



July 2003

REPORT TO THE TENTH ASSEMBLY

1. INTRODUCTION

UnitingJustice Australia (formerly National Social Responsibility and Justice) is responsible for offering leadership to the Uniting Church in Australia on matters of social justice. Its mission is

to guide and resource the Church to more fully live out its commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, primarily within Australia.

The Church contributes to public debates on social justice matters of national significance for the purpose of working toward a just world. The Uniting Church's commitment to social justice arises both from our Christian beliefs and from our rights and responsibilities as citizens in civil society.

UnitingJustice has, over many years, worked to fulfil the mandate given it by the Assembly and has grounded this work in the principles and commitments expressed in the 1977 and 1988 Statements to the Nation and the 1997 Invitation to the Nation.

The 1997 Invitation to the Nation committed the Assembly to building a nation which responds to the disadvantaged and vulnerable; which acts with generosity; that struggles for equity and justice for all people; that stands in solidarity with Indigenous Australians; and that recognises the importance of all creation for future generations. UnitingJustice is proud to affirm this statement as it continues to serve the Assembly in its commitment to a just, equitable and sustainable world.

This commitment is about the fulfilment of the gospel in Australia, a gospel in which liberation from oppression and injustice is central to the incarnation of God through Jesus Christ:

*"I have come to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."
(Luke 4:18)*

Through our struggle for justice for all people, and all creation, the mission of Christ and that of the Church is realised.

2. AGENCY PRIORITIES

2.1 Introduction

In the three years since the Ninth Assembly a number of significant events have influenced the work of the Agency. The priorities which had been envisaged for 2000-2003 were reconsidered in the light of the 'war on terrorism', the war in Afghanistan and the war on Iraq; and the increasingly harsh conditions for asylum seekers and refugees.

The Ninth Assembly, with resolution 00.21.03, laid the foundations for what would become one of the major areas of work—the issues around asylum seekers and refugees. While the resolutions of the Third Assembly laid the foundations for opposing military solutions to terrorism and international conflict, the focus of the issues in 2001-2003 has been quite different from the specific concerns addressed in 1982. Both these issues have required substantial research, consultation, lobbying and the provision of information to the Church.

2.2 Programs

2.2.1 Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Since October 2001, the advocacy work on asylum seekers and refugees has dominated the work of the Agency. A position/policy paper on asylum seekers and refugees was produced in 2001. After further changes to Federal Government policy and practice, the policy was amended and adopted by Assembly Standing Committee in July 2002. Further position papers and resources have also been developed.

Both Rosemary Miller (during 2001) and Elenie Poulos (since 2002) have accompanied the President to meetings to advocate for the welfare



of asylum seekers and lobby for changes to Government and Opposition policies. Rosemary Miller and the President met with officers of the Prime Minister's office during the Tampa incident and Elenie Poulos and the President met with Phillip Ruddock and Julia Gillard after the 2002 Assembly policy was adopted.

Press releases have been issued, letters sent to parliamentarians, papers written for Uniting Church and other Christian papers and magazines, sermons have been preached, speeches given at rallies and refugee support group meetings and many radio, print and television interviews have been conducted. Significant effort has also been made in continuing to build and grow new alliances with other church and community sector organisations.

Rev. Bev Fabb, Chair of the Reference Committee, was a keynote speaker at the 2002 National Theological Consultation in Adelaide. She spoke about her experiences in ministry at the Port Hedland Immigration Reception and Processing Centre, exploring the relationship between justice, advocacy and evangelism.

Submissions were made to

- the Senate Inquiry into the Migration Legislation Amendment Bill 2001
- the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into Children in Detention 2002 (with UnitingCare Australia)
- the DIMIA Consultations on the 2002-2003 Migration and Humanitarian Program
- the DIMIA Consultations on the 2003-20034 Humanitarian Program (with UnitingCare Australia)
- the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Family and Community Services Legislation Amendments (Special Benefit Activity Test) Bill 2002 (with UnitingCare Australia). On the strength of this joint submission, Elenie Poulos and Lin Hatfield Dodds were invited to present evidence to the Committee.

UnitingJustice gratefully acknowledges the work of Rosemary Miller while she was Acting National

Director and the significant contribution of Julia Pitman of the Synod of South Australia in two of these submissions.

A national Refugee Working Group was established by the ASC under the auspices of UnitingJustice. On the basis of the Assembly policy this group drafted a single resolution that was offered and passed at almost every Synod in 2002. A brochure has been produced and distributed to members of the Church informing them about the Assembly policy and the Synod resolutions. It includes information about why this is an important issue for the Church and suggestions for what people can do to help.

The way that work on this issue developed over 2001-2002 provides a useful model for future work for the Agency. With a focus on collaboration between Synods, Synod agencies and Assembly agencies, the research and policy work has been well informed by the services and support being offered to asylum seekers and refugees by Uniting Church agencies, congregations and members all over the country. The Agency in turn has been able to resource and support the lobbying and advocacy work of members, agencies and services of the UCA. With a clear policy, the Agency has developed effective alliances, ecumenically and with community sector organisations. In meetings with Government, the Church has been able to speak with a well-informed voice.

UnitingJustice continues in its concerted political lobbying strategy. Most recently we have focussed on the Memorandum of Understanding between the Australian and Iranian governments and the plight of Iranian Christians and others in detention, and those whose Temporary Protection Visas are due to expire, who face deportation back to countries where their safety cannot be guaranteed.

2.2.2 War and Peace

Following the terrorist attack of September 11, UnitingJustice developed the resource Uniting for Peace (November 2001). This document was the result of extensive collaboration from Synods and agencies around the country.

In the lead up to and during the war on Iraq, UnitingJustice actively lobbied against Australian involvement in the war and supported the President in a national media strategy. The Synod justice staff produced resources for the Church, held seminars and forums, planned and participated in public rallies and meetings and gave media interviews.

2.2.3 Mandatory Sentencing

Resolution 00.21.02 of the Ninth Assembly was on mandatory sentencing. In 2001 UnitingJustice made a submission to the Senate Inquiry into Mandatory Sentencing. Rev. Prof. James Haire, Rev. Sealin Garlett, Rosemary Miller and Rev. John Brown were consequently invited to present evidence to the Committee.

2.2.4 Environment

UnitingJustice has continued to produce resources to assist in the Church's reflection on the issues of environmental justice. World Environment Day liturgies were produced on the themes determined by the United Nations: "Connect with the World Wide Web of Life" (2001), "Give Earth a Chance" (2002) and "Fresh Water – two billion people are dying for it!" (2003). These resources would not have been developed without the contributions of Rev. Paul Chalson (2001), Cath James and the Earth Team in Victoria (2002) and Rev. Jason John in Queensland (2003).

The Social Justice Sunday 2002 resources were developed around the theme of sustainability. UnitingJustice led an ecumenical working group, which included representatives from Synods and agencies of the UCA, the Anglican Church and the Roman Catholic Church, and produced a kit entitled, 'Sustaining Creation'.

UnitingJustice, together with Synod justice units, continues to lobby the Government to ratify the Kyoto Protocol to the UN framework convention on climate change, most recently in connection with the particular circumstances of the island nation of Tuvalu.

2.2.5 Democracy, Citizenship and Human Rights

One of the Agency's most significant projects over the last triennium was the co-ordination of Election

2001: A Briefing Paper. The project was the result of intensive and significant collaboration across Synods and Assembly agencies. The document was distributed throughout the UCA as a resource to members and associated communities in preparation for the 2001 Federal Election.

In the 2001 resources for Social Justice Sunday, UnitingJustice used the opportunity provided by the Centenary of Federation to remind the church of relevant major Assembly statements (from 1977 and 1988), and to explore, in the light of these and the international human rights instruments, our achievements as a nation. We also asked the Church the question, 'What sort of Australia do we want to be?' – a question that lies at the heart of working for justice. In these materials we raised some of the issues around what it means to be a citizen participating in the life of a democratic state.

Other work in this area has included: the release of a public statement condemning the Government's vote against the United Nations anti-torture protocol; a joint submission with Justice and International Mission Unit Synod of Victoria and Tasmania to the Senate Inquiry on the ASIO Legislation Amendment (Terrorism) Bill 2002; and continuing work on the issue of integrity in public life.

2.2.6 Racism

UnitingJustice was one of the agencies that worked with Multicultural Ministry to produce the cross-cultural education program, Confronting Racism. Workshops have been run in a number of Synods and presbyteries and many more are planned.

The theme for Social Justice Sunday 2003 is racism and UnitingJustice is co-ordinating an ecumenical team in the preparation of a kit containing materials for reflection, worship and action.

2.2.7 NCYC

NCYC 2003 provided a wonderful opportunity to reach out to young people in the Church. UnitingJustice led four elective sessions: an immersion stream workshop on refugee and asylum seekers issues; the justice stream immersion processing session; and two hothouse forums –

one on issues of black and white in Australia and the other on war and peace. All sessions were well attended and well received.

2.2.8 Globalisation and International Trade

UnitingJustice has made two submissions, one to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and one (jointly with UnitingCare NSW.ACT), to the Senate Inquiry into GATS and the US-Australia Free Trade Negotiations.

UnitingJustice joined the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET).

2.2.9 Poverty

UnitingJustice and UnitingCare Australia made a submission to the Senate Inquiry into Poverty and will be further developing this area of lobbying and advocacy.

2.3 Ecumenical Collaboration

The National Director of UnitingJustice represents the Assembly on two committees of the National Council of Churches – the Refugee and Displaced Persons Program Committee (RDPP) and the Social Justice Network (SJN). Through these networks the Agency has been able to develop strong alliances and good working relationships with both NCCA staff and justice representatives from other churches, particularly the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC).

Two significant discussions on methodology for national ecumenical social justice work have been based on the Rev. Dr Ann Wansbrough's PhD thesis, *Speaking Together: a methodology for the National Council of Churches contribution to public policy debate in Australia*. The first was a one day workshop in March 2001 for the NCCA Executive, state ecumenical staff and other interested people. This led to a further presentation and discussion at the National Executive in June 2002. These forums have provided the opportunity to clarify how churches engage in the analysis and development of social justice statements.

On the advice of the NCCA Social Justice Network (co-chaired by Ann Wansbrough), and following on from Social Justice Sunday 2002, the NCCA

Executive in March 2003 adopted a statement to government about environmental responsibility. This included a specific call that Australia ratify the Kyoto Protocol on Greenhouse Gas Emissions. The statement has been sent to state as well as federal Ministers and their counterparts in other political parties.

The SJN has also contributed to the National Conference on Treaty in June 2002 and to the work of Australian Collaboration. Australian Collaboration is seeking a more holistic approach to social justice and environmental responsibility in public policy, and is looking at ways of measuring outcomes.

Our participation in the RDPP and the SJN committees of the NCCA has enabled us to develop the relationships that have made possible ecumenical collaboration on such projects as Social Justice Sunday. More generally, however, the effectiveness of national ecumenical social justice work is hampered by the failure of the NCCA member churches to fund a justice staff position, the lack of national justice agencies in many member churches, and the fact that most churches do not have clearly articulated positions on many issues.

2.4 Agency Life

2.4.1 Staffing and Resourcing

The last three years have seen significant changes in the life of the Agency – both a high level of staff turnover and a reduction in human and financial resources. Project continuity has sometimes been difficult and the maintenance and continued growth of the justice networks around the country has also been affected. The effectiveness of the Agency's administrative systems and processes has also suffered. Despite these difficult conditions, the commitment of the Agency staff, the Reference Committee and the Synod justice staff has enabled the Agency to achieve a great deal of important work.

Deb Brown resigned from the Agency after almost eight years (from April 1993 to February 2001) of committed service which included excellent work as Research Officer. After Deb's departure the

staffing allocation was redefined as a 2 day per week administration position. Iris Elgueta filled that position with great enthusiasm and managed the Sydney office while Rosemary Miller worked mostly from the Perth Synod office as Acting National Director. Iris resigned after one year in the position to move interstate.

Christine Cargill resigned as National Director on 1 June 2001 after almost two years in the position (from September 1999). Christine developed stronger relationships of collaboration and co-operation between Assembly agencies and the Synod justice networks. Her vision for the social justice work of the Church was enacted through her significant contact with presbyteries and her support of the social justice work of the Synods.

Rosemary Miller was appointed Acting National Director from 1 June till 31 December 2001. Rosemary's expertise and commitment proved invaluable as she led the response to the war in Afghanistan after the September 11 bombings and on refugees and asylum seekers in the difficult times during and after the Tampa incident.

The Rev. Elenie Poulos was appointed National Director in January 2002.

Tanya Richmond was appointed as Administration Officer in May 2002. She has brought both excellent administrative skills and research and submission writing experience to the Agency.

2.4.2 Communication

In 2000 and 2001, the Social Justice Newsletter was a significant way in which the Agency communicated its work with the Church.

In 2002 and 2003 we have been focussing on the further development of the website, a new email news list and a justice email chat group as the primary means of communication. The website has been redesigned and updated. It is now easier to navigate and easier to update. The UnitingJustice-news list has been operating for a number of months and has proved an excellent way of informing interested people about our work and

providing them with opportunities to participate in various forms of action for justice and peace.

Regular updates on the Agency's work are offered in Assembly Update and the Synod papers (which always include an invitation for those who cannot access the internet to phone and request hard copies of all of our materials). A pamphlet describing the Church's position on refugees and asylum seekers has been produced and an action kit developed. The book *Doing Justice* is being launched at this Assembly and further publications of various forms will be produced as appropriate over the next three years.

3. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

3.1 UnitingJustice in Context

The social, political, economic and moral contexts in which we live have changed dramatically since the end of the Cold War, and particularly the last three years. We are now living in times defined by military aggression, rampant consumerism, growing inequities between the wealthy and the poor, and the continued, unchecked destruction of the natural environment.

Some of the significant particular issues which we are facing (and which fall within the mandate of UnitingJustice are) include:

- short-term gains determining social policy at the expense of the social good;
- terrorism, war-mongering and military re-armament;
- an increasingly less generous stand on human rights and civil liberties in democratic nation states;
- people being defined by governments as consumers in an economy rather than as citizen participants in a democratic state;
- waning commitments to the development of sustainable environmental practices;
- the decreasing commitment by the Australian Government to reconciliation;
- the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers; and

- the development of medical and scientific technologies unchecked by serious ethical consideration.

It is vital that in these uncertain, fearful and fragile times, the Christian churches continue to offer a clear alternative vision for a compassionate and just society.

The Uniting Church is in a position to be able to provide leadership in our society, a prophetic leadership which speaks of justice, peace and harmony. To continue to be effective in its work, it is essential that the Church has a strong national voice. UnitingJustice is a key agency in fostering and expressing the national voice of the UCA in the public arena.

3.2 Goals and Priorities

Within this context, UnitingJustice is examining ways to resource the Church across as wide a range of issues as possible. It has a clear and focussed vision of its mission and a well-articulated strategy for achieving its goals. It continues to be committed to working collaboratively across Synods and agencies, and in partnership ecumenically and with the community sector.

The work of UnitingJustice must be grounded in the highest possible standard of research and theological reflection. The Agency must be well-informed and in a position to act quickly. It must lead the Church in effective lobbying and advocacy. It must be able to contribute wisely to the public forum.

The goals of the Agency can be summarised as:

- excellence in research and theological reflection;
- the development of strong policy;
- effective lobbying; and
- effective advocacy based on the solidarity model.

In order to achieve these goals, the strategic priorities for UnitingJustice over the next triennium will be:

- the development of a strong identity for the Agency, inside and beyond the Church;

- the development and maintenance of a UnitingJustice network; and
- the development of UnitingJustice Task Groups as the operational norm of the Agency.

3.2.1 Identity

In March 2003, the ASC approved a change in the name of the Agency from National Social Responsibility and Justice to UnitingJustice Australia. A new logo has been designed. This change was made as part of the strategy to build a stronger national identity for the Agency, both within and beyond the Church. It was believed that the work of the Agency should be reflected in a name that is easy to remember, strong in its associations and immediately identifiable as part of the Uniting Church.

Another way to strengthen the identity of the Agency is to ensure the clarity and focus of its mission and mandate. The Reference Committee, in consultation with the Synod staff, are reviewing the current mission and mandate.

3.2.2 Ways of Working

UnitingJustice has always drawn upon the skills and experience of Church members in the production of resources on a variety of issues in the form of various working or task groups. After the Tenth Assembly, UnitingJustice will be forming the first UnitingJustice Task Groups. The Task Groups will be under the oversight of the National Director and the Reference Committee and will be supported by the Synod justice staff workers as appropriate.

UnitingJustice has a long history of working collaboratively and co-operatively with Synod staff. The Agency and the Synod justice staff have agreed to the establishment of a national UnitingJustice Network to enable communication, education, research, lobbying and advocacy throughout the Assembly, Synods and Presbyteries. This network will support and resource action (members will be available for the UnitingJustice Task Groups) and will contribute to the national policies and priorities of the Assembly.

On issues identified as national priorities, the Synod staff, wherever possible, will work together with the

National Director of UnitingJustice to facilitate the UnitingJustice Task Groups and the UnitingJustice Network, to ensure an integrated and strategic approach to national priorities.

3.3 Programs 2003-2006

In the current socio-political context, the following three areas of work have been identified by the Reference Committee as the major priorities and the first to require the formation of UnitingJustice Task Groups:

- Peacemaking – the Task Group will build on the work committed to in the proposal being brought to this Assembly ‘Building a Culture of Peace’.
- Reconciliation and justice for Indigenous Australians – we will seek to set up a collaborative project with Covenanting and the UAICC.
- Environment – the work of the Task Group will be focussed in the areas of water and salinity.

Other important areas of work planned over the next three years include:

- Decade to Overcome Violence – a special project will be developed as the Uniting Church’s national contribution to the DOV program;

- Health – UnitingJustice will take the lead in a joint project with UnitingCare Australia to develop a national statement of health principles;
- Poverty and welfare – UnitingJustice will support UnitingCare Australia in these areas of work as appropriate; and
- Genetic technology and bioethics.

Work will continue in the areas of:

- Refugees and asylum seekers;
- Democracy, citizenship and human rights; and
- Globalisation and trade

4. CONCLUDING COMMENT

UnitingJustice Australia is committed to be faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ by pursuing social and ecological justice and peace in Australia and the world. We produce work grounded in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Scriptures, and built upon the tradition of the Uniting Church in Australia. We offer our ministry to the Church and the world that God’s will for peace and justice for all creation may be served.

Bev Fabb, Chairperson
Elenie Poulos, National Director

May 2003