMITTEE MANDATE

**Responsible to:** The Assembly

**Reporting arrangements:** The Assembly and the Standing Committee.

**Mission Statement:** To advise the Assembly and the Standing Committee on historical and archival matters of significance to the Church.

**Mandate:**

1. To oversee the care and collection of all records of the Assembly and Assembly Agencies;
2. To co-ordinate the cataloguing of Assembly archival material;
3. To circulate advice throughout the Church on appropriate methods of keeping records, in the light of modern archival techniques;
4. To negotiate terms of access, care and preservation of Assembly and Assembly agency records with any approved repositories;
5. To consult with Synods:
  - on the designation of buildings and sites of national importance to the Church, and advise on relationships with conservation bodies;
  - on the collection, maintenance and cataloguing of records;
  - on the appropriate policies regarding matters of historical importance;
6. To foster interest in the Church's heritage, and encourage research and publication on the history of the Uniting Church in Australia and its parent churches;
7. To draw attention to significant dates, events and people in the history of the Church and its parent churches, so that appropriate resources can be provided;
8. To negotiate with appropriate bodies on the funding of historical activities and conservation.

**General:** The responsibilities include:

- focusing the activities of the agency on the vision of the Assembly as a whole;
- advising the Assembly and/or the Standing Committee on policy matters within their area of responsibility;
- making policy decisions where the Assembly or the Standing Committee has delegated authority for certain policy areas, either through the agency mandate or by resolution;
- assisting the Assembly Archivist and any other agency staff in the implementation of policies determined by the Assembly and/or the Standing Committee;
- ensuring that appropriate pastoral support is offered to agency staff members;
- participating in cross-agency projects and teams established by the Assembly.

**Power to appoint:**

- To establish working groups for special tasks related specifically to the mandate.
- To make recommendations to the Standing Committee to establish other working groups for special tasks related to but not part of the mandate.

**Membership of the Reference Committee:**

**Chairperson, from the Synod of New South Wales and the ACT area (appointed by the Assembly);**

- the appointed archivist of each Synod or another person appointed by the Synod;
- five persons from the Synod of New South Wales and the ACT area, of whom one will be designated as Assembly archivist, appointed by Standing Committee; these five persons and the chairperson comprise the Executive of the Reference Group;
- power to co-opt up to two additional persons to ensure appropriate competencies, representation and development of new leadership.

*Approved by the Assembly Standing Committee March 2009*