

# Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress

## 1. 1985 MANDATE GIVEN TO CONGRESS BY UCA

The 1985 Assembly mandate states ...

Congress shall have responsibility for oversight of the Church's life and mission with and for the Aboriginal and Islander people of Australia. In fulfilling this responsibility, the Congress shall seek to work with the Assembly, Synods, and Presbyteries.

There has been a steadily growing recognition that such ministry would include

- A covenant-partner relationship between the Indigenous and non – Indigenous sectors of the UCA to enable “ministry to the Aboriginal and Islander people of Australia” to be fulfilled as well as enabling Congress to share its unique God-given gifts with the wider UCA;
- Development of an Indigenous Christian theology to complement and enrich that of the UCA and hopefully, Australian mainstream churches;
- A relationship with other Australian Indigenous Christians so that there could be a united national Indigenous Christian voice able to speak out and bring a spiritual perspective to secular society as needed; and
- Eventually a relationship with other neighboring Indigenous Christians in the Asian-Pacific realms and beyond, again, to enable a unified voice to speak on behalf of Indigenous Christians in global forums.

## 2. THE PAST TRIENNIUM

The past three years are likely to be judged by history as a watershed time for the Aboriginal and Islander people of Australia. In many respects there now seems to be a shift in attitudes linked to the changing political climate. In particular, we have witnessed ...

- The growing recognition of the harsh realities of life for many Indigenous Australian youth through the release of the ‘Little Children are Sacred’ Report;
- The ‘Intervention’ program in the Northern Territory instigated by the then Federal Government;

- Federal Parliament signing off on the national ‘Apology’ to Indigenous Australia; and
- The growing acceptance of the urgency for Governments to become seriously committed to ‘closing the gaps’ between the non-Indigenous and Indigenous people of the nation.

Congress believes that all of the above have ramifications for the life and ministry of Congress ... both positives and negatives.

## 3. THE NATIONAL ‘APOLOGY’ HAS BROUGHT NEW HOPE

For most Indigenous Australians, the Kevin Rudd apology is the stand-out event. On February 13<sup>th</sup> 2008, members of the UAICC National Executive, together with many hundreds of others, sat in the Great Hall of Parliament House to hear the Prime Minister offer the now famous ‘Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples’. He began with the words,

Today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history. We reflect on their past mistreatment. There comes a time in the history of nations when their peoples must become fully reconciled to their past if they are to go forward with confidence to embrace their future. Our nation, Australia, has reached such a time..... until we fully confront that truth, there will always be a shadow hanging over us and our future as a fully united and fully reconciled people. It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together.

This apology, in so many ways, reflects aspects of the journey which the UCA began twenty four or more years ago ... a journey of ‘apology-healing-reconciliation-covenanting-partnership’ with its Indigenous brothers and sisters. May the renewal of our Covenant be an ever growing - ever enriching experience.

## 4. TASK GROUP FOR COVENANT RENEWAL

During the past triennium, the Assembly Standing Committee established a Task Group, to progress ‘Covenant Renewal’, nominating three persons from mainstream Uniting Church. Congress appointed four from their ranks to complete the team.

This Task Group was established for the purpose of ...

- a) *providing a context in which the partners to the Covenant can raise and discuss experiences and issues that cause encouragement and concern over the*

*operation of the covenant relationship across the church;*  
*b) considering ways in which Congress and the wider church can further develop their understanding of, and commitment to the Covenant; and*  
*c) continuing the unfinished work from the previous General Secretaries' based Task Group on the Covenant. (ASC minute 07.39.02)*

Congress believes this initiative to be particularly valuable. Over the life of this Group, all tasks outlined above have been addressed. Of particular significance from a Congress point of view, this Task Group has provided an essential forum for shaping thinking as its members worked through their growing body of ideas regarding the nature of future covenant relationships with UCA.

The study booklet "Building Partnerships" has been made available to all Synods and ministers. It was specifically designed to deepen understandings and awareness amongst UCA persons who may have had limited experience or understanding of Indigenous issues and the work of the UAICC. We are hoping that resources such as these will be used increasingly by congregations.

## **5. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROPOSED PREAMBLE STATEMENT**

The proposed Preamble to be considered at this 2009 National Assembly, has its roots in a statement made twenty one years ago.

In this statement, the dysfunctional relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians was apparent and acknowledged in these words ....

"Those of us who have migrated to Australia in the last two centuries or are descendents of migrants, confess that all of us are beneficiaries of the injustices that have been inflicted on those of us who are Aboriginal people. ....

"The integrity of our nation requires truth; the history of Australia, as it is taught in educational institutions or popularized in the media, must cease to conceal the reality and nature of Aboriginal society before invasion, what has been done to them in colonization, and what has been the fate and status of Aborigines within the Australian nation."

When the statement was prepared, the theological implications for the Uniting Church had probably not emerged in any significant way. The realization that God

might have been speaking directly to Indigenous Australians for many millennia, well before the days of Noah or Abraham, was hardly a consideration. But this is the view of Congress ... this is the historical truth as we see it and which we are now asking non-Indigenous members of UCA to acknowledge through the proposed Preamble.

This proposed Preamble is particularly important because it takes the UCA Covenant - between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members - to another level; to beyond just having 'truth' in history and Indigenous claims for justice and a fair deal addressed .... it poses challenging questions such as –

- What was God's purpose in preparing and speaking to the 'first people of our nation over such a long period of time?';
- What cultural and spiritual insights can Indigenous Christians potentially bring to today's Australian churches from their long history and a theology contained in their 'Dreaming?';
- What would it mean for an Australian church to recognize these Australian spiritual roots as part of God's revelation and gift for this nation today?

## **6. REVISION OF THE UAICC CONSTITUTION**

The UAICC Constitution and Regulations were last revised and approved in 1992: more than sixteen years ago. The need for another revision of this document has been long felt and has been a matter constantly before the National Executive and Regional bodies of Congress. In the past two years, steady progress has been achieved towards completion of a draft for a revised Constitution.

As can be appreciated, our draft document is dependent on the agreed relationships, especially between Regional bodies and their respective Synods. It has also been a long process for Congress to clarify the future structures that are most likely to serve it best with respect to its mandate for ministry. The need for flexibility in structures to accommodate the very different situations that Regions find themselves in and to avoid attempting to adopt a 'one size fits all' approach has been essential.

Originally the target was to have the Congress draft document ready to be dealt with at this '09 Assembly but it has been apparent for some time that this timing was far too short and instead a more prudent target would be 2012.

## **7. EXPLORING INDIGENOUS CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY**

For a number of years, UAICC was acutely aware that it needed to become proactive in the task of exploring relevant aspects of indigenous spirituality and theology from their Christian perspective.

In July 2007, the first of the UAICC Indigenous Theology Forums was offered. Twenty two participated in a three day event that provided for key note speakers, sharing out of cultural life experience and small group workshops. The focus of this first workshop was to be upon "Exploring distinctively Indigenous Christian ways of dealing with the stresses of life in Australia"

The theme was explored under three headings:

- i. Naming the stresses that are faced by Indigenous men and women;
- ii. Learning from Scripture, theological tradition and the wisdom of the culture about practices of life that are Christian ways of responding to stresses on Aboriginal communities. Identifying what actually sustains people and
- iii. Talking about the practices that should mark our life now, and which show what it means to be a distinctly Christian Church at this time.

In August 2008, a second three-day Forum was organized for forty participants. The theme of this event was "Doing it Our Way; Contemporary Christian Ceremony in Indigenous Cultural Contexts". A similar approach to the first Forum was followed with inputs, sharing and small work groups. The aim of the four workgroups was to focus on a chosen ceremonial area in church life and explore how a culturally inclusive and sensitive framework for liturgies could be developed for use in current Congress ministry. The four ceremonies that were addressed in this Forum were ...

weddings / marriage; funerals; Holy Communion; and baptism.

National Executive has strongly endorsed this initiative and it is now planned to make this a regular feature in the life of Congress. It is also hoped that these activities will eventually become a source of enrichment to the life of UCA.

## **8. NATIONAL COUNCIL OF ELDERS**

Within the UAICC Constitution and Regulations, provision was made for the establishment and functioning of a National Council of Elders. This is unique to Congress and a reflection of the roles

and importance given to Elders in cultural life.

For a number of years, this body has had a minimal role in the life of Congress. However, during the past three years there has been a determined effort to develop the effectiveness of this Council. It has been meeting on a regular basis and seriously addressing its responsibilities.

At the initiative of the National Council of Elders, their October '08 meeting was so arranged as to have an overlap with the UAICC National Executive and so enable them to share their concerns and insights about the life of Congress with the Executive. At this combined meeting, Elders expressed concern as to whether the ministry on the ground was reflecting the necessary balance between the spiritual and temporal. They pointed out that when constantly being faced with situations of great need, it is all too easy to have those activities that feed the spiritual hunger crowded out. It was timely and refreshing to be challenged in this way.

The growing influence and work of this Council is greatly valued.

## **9. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CONGRESS NATIONAL YOUTH COMMITTEE**

At the 2006 National Conference of the UAICC more than forty youth registered and participated in a special program that ran for much of the time in parallel with the main Conference activities. It was largely as a result of this experience that a Congress National Youth Committee was established with provision for representation from every State. It has been meeting regularly since and was responsible for the very successful participation in and contribution to the 2009 NCYC. This group is planning for a major contribution to the '09 National Conference and has also begun preparations for a Congress National Youth Conference in July 2010. It is anticipating playing a significant role in the next NCYC event.

The establishment of the National Youth Committee has been an exciting development for Congress ministry. This initiative is picking up real momentum and becoming a source of encouragement for Congress youth. The growth and availability for future Congress leadership is receiving a significant boost.

## **10. TRAINING**

Yalga-binbi Institute for Community Development is recognised by the Uniting Church in Australia as a college for

ministry formation and theological teaching, especially for Indigenous Christian leaders within the Congress.

The Institute also trains people in community development work through the vocational education and training sector. Some of the community development training is incorporated in the ministry formation courses.

Currently, the Institute delivers the following:

- Certificate IV in Christian Ministry
- Diploma of Christian Ministry
- Certificate III in Community Services Work
- Certificate IV in Community Development
- Diploma of Community Development

The training functions of the Institute have been in operation since 2005, when Yalga-binbi became a recognised training organisation. In 2008, the Institute's first graduates celebrated their achievements. There were four graduates in Certificate IV in Christian Ministry and nine graduates in the Diploma of Community Development.

Yalga-binbi looks forward to an expanded future in training and education across other vocational areas in response to the

## 11. NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Congress is looking forward to the 2009 Conference in Perth. The National Council of Elders has requested that this gathering be extended by a day to enable the program to begin with a "Day of Retreat". Their concern was to challenge all attending to set aside the concerns and stresses in their lives and to become still before God and open to His leading during the Conference week.

The Conference theme – "Transformation: Determining Tomorrow's Leaders" has been carefully chosen. The scriptural focus is to be on the leadership of Nehemiah as a person who faced the impossible, confident that with the Lord, the impossible could become possible. It will also be wonderful to have Professor Daniel Smith-Christopher available to share his knowledge and expertise on the life of Nehemiah with us. Nehemiah dealt with broken walls and a broken community; then together with Ezra, the two of them were able to help the people rediscover their spiritual life and cultural heritage. The relevance of these scriptures to many situations Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike find themselves in, is obvious. Our Congress Elders and leaders are determined to accept the challenge for transforming lives, families and

communities and believe this Conference will be of very special significance.

## 12. NATSICA

During the period 2006-8 Congress became heavily involved in promoting the formation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Alliance (NATSICA)

Towards the end of 2006, a number of Indigenous Christian leaders, drawn from all denominations and fellowships, began to share their concerns over the inability of the Australian and Federal/State Governments to effectively address the social gaps between life in Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian communities. A number of meetings were had over the next year and a half leading to an official launch of the organization in May 2008.

"It has been well documented that in the main areas of life – education, employment, housing, health, longevity etc. – the gaps between the two populations are not being closed to any substantial or satisfactory degree. Answers to this tragedy, it was argued, were not merely a matter of better education, increased employment and health services, more housing etc. These are certainly critical needs but where the spirit of people has been crushed over many decades and generations, answers and policies must also embrace spiritual perspectives and dimensions. In this respect, the need for a voice to advise Governments, a voice that takes into account fundamental questions of life – the purpose and vision for living; the importance of social and spiritual cohesion within cultural /individual diversity etc. – are critical factors to finding answers."

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Alliance (NATSICA) is a body comprised of representatives from Australia's Indigenous Churches. It was formed to create a national platform to advocate for the rights and responsibilities of all Indigenous Australians from an Indigenous Christian perspective.

Accordingly, the NATSICA mission statement reads:

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian Alliance seeks to glorify God by bringing a unified Christian voice, to advocate for change in governments, Churches and the wider community to address the spiritual, social, economic and political issues that affect Indigenous peoples.

### **13. INTERVENTION**

Congress and other members of NATSICA gathered in Alice Springs for two days in July '07 to consider the Government's emergency response plan for preventing Indigenous Child Abuse.

This was the first major opportunity for a unified Christian voice to be raised over a matter of such national significance. The organization of this Summit was largely initiated and borne by Congress. It is hoped that this will become just one of many such gatherings as the needs arise.

**Rev Shayne Blackman**  
**National Administrator**