Multi-cultural nature of the Uniting Church and its mission

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Abstract

At Canberra City Church we experience Sunday by Sunday people from many countries of Asia, the Pacific, Africa and Europe worshipping together. Some of these people were baptized at City Church. Others are attending Church for the first time. But immigrant people live mainly in the large cities in Australia. Very few live in the country areas.

Over the last forty years immigrants have come from many countries in Asia, the Pacific and Africa. As they have come, the Uniting Church has helped them establish worshipping congregations to serve and minister to their people. We have helped them to bring pastors from their countries of origin, to obtain church buildings in which to worship, and have welcomed their representatives into the presbyteries, synods and Assembly of the Uniting Church.

Sometimes this has meant that we have had to take actions to combat negative and racist attitudes among other members of the church – attitudes such as, “Why can they not worship with us? Why can they not be like us? Why have they got to worship separately?”

In 1985, the Assembly of the Uniting Church adopted a statement. “the Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church”,
and took a number of steps to enable immigrant people to enter into the life of the Church and play their unique part in its life and witness.

In the case of the Korean congregations of the Uniting Church, we have now set up a Korean Presbytery in order to provide more effective oversight of the congregations.

Members of the Uniting Church in Australia now worship in more than twenty languages. Furthermore, many young people from these immigrant congregations have trained for the ministry of the Uniting Church and are now serving in English-speaking multicultural congregations.

But the Uniting Church is multicultural in another sense also. For nearly two centuries, the churches which came together in 1977 to form the Uniting Church in Australia have established missions among the Aboriginal people of Australia. During the last thirty years the Aboriginal members of the Church have determined to take responsibility for the organization of their own congregations and for ministry and mission with Aboriginal people in Australia. They do this, not as a separate church, but as part of the Uniting Church. In 1985, with the support of the Uniting Church Assembly, they established the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Many people who are not Aboriginal work under the oversight of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian
Congress, among Aboriginal people.

At the meeting of the Assembly in 2010, the Assembly adopted a preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church, acknowledging the unique place of Aboriginal people in Australia, and in the Uniting Church.

So the Uniting Church is multicultural in more than one sense. It is truly an inspiration to worship with people of all these cultures. It gives a foretaste of the unity of humankind which is part of the vision of the Kingdom of God.

Key Words
Uniting Church, immigrant people, European migration, the White Australia Policy, Asian Immigration, racism, Multicultural Church, Mission with Aboriginal people, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC)
The experience of Canberra City Uniting Church

Canberra is the capital city of Australia. It is a small city of 350,000 people. It is situated 300 kilometres south-west of Sydney and 600 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, built specifically as the capital city. It is the site of a number of national institutions, including Parliament House, The National Gallery, The National Library, the National War Memorial, Defence Forces Academy and the Australian National University.

My wife and I are members and Ministers-in-Association of Canberra City Uniting Church, a small church in the centre of the city and one of many churches of all denominations in Canberra. In Canberra there are also mosques, a synagogue, Buddhist and Hindu temples, and other places of worship.

I have just returned from Sunday morning worship. This morning, being the first Sunday of the month, was a combined service of Holy Communion with the Tongan Toe Talatalanoa Congregation and the English language congregation. The Tongan congregation has shared the property with us for about thirty years. They have full use of the facilities, pay no rent, but make a substantial contribution to the annual budget of the church, and to the fellowship and community service work of the church.
As always on this first Sunday of the month, one of the readings from the Bible was read in Tongan and printed in English, and the other was read in English and printed in Tongan. Some of the hymns were sung simultaneously in both languages. The Tongan choir sang the anthem. The prayers for others were led by a Sri Lankan Tamil man. The elders, men and women, who distributed the bread and wine included Tongans, a West Papuan, and a Korean, as well as European Australians. The stipended ministers of the church are a European Australian man and a Korean Australian woman. The music was led by an Indian-Australian pianist and a Polish violinist who is studying at the Australian National University. On one side of my wife and me sat a young Chinese woman and on the other a Pakistani man.

Sometimes it is a group from West Papua who sing the anthem. On Saturdays, a group of people from Sudan meet for prayer and fellowship; there is an English Bible study group for Korean speakers; and a group of Tongans meet for fellowship and choir practice. On most Sundays, the Tongan congregation meets for worship in Tongan language at 2.00 p.m., and on the first Sunday each month, the Tamil community gathers for worship at 4.00 p.m.

Many of the people who meet for worship on Sunday morning are also members of congregations or fellowship
groups that worship in languages other than English at other times. Some of them were baptized at City Church; some were Christians before they migrated to Australia. Some had no experience of church before arriving in Canberra.

On most Sunday mornings the congregation includes Australians of Anglo-Celtic background as well as Australians of other European, Tongan, Fijian, Rotuman, Papua New Guinean, West Papuan, Indonesian, Malaysian, Indian, Sri Lankan, Chinese, Korean, Tanzanian, Zambian, Liberian, Sudanese, Malawian, Ghanaian and other backgrounds. To worship in such a congregation is to have a foretaste of the vision of the Reign of Christ pictured in the Book of Revelation 7:9: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

The Church Council includes Australians of Sri Lankan Tamil, Korean, Tongan, West Papuan, Indian and German background as well as Anglo-Celtic people. The volunteers who serve breakfast each week-day at the church to some Canberra’s homeless people include people of various national and cultural backgrounds.

Unfortunately, although Canberra City Church is not
unique, there are not many congregations in Australia which are as diverse as this. There are several reasons for this.

**But not all of the Church is so Multicultural**

First, most immigrant peoples live in the cities where employment, business and children’s education opportunities abound. Many churches are in rural settings and small towns, where there are few immigrants.

Second, most immigrants, especially those who have arrived recently prefer to worship in the language of their birth, in styles of worship similar to that which they left behind when they emigrated, and in the company of fellow immigrants facing the same struggles, and with similar cultural traditions and values.

Third, I am sure that some immigrants have not experienced warmth of welcome when they first arrived and attended a local Uniting Church congregation. They felt unwelcome, different, and some degree of alienation. This might have been completely unintentional on the part of the regular members of the congregation. Perhaps there was just little understanding of the issues that the immigrant person was facing. But the end result was that some immigrant people who tried to relate to the local Uniting Church congregation felt alienated, and did not want to attend again.
Immigration prior to 1950

Prior to 1950, the vast majority of Australian residents were descendants of English, Scottish and Irish settlers, with minorities of Aboriginal people, and of Chinese whose forbears had come to Australia to mine gold in the 1850’s. The Presbyterian Church established missions to Chinese people living in Australia as early as the nineteenth century, and brought pastors from China to minister to them and to preach the Gospel among the wider Chinese community. So missions and congregations of Chinese Christians grew in the major cities and some smaller centres. However for many years these congregations were related to the General Assembly through the Board of Missions.

Immigration after World War II

After the Second World War large numbers of people who had been displaced by the war in Europe migrated to Australia. Many of these initially became labourers and factory workers. Many were Roman Catholics and either joined existing Catholic congregations, where the Mass was said in Latin anyway, or formed largely Italian or Polish-speaking congregations. Dutch and Hungarian Congregations of the Presbyterian Church of Australia were formed in the big cities, and Dutch or Hungarian–speaking pastors were brought from Europe to minister to them. Many of the German-
speakers joined Lutheran congregations. Greek people and many Eastern European migrants established Orthodox churches. Many people also arrived from Lebanon during the 1960’s. Some found homes in Catholic or Orthodox churches. Muslims established mosques. The Protestant Churches made some buildings available for Orthodox Christians to meet for worship. A few immigrants arrived from Tonga, Fiji and Samoa in the 1960’s, and the Methodist Churches in the centre of Melbourne and Sydney set up ministries with and for them. Ministers were brought from their countries of origin to minister to these people from the Pacific Islands.

The White Australia Policy

Following racial violence against Chinese immigrants in the 1890’s, successive Australian governments had maintained the notorious so-called, White Australia Policy under which anyone wishing to migrate to Australia from other than the United Kingdom had to undertake an English-language dictation test. It was extremely difficult to pass the test, and so all but a tiny minority of migrants before 1950 came from the United Kingdom. It is interesting to note that some of the staunchest opponents of this racist policy in the 1940’s and 1950’s were the two senior missionaries who had returned from many years of mission work in Korea – Rev J. Noble Mackenzie and Dr Charles McLaren. The law was finally repealed in 1972.
The beginning of large scale immigration from Asia.

With the repeal of this law, the gates were opened for the possibility of people from Korea, Vietnam, India, China and other places to immigrate to Australia. A small trickle of Koreans arrived over the next three years. In 1975 there was an influx of about 500 Korean men who had worked as civilian technicians in support of the United States and Korean armies in Vietnam. Over the next few years these men obtained permanent residence permits and were able to bring their families from Korea. At the same time, from 1976 onwards, Australia received over 90,000 refugees from Vietnam, and Vietnamese-Australians now number more than 200,000. By 2006 more than 150,000 Australian declared themselves to be of Korean ancestry. More than 200,000 Australians were born in each of China, India, Vietnam, Korea, Philippines, Malaysia, Lebanon, Italy. In addition over the last decade Australia has received thousands of migrants each year from Sudan as well as immigrants from other countries in East Africa.

The response of the Uniting Church

How has the Church responded to this growing influx of immigrants from Asian and African countries? I became General Superintendent of the Presbyterian Board of Ecumenical Mission and Relations in 1972. By co-incidence,
this was the same year in which the White Australia Policy was repealed, and the doors were opened for Asian people to immigrate to Australia. In 1973 The Rev. Alan Stuart, formerly a missionary in Busan, together with a few Korean-Australian Christians established the first Korean Church in Australia in Melbourne. In July 1974 the Rev Kim Yoon Shik, (at that time Moderator? General Secretary?) of the Presbyterian Church of Korea visited Sydney, and I invited a few Korean-Australian Christians whom I had recently met, to meet with Dr Kim in our home. We decided that evening to begin a Korean congregation in Sydney. The Korean Christian Fellowship began meeting in Sydney in September 1974.

It was in this year that Korean technicians who had been employed by the United States and Korean forces in Vietnam began to arrive in Sydney. They immediately sought out the Korean church, not because they were Christians in most cases, but because at the church they could speak Korean, hear news of Korea, find a listening ear as they struggled with the problems of adapting to life in Sydney, share information about housing and employment opportunities, and gain help with obtaining longer term visas or permanent residence permits. (Most had arrived with visitor’s visas). The Christian Fellowship at that time included Roman Catholics and many different Protestant people. Sometimes I led worship; sometimes it was led by a Catholic priest from Korea who was undertaking study at the Pacific Mission Institute, run
by the Columban Fathers. Some of the men who attended became Christians and requested baptism, and so we decided to seek affiliation with the Presbyterian Church of Australia. The Roman Catholics among us began to attend Mass in a Catholic Church.

**The Church as a missionary community**

From the beginning, the church became not just a place where the Gospel was preached and heard in Korean. It was also a place where men newly arrived in Australia could find friendship, information about accommodation and employment opportunities, and also help with negotiating to obtain permanent residence in Australia, leading later to Australian citizenship. As soon as the men had obtained permanent residence visas, they began negotiations to bring their wives and families to settle in Australia. When the families began to arrive it was necessary for the church to begin to help people to enrol their children in schools, and to begin to understand the health care and hospital systems. The church became the place where information was shared, and workshops and classes were held to assist people to adapt to their new country.

We then began to bring ministers from Korea to serve the congregations. As numbers of immigrants increased, so did the need for more ministers. We established new
congregations in other cities. In Sydney, where most Korean immigrants settled, we established churches on a regional basis in the metropolitan area – north, south, east and west of the central church. We brought ministers from Korea to serve the congregations, all under the umbrella of the Uniting Church in Australia which had been established in 1977 as a union of Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. This all happened during the rule of the military government in Korea, and we were able to invite to Australia some of the most able young ministers to come to Australia to work for various periods in these churches, to give them some respite from the pressures in Korea, as well as offer support to new immigrants.

Other Asian congregations

But even while we were doing this, events overtook us. Within the one congregation we might have people from 10 or 15 different denominational backgrounds – Presbyterians of Ko Sin, Hap Dong, Tong Hap, PROK and Jae Geon Church background, Baptists, Methodist, Holiness, Churches of Christ and others. So there were two pressures working to divide the churches. People of a particular Presbyterian background sometimes wanted to call a minister from their own Korean denomination as minister. On the other hand, many ministers came from Korea as “missionaries” wanting to establish a church. So the churches began to divide, and now there are
many small congregations with from twenty to one hundred members. At times this has become scandalous with so many small congregations competing for members, and thus giving mixed messages to the Korean-speaking community in Australia about the purpose of the church.

But it was not from Korea only that immigrants were arriving. Over the first ten years of the life of the Uniting Church, we established also congregations for Indonesians, Chinese, Filipinos, Vietnamese – a total of more than 20 cultural and language groups. To serve these groups we brought ministers from the countries concerned, or recruited them elsewhere. Most have become ministers of the Uniting Church in Australia, while some remain ministers of the church in their country of origin, serving with the Uniting Church.

To assist these churches in their evangelism and service ministries, we translated some important documents into different languages and made them available to the various immigrant groups. Some of these documents detailed government and church-sponsored services available for immigrant people in the community – health-care services, children’s education services etc.

To enable the immigrant congregations to understand and utilize the liturgies of the Uniting Church, we also translated into many languages the Basis of Union and Constitution of
the Uniting Church in Australia and the liturgies for Holy Communion and Baptism, and made these available to the leaders of the congregations.

**Recognition of the Uniting Church as a Multicultural Church.**

During the 1970’s and 1980’s these congregations of people of a non-English speaking background (NESB) were usually represented in the councils of the church (presbytery/synod/assembly) by the national mission agency – Commission for World Mission of the Uniting Church. It was this Commission which brought to the national Assembly in 1985 a statement entitled “The Uniting Church is a Multi-cultural Church”.

- The Assembly adopted the Statement which it affirmed: as a declaration of the intention and the nature of the Uniting Church in Australia.
- The Assembly requested the Commission on Mission to undertake further study on intercultural aspects of worship, communication, polity, decision-making processes and models of ministry.
- It requested the Standing Committee to use its powers to ensure the presence at the next Assembly of men and women directly representing migrant parishes and congregations and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress; and that these representatives would be in addition to
any delegates elected as representatives of synods and presbyteries, the number to be not less than six from migrant ethnic congregations and a similar number from the Congress.

- It requested the synods to make similar provisions in the membership of their annual meetings.

- The Assembly also requested congregations of the Church to make provision for migrant congregations to use Uniting Church properties by payment of rentals only in proportion to the hours of use they made of the properties.

- The Assembly decided to use migrant languages in addition to English to facilitate participation in worship services.

- It authorized congregational structures that varied from those authorized in the regulations of the Church so as to provide flexibility for those people used to different styles of organization and different styles of worship.

- At the same time the Assembly authorized the translation of liturgies of the Uniting Church into other languages, while encouraging them to use liturgies familiar to them if they so chose. It also requested the NESB congregations to make available to the Church liturgies and prayers from their tradition for possible use in the rest of the Church.

All these actions were designed to provide flexibility as a means of helping migrant people to feel that they had a place in the Uniting Church.
Combatting racism in the church and community.

The greatest difficulty faced by migrant groups settling in Australia has undoubtedly been the racism that is endemic to Australia. Racism comes in many forms. Sometimes it is experienced at a personal relationships level, but it is also institutionalized. It may appear in the form: “This is the way we do things in Australia”, or “This is the way we do things in the Uniting Church”. “So, if you are to live here”, or “if you are going to be part of the Uniting Church”, this is the way you will be expected to do things. Sometimes the barriers were linguistic, sometimes they were cultural, but whichever they were, they often resulted in a total failure on the part, particularly of the presbyteries, to understand the difficulties facing a congregation or ministers of a different culture.

In order to counter and change this ethnocentric racism, the Commission for Mission adopted a number of measures. These included the publication of several documents designed to help people understand how racism functions and is expressed, and inviting members of the church to consider how racist attitudes might be affecting relations between them and migrant people. The Commission also took measures to empower migrant congregations in their negotiations with local Uniting Church congregations.
Korean Congregation regulations

In the case of Korean congregations of the Uniting Church, representatives of the congregations and the Commission for Mission negotiated a set of regulations to govern the life of the Korean congregations of the Uniting Church. Other Korean congregations joined a presbytery of the Ko-sin church. This set of regulations helped for a time to ameliorate some of the tensions with the presbyteries, but there remained a deeply ingrained attitude to these regulations in some presbyteries: “Why can’t they be like us?”

An elder of the Korean congregations who had been a founding member of the first Korean-speaking congregation in Sydney – Mrs Seongja Yoo - was appointed to the staff of the Commission for Mission as Secretary for Multicultural Ministry. She provided an effective voice in the Commission and in the Assembly office for congregations and members of the Uniting Church whose first language was not English. It was thanks to her efforts that many documents important to immigrant people were translated into languages other than English.

Annual Conferences for Immigrant groups.

From 1985 the Commission for Mission began organizing
annual national conferences for ministers and lay leaders of local congregations for Tongan, Korean, Indonesian and other language groups. These provided people with opportunities to air problems and frustrations with leaders of the Church, and also to dream dreams about how to do things better in the Uniting Church.

In Sydney some leaders of NESB migrant congregations and staff of the Commission for Mission met together for a time and established the Multicultural Forum of the New South Wales Synod, with Rev Lee Sang Taek as chairperson. The forum provided a platform for the discussion of issues common to migrant congregations and developing strategies for dealing with them.

So over a period of a decade or more, various structures were established to facilitate the life and witness of migrant congregations, and to enable the Uniting Church to be a more responsive sponsor for these ministries.

**The Korean Commission**

During the 1990’s as the Korean congregations of the Uniting Church in Sydney felt increasing frustrations with their relations with the regional presbyteries and their ineffective oversight of the Korean congregations, some leaders of the Korean congregations developed a proposal
for the establishment of a Korean presbytery of the Uniting Church to have oversight of the ministry and mission of the Korean churches in Australia. This would not be a regional presbytery but could have oversight of congregations in other states and cities besides Sydney. The proposal and request to the Assembly was opposed by some of the regional presbyteries and was disallowed by the Assembly. However the frustrations and problems that gave rise to the proposal to establish a Korean presbytery refused to go away, and in the end the New South Wales Synod established a Korean Commission with representatives of Korean congregations in that State. Membership of the Commission included representatives of Korean congregations and three other persons appointed by Synod. The Commission did excellent work in overseeing the life of the Korean congregations in New South Wales and providing support for ministers and church councils. The executive officer of the Commission was a Korean-Australian – Rev Jang Ki-soo.

Korean Presbytery

But many of the Korean congregations considered that the commission should be given the full powers of a presbytery – including the responsibility for arranging ordination and placement of ministers. Finally in 2011, the Synod, considering the responsible and effective way in which the commission had functioned, and having received a positive
report about the functioning of a similar presbytery in the Presbyterian Church USA, established a Korean presbytery with full rights and responsibilities.

The other large migrant community in the Uniting Church is the Tongan community of which there are many congregations scattered across Australia. Some are organized under one umbrella Tongan Parish. Some, as in Canberra City Church have their own congregational structure but function with unwritten constitutions in close fellowship and cooperation with an English language congregation, sharing an ordained minister with that congregation, and carrying on many services and activities jointly with the English-speaking congregation. Others are organized as separate congregations connected through the local presbytery. Some congregations remain congregations of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, with very little connection with the Uniting Church.

Throughout the development of the migrant congregations, the Commission for Mission was motivated first by the command of the Gospels to preach the Gospel to all peoples. Second, it has sought to empower the powerless in their struggles in settling into a new country, in accordance with the teaching of the prophets and Jesus himself. Nevertheless, I am sure that many immigrant groups have found it difficult to understand the Uniting Church and the Commission for Mission. In spite of this, there are now congregations of the
Uniting Church which worship in as many as 23 different languages. Some of their ministers have been trained in Uniting Church theological colleges. Some have come as migrant people. On the other hand, many young men and women who grew up in these migrant congregations are now ministering in English-speaking congregations composed mainly of Anglo-Australians. And the Uniting Church has been greatly enriched by their contributions to its life.

The Aboriginal people and the Uniting Church

But in addition to migrant congregations there is another stream in the Uniting Church which is perhaps even more basic to its life as a multicultural church. This is the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – the indigenous people of Australia - in the life of the Uniting Church. Whilst this is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of the relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and all migrants and their descendants – including those who came from Britain and Europe from 1788 onwards -some aspects of that migration affect the relations between all Aboriginal peoples (including the Christians among them) and the mainstream churches.

Dispossession and land wars

The people who came from England from 1788 onwards,
apart from a few Jews, were nominally Christians. They established churches wherever they lived, although some among them were alienated from the churches, or were only nominally Christian. But the migrant people in line with the policies of the British Government of the time simply took possession of the land as if it were vacant land without an owner. They totally misunderstood and ignored the land ownership laws of the Aboriginal people. They claimed that because there were no houses or other permanent structures visible, no signs of farming the land and no domestic animals, the land belonged to no-one. In fact, Aboriginal people had lived on the land for perhaps 60,000 years. Aboriginal people knew which family group was related to which land and had the rights to its produce and the responsibility to care for it. But the newcomers from England were ignorant of all of that. They simply divided up the land and allocated or sold it to whomever they decided.

This policy inevitably brought about conflict between the migrant English people and the Aboriginal people. Land wars ensued. With the superior weapons they possessed, the Europeans simply crushed the opposition. Many groups of Aboriginal people were massacred. Those who remained were gathered into settlements or Aboriginal Reserves. Managers were appointed by the Government to supervise the reserves and hand out very basic supplies to the people living there. In some cases Christian missionaries took the opportunity
and were appointed as managers of the reserves, so that these places were often called “missions”. Some of the managers were good and thoughtful people who took the opportunity of witnessing to the Gospel as best they knew how. Others were dictators whose rule appeared to the Aboriginal people as merciless and violent. For most Aboriginal people, the term “mission” became associated with control, and destruction of their culture, way of life, and their laws.

**Early missions**

A few good English people, angered by the way the Government and settlers were relating to Aboriginal people, took the side of the Aborigines and supported them in their struggles against the violence. Some strong Aboriginal men and women led resistance movements. During the latter half of the twentieth century, these resistance movements gained force and drew the support of many non-Aboriginal people, including the mission boards and agencies of the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. They focussed particularly on demands for rights to traditional land for Aboriginal people.

While all this was happening, Aboriginal groups in the centre and north of the country remained living on their traditional lands. At the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, missionaries of the mainstream churches went to live and work with them. Some were more
respectful of Aboriginal culture and law than others. Many became strong supporters of Aboriginal struggles to obtain mainstream law titles to, and control of their lands. Many of these Aboriginal groups became Christian while retaining their commitment to their own culture and law in new fusions.

During the 1970’s the Methodist and Presbyterian Church missions began training the lay leaders of Aboriginal churches as ministers. An ecumenical theological college was established in Darwin to train Aboriginal pastors and community workers. These men and women were appointed to work in Aboriginal churches and communities across Australia.

**Formation of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress**

The Uniting Church in Australia was formed by a union of Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches in 1977. In 1982, the Uniting Church in collaboration with the Christian Conference of Asia Urban Rural Mission, brought together Aboriginal pastors, lay leaders and community workers from across Australia to think about Aboriginal church and community, and the future of Uniting Church ministry and mission with Aboriginal people. Much of what people in other parts of the world had learned about community organization was introduced into missions in these years. The conference
decided to establish an organization to take responsibility for ministry and mission with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia. This organization would be linked to the Uniting Church, but would have autonomy in deciding policy, planning and implementation of ministry and mission with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In the end, it was decided to call this organization “The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC). The Assembly of the Uniting Church approved the establishment of the UAICC and resolved to transfer to its oversight and control all financial and personnel resources designated for work with Aboriginal people. From that time on all decisions in relation to Aboriginal churches and mission with Aboriginal people have been made by the UAICC.

**March for Justice, Freedom and Hope**

In 1988, Australians celebrated the Bicentennial of the coming of the English people to Australia. In the years leading up to 1988, Aboriginal members of the church and their supporters queried whether the Uniting Church should participate in celebrating the Bicentennial of an event which had brought disaster for most Aboriginal people. So in 1982, the Assembly of the Uniting Church resolved to participate in the celebration only if substantial steps had been achieved beforehand to secure justice for Aboriginal people. Three years later when it became clear that the vast majority of
church people would participate in the celebration anyway, the UAICC, supported by the Commission for Mission, decided to organize a march for Freedom, Justice and Hope to take place while other Australians were celebrating the Bicentennial. So on the day of the Bicentennial, 16 January 1988, several thousand Aboriginal people from across Australia, and their non-Aboriginal supporters, marched in Sydney for freedom, justice and hope for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while the rest of Australia celebrated the Bicentennial.

The Covenant

But the UAICC was disappointed in the response of the Uniting Church Assembly to their request that the Uniting Church participate in the Bicentennial Celebrations only if significant progress had been achieved by that time towards establishing justice for Aboriginal people. So in 1988 they brought to the Assembly a request that the Assembly enter into a Biblical-style covenant relationship with the UAICC so that the Uniting Church would become a church in solidarity with the struggles of Aboriginal people for justice. The Assembly agreed to the request. In 1992 the Assembly, at the request of the UAICC, appointed me to work full-time at promoting the covenant at every level of the Church’s life, and encouraging the Uniting Church members, congregations, presbyteries and synods to get to know and enter into committed relationships
with the UAICC, and with Aboriginal people and congregations in their area. This process of covenan-ting has continued for twenty four years. Part way through the process, at in 1994, the Uniting Church Seventh Assembly entered into a formal covenant relationship with the UAICC, the President reading a statement of apology for past wrongs committed by the church against Aboriginal people and resolving to work together in a covenant relationship from that time onwards. The President of the UAICC accepted the Apology on behalf of the UAICC.

The Preamble to the Constitution of the Uniting Church

During the years 2006-2009 as part of this covenanting process a proposal was developed to give recognition to the Aboriginal people by writing and incorporating a Preamble into the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia. The proposal was discussed in presbyteries and synods and finally, the following words were adopted by the Assembly in 2009:

“... As the Church believes that God guided it into union so it believes that God is calling it to continually seek a renewal of its life as a community of First Peoples and of Second Peoples (from many lands), and as part of that to
Recognize that:

1. When the churches that formed the Uniting Church arrived in Australia as part of the process of colonisation they entered a land that had been created and sustained by the Triune God they knew in Jesus Christ.

2. Through the land God had nurtured and sustained the First Peoples of this country, the Aboriginal and Islander peoples, who continue to understand themselves to be the traditional owners and custodians (meaning ‘sovereign’ in the language of the First Peoples) of these lands and waters since time immemorial.

3. The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonizers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace which was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.

4. Some members of the uniting churches approached the First Peoples with good intentions, standing with them in the name of justice; considering their wellbeing, culture and language as the churches proclaimed the reconciling purpose of the Triune God found in the good news about Jesus Christ.

5. Many in the uniting churches, however, shared the values and relationships of the emerging colonial society including paternalism and racism towards the First Peoples. They
were complicit in the injustice that resulted in many of the First Peoples being dispossessed from their land, their language, their culture and spirituality, becoming strangers in their own land.

6. The uniting churches were largely silent as the dominant culture of Australia constructed and propagated a distorted version of history that denied this land was occupied, utilized, cultivated and harvested by these First Peoples who also had complex systems of trade and inter-relationships. As a result of this denial, relationships were broken and the very integrity of the Gospel proclaimed by the churches was diminished.

7. From the beginning of colonization the First Peoples challenged their dispossession, and the denial of their proper place in the land. In time this was taken up in the community, in the courts, in the parliaments, in the way history was recorded and told, and in the Uniting Church in Australia.

8. In 1985 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Uniting Church in Australia formed the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

9. In 1988, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress invited the other members of the Church to join in a solemn act of covenanting before God.

10. After much struggle and debate, in 1994 the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia discovered God’s call, and accepted this invitation and entered into an ever deepening
covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. This was so that all may see a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

AND THUS the Church celebrates this Covenantal relationship as a foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation.

Conclusion

So the Uniting Church is clearly a multicultural Church, with congregations and virtually a synod of the church comprised of Aboriginal people, many worshipping in Aboriginal languages and using Aboriginal cultural symbols and forms, and relating the Gospel to issues faced by Aboriginal people in their daily lives. Other congregations are comprised of immigrant peoples who have arrived in Australia over the last forty years. They worship in languages other than English, and in the light of the Gospel, wrestle daily with issues faced by their people living as immigrants or asylum seekers arrived recently in Australia.

These congregations are all the fruit of Christians bearing witness in words and actions to the Gospel, as the people of the congregations wrestle with the issues that the members of the churches and their communities face in their daily living.
I do not think that we, as a part of the Church of Jesus Christ, have always borne the burdens of our brothers and sisters as empathetically as we should have done. But we are a church that takes seriously its nature as a church composed of and living among people of diverse cultures and histories, and trying to bear faithful witness to the God of the prophets and Jesus Christ, among people struggling daily with issues of justice, human need and pain.
Bibliography


