

Task Group on National Conferences

Committee Membership: Rev Andy Tiver (convenor), Rev Eseta Meneilly, Mr. Wai Hoey, Rev Denis Hawkey. The Committee also coopted Rev Dr Tony Floyd (National Director Multicultural and Cross Cultural Ministry) to advise and support the work of the task group.

Clarification of Task

The Minutes of the Assembly record that *"on the advice from the Assembly Multicultural and Cross Cultural Ministry, appoint a National Conferences Task Group to have discussion with the National Conferences and other bodies or council as appropriate, and report, including bringing any proposals, to the 12th Assembly on how the voice of migrant communities expressed through the National Conferences may be strengthened in the life of the Church."*

The task is stated in very general terms and neither the background documents nor recollections of those present at Assembly added much specificity to our understanding of the task.

We refined our task to be: report to the 12th Assembly on *how the voice of migrant communities expressed through the National Conferences may be strengthened in the life of the church*

In undertaking this task it was soon apparent that an extremely wide range of possibilities exists for the focus of our consultations and discussions.

1. Consider how the profile of the National Conferences can be heightened within the UCA
2. Seek input in regard to the current and possible alternatives in regard to the "status" of the National Conferences within the UCA structure
3. Clarify the process by which the National Conferences currently speak to the life of the church, evaluate the adequacy of this process, and seek proposals for improvement and / or strengthening
4. Examine how National Conferences can best work cooperatively with Presbyteries in offering pastoral care to migrant communities, particularly in situations where there is a communication break down or conflict in congregations
5. Consider what is the appropriate way for the wider church to be involved in the life of National Conferences (given that the relationship needs be a dialogue)
6. Consider issues related to the voice of second generation young people within the life of the church
7. Consider issues related to the voice of communities not yet, or not intending to organize into National Conferences

In light of time constraints for the Task Group membership and the complexity and inter-

connectedness of this range of possibilities, it was agreed to focus on numbers 1 – 3 and 7.

Activities and Issues

1. **Discussions:** It became evident that it would not be helpful to circulate a discussion paper because of the lack of consensus around many of the issues and the diversity of concerns that the task group was attempting to consider. Rather a mapping exercise was undertaken to identify the points at which the National Conferences are presently, and can potentially, connect with the councils and forums of the wider church. Discussions have slowly been conducted with significant representatives of these other church councils on current practice and future possibilities.

2. **General Observations:** As a Uniting Church in Australia we have affirmed our identity as a multicultural church, however it is clear that racial, cultural and language specific communities (other than Western / European / English-speaking communities) are viewed as marginal in the life of the UCA both organizationally and conceptually. "Multicultural" is seen as a racial, cultural and linguistic "add-on" to what is considered to be the normal life of the UCA – white, western and English speaking. Yet the wider context in which the Christian church is located in Australia and across the world is one where the Christian faith is in significant decline among traditional churches in the post-Christian West, while there is an unprecedented explosion in Christian faith, especially in Asia and Africa. It is highly probable that within less than a generation the ethnic profile of the majority of those who identify as Christian in Australia will not be from the Western / European cultural traditions that have been formative of Australian Christianity in the past (and the UCA in particular). The questions: "How might we order our life in anticipation?"; "As the UCA will we or we won't embrace this present future?" and "If so, then how?" are critical to why the UCA must create valid and valued spaces in which the whole Church is able to hear the voice and feel the impact of the National Conferences and their constituent congregations not only for the present, but for our future.

3. **Areas and issues that have emerged in the work of the task group** - not an exhaustive list but an indication of some of the more significant questions and / or issues:

- a) How can National Conferences and their constituents be enriched by the polity and practice of the UCA?
- b) How can National Conferences challenge the wider church to

- experience its polity and practice through new eyes as it undergoes particular interpretation and enculturation within the life of our racially, culturally and linguistically diverse congregations, faith communities and fellowship groups?
- c) How is leadership exercised within National Conferences and constituent congregations, faith communities and fellowship groups and experienced in the wider church? The difficulties and conflicts are not simply about personal, autocratic, paternalistic characteristics that are actually not confined to racially, culturally and linguistically diverse congregations, faith communities and fellowships. They also work in the other direction whereby UCA models are experienced as individualistic, impersonal and lacking in any significant relationships or sense of communal life. Many of our National Conferences represent cultures where much more importance is given to relationships between people, rather than processes and outcomes and have something very important to say to the wider church about the exercise of personal oversight and leadership. This area represents well the mutual and cross-cultural nature of exploring being a multicultural church and society.
- d) How can a clear understanding of the National Conferences and their aims be communicated effectively throughout the UCA? This applies both within National Conferences and their membership and among many key leaders, working groups and other councils of the church who do not have a clear understanding of National Conferences, their role, place and purpose. The task group is encouraging the MCM Reference Committee, with the National Director and the restructured Uniting National Conferences Working Group to develop strategies to more effectively communicate the existence, role and structures of the National Conferences to the membership and wider Uniting Church.
- e) How can relationships between UCA congregations, fellowship groups and faith communities and their 'home churches' be more effectively and creatively managed? There are issues of common concern that relate to UnitingWorld, the Christian Unity Working Group, and the various National Conferences. The National Directors on MCM and UnitingWorld speak regularly about these matters and conversations are ongoing about how best to involve both National conferences and others from specific racial, cultural and language groups who may not be part of such Conferences, but whose voice and concerns are also important to the UCA.
- f) There are real possibilities and challenges in establishing new racially, culturally and linguistically diverse congregations, faith communities and fellowship groups. National Conferences are often aware of these potentials but there is rarely creative and fruitful cooperation between National Conferences and those parts of the church that have responsibilities for resourcing and nurturing the development of new congregations – presbyteries and synods. While the growth of new churches is not primarily the task of National Conferences, it does need to be seen as a strategic mission opportunity of the whole church which can be enriched by the insights from National Conferences about mission and evangelism strategies that have proven effective in particular racial, cultural and linguistic groups.
- g) Experiences that have been shared with the task group suggest that presbyteries have not always exercised their oversight role in respect to racially, culturally and linguistically diverse congregations, faith communities and fellowship groups well. A number of illustrations have been made:
- A lack of clear understanding of what has been happening within the life of the congregations, faith communities and fellowship groups (especially where the dominant language is not English),
 - Presbyteries have at times been unaware of difficulties and conflicts within these congregations, faith communities and fellowship

- groups until they have reached a 'critical' point.
- Examples of presbyteries intervening without a clear understanding of the cultural complexities involved, of
 - presbyteries not having sought advice from people with cultural understanding, and as a consequence acting in ways that have not been appropriate or respectful of the communities involved.
 - There is clearly a role for the National Conferences in respect to such situations, however currently there is little awareness amongst presbyteries of the resources available through the National Conferences, while lists of National Conference Contacts are available on the MCM website, this information is not well known nor are there clear mechanism / guidelines in regard to how presbyteries might relate to National Conferences.
- g) There have also been concerns expressed that when Presbyteries or other councils of the church did at times draw upon the cultural knowledge of people from within the National Conferences, it was not always a positive experience, for example, different understandings of confidentiality and accountability, have created tensions. There thus appears to be a need for
- a) Guidelines on how Presbyteries might work with National Conferences in regard to issues that emerge in racially, culturally and linguistically diverse congregations, faith communities and fellowship groups,
 - b) Training of suitably gifted people within the National Conferences as specifically designated "mediators" (there may be a better term),
 - c) Sensitive and creative cross-cultural relationships and communication and conflict resolution training of the leadership within the church. For example, a requirement that all UCA leaders in any form of UCA placement / employment be required to regularly undertake a Cross-cultural Relationships Workshop in an appropriate form.

- h) How might National Conferences have input and make contributions to effective and appropriate Ministerial Education, the development of UCA doctrine and liturgy and worship development?
The task group has not taken this up, but is aware that it is high on the agenda of the MCM and its cross-cultural Theology and Education Working Group, and of the Uniting National Conferences Working Group.

4. **A consultation was conducted in February 2008** with the 'Uniting National Conferences Working Group' (reconstituted to comprise the Chairperson and one other [total of 2] people from each of the National Conferences, and a person from one of the Arabic speaking communities, the 'Multicultural and Cross-cultural Ministry – National Reference Committee' and members of this assembly task group, and persons to interpret where a chairperson requested this. This consultation provided significant input into all of the focus areas of the task group. The consultation also suggested significant areas that could be acted on immediately in regard to achieving the brief of our task group 'to strengthen the voice of the National Conferences'. Two of the most significant outcomes in this area have been 1) the revision of the guidelines for National Conferences by that meeting, already approved by the National Reference Committee and 2) the restructuring of the Uniting National Conferences Working Group into a regular forum that will meet twice in each triennium of the National Assembly.

5. **New Ways of Listening**
The task group has grown in awareness that the issues are not primarily structural, but spiritual and relational – it is about how different parts of the church listen to each other and value what is shared and the different contexts and processes by which it is shared respectfully, effectively and appropriately. To this end the task group has spent time in long conversations and reflection about possible ways and settings arising out of our cultural diversity that might be tried in order to do things differently.

The task group is convinced that 'place' – Australia, and 'Spirit' – the gift and presence of God here and active through Creation and throughout all time and history may well be relatively unexplored gifts. Further, that these gifts may well provide ways forward that will be effective tools for understanding one another and at the same time connect that which is disproportionately European and Western with other ways of knowing, understanding and speaking about God, life in Christ, and

journeying in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It is also clear that these matters of faith, language and process are increasingly coming to the fore in the life of church and nation. That they are sources of tension, misunderstanding, frustration and uncertainty is clear. That they might also provide ways to move forward in understanding and effectiveness, in common language and imagery earthed here and not in Europe or other places and times has not been explored in any substantial or widely intentional way.

Out of our conversations, reflections, interactions and prayers, the task group is of a mind that the church needs a starting place in its search for a different way to *listen to each other and value what is shared* and not simply another process or program. A way of meeting and talking that is relationship based and not program or agenda based. Although there will be particular and identifiable outcomes, but they will not be pre-determined by the agenda itself.

The first step proposed is to invite leaders of the UAICC to host a gathering of key leaders involved in the matters relating to the work of this task group. That such a gathering be 'in country', that is to say at a time and place determined by the UAICC leaders, and in a style and using processes that arise out of UAICC experiences of working in this church and country and include first peoples' understandings and spirituality. To this end the UAICC National Chairperson agreed to have a conversation with the Task Group about such a time. Vince commonly refers to such a process and time together as "Yarni Mindin" – which can be described as conversation of the heart. It is the belief of the members of the task group that this model of conversation will give us insight into some appropriate and life-giving ways ahead in the UCA's desire to better hear and understand the diversity of voices, needs, hopes and gifts among us as a Church for all God's people, and in the intention of this Working Group to explore how *"... the voice of migrant communities expressed through the National Conferences may be strengthened in the life of the church"*.

Following a meeting between members of his Working Group, the National Director MCM and Vince Ross, National Chairperson of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress [UAICC] at "Narana", the UAICC Centre at Geelong on Friday February 27th 2009, it was agreed:

- That the National Director MCM and the Convenor of the Uniting National Conferences Working Group, in consultation with Vince Ross and the

staff at Narana, convene the 2009 meeting of the Uniting National Conferences Working Group at Narana in the 4th quarter of 2009 [preferably October after Vince returns from Long Service Leave].

- That the group 'camp' on site at Narana
- That Vince guide the process of the gathering in the spirit of 'Yarni Mindin' so that the work of the Uniting National conferences Working Group and the interactions of its members provide opportunity to experience this way of listening and in the process be further exposed to indigenous culture and insights in ways that will further mutual understanding and the journey of reconciliation.

**Rev Andrew Tiver
Convenor**

The proposals arising from this report are included in Section C of the Assembly papers.