



# ASSEMBLY COVENANT ACTION PLAN

2021 - 2024



Uniting Church in Australia  
ASSEMBLY



UNITING ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER  
CHRISTIAN CONGRESS

**Front cover artwork:**  
Interwoven story-telling

**Artist:**  
**Grace Williams**  
Community and Cultural Resource Officer  
Leprena - UAICC Tasmania



***"No matter what the history, this will always be Aboriginal land, our imprint will never be invisible and we will always survive and thrive. Our stories and family lines entwine across seas, lands and skies, forever a united front."***

**Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this publication contains the images of people who have passed away.**

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# Walking Together First and Second Peoples

## A Covenantal Vision for the Uniting Church in Australia

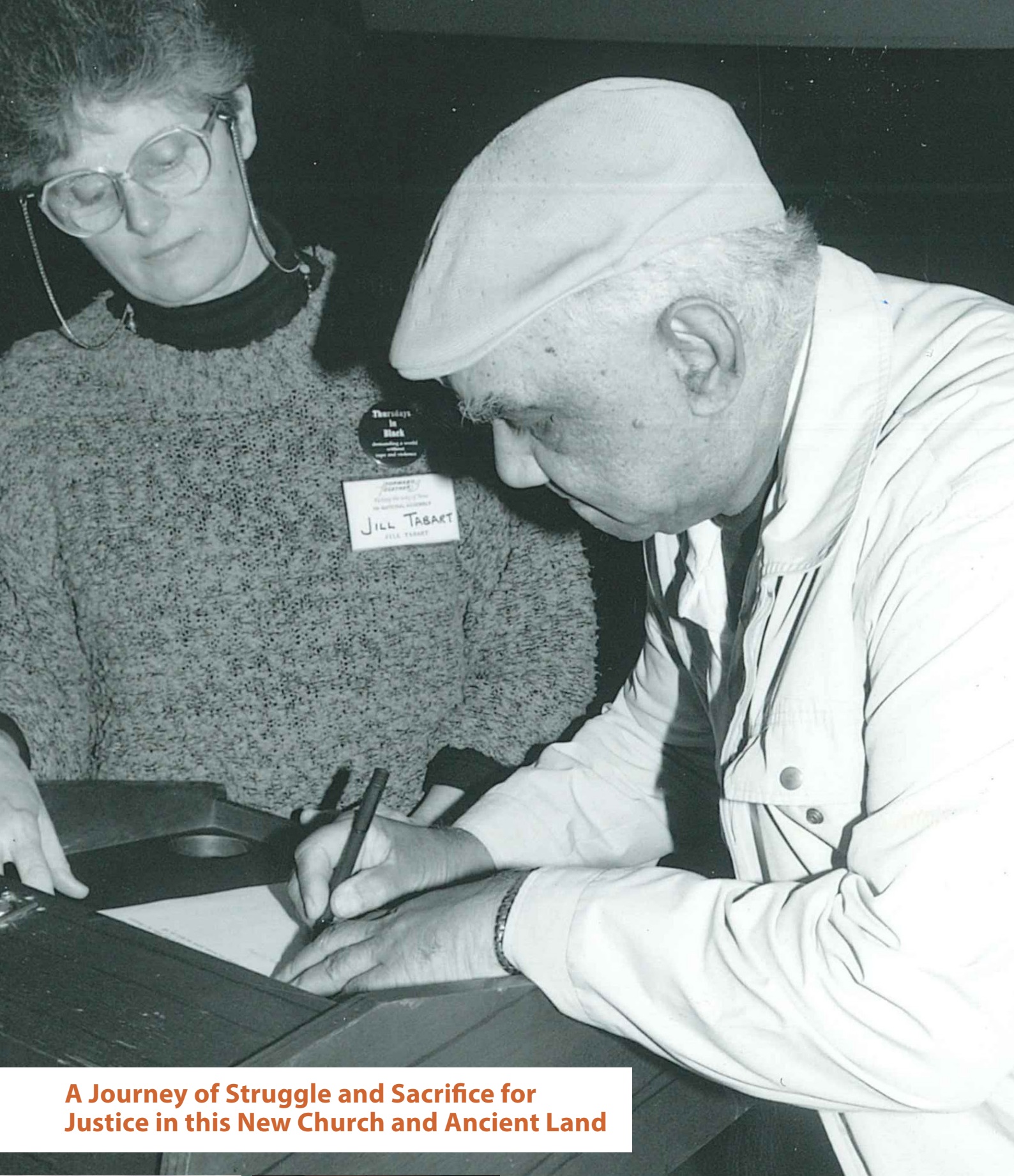
**The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC or Congress) – First Peoples, nurtured and sustained by God before the invasion, are celebrated at the very heart of what it means to be the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA).**

**First Peoples' sovereignty is affirmed, First Peoples have a voice in the decision-making of our Church and are empowered to live out their right to self-determination.**

**As First and Second Peoples of the Uniting Church, we are bound together in covenantal relationship, walking together, creating socially just and culturally safe relationships, listening and learning from one another.**







## A Journey of Struggle and Sacrifice for Justice in this New Church and Ancient Land



1) President Dr Jill Tabart and UAICC Chairperson Pastor Bill Hollingsworth sign the Covenant Statement at the 7th Assembly, 1994. 2) Rev Charles Harris visionary and first President UAICC addresses a rally in Canberra on 9 May 1988 opening of Parliament House. 3) President Rev Alastair Macrae and UAICC Chairperson Rev Ken Sumner after the 12th Assembly, 2009 resolve to adopt a new Preamble to the UCA Constitution. 4) President Rev Prof Andrew Dutney and UAICC Chairperson Rev Jeffrey R. Garrawurra on the lawns of Parliament House Canberra for the Destiny Together gathering of the UCA in March 2014. 5) President Dr Deidre Palmer and UAICC President Rev Garry Dronfield join with First Nations UCA leaders (UAICC National Executive together with the UnitingCare Australia Network members) in 2019 to form, the Uniting First Peoples Network.



In 1982 at Crystal Creek, a place just north of Townsville, First Nations Peoples came together. There were Christian leaders from across Australia as well as some Māori leaders from Aotearoa. They determined to start a 'Black Congress' - a First Peoples movement within the Uniting Church in Australia.

Later in 1982 the Uniting Church's 3rd national Assembly Meeting, resolved to stand together in solidarity and not to celebrate the Australian Bicentennial in 1988 unless there was a significant change for First Nations Peoples in the advancement of land rights and justice.

In 1983 at Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island in North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, First Nations Peoples came together again and formed the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC). Rev Charles Harris (dec) was the leader with Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra his deputy.

Charles spoke of holistic evangelism. By this he meant both arms of the cross. One, the vertical arm, was pointing to God – signifying they would preach the good news of Jesus Christ. The second, the horizontal arm symbolised outstretched arms to embrace a hurting community in love, to seek justice for First Nations Peoples and to care for their physical needs.

The 4th Assembly Meeting in 1985 saw joy with the formal recognition of UAICC but then the meeting sadly reversed the decision of the previous Assembly to boycott the Bicentennial celebrations. This caused much pain.

By January 1988 Charles Harris organised with prominent First Nations leaders the March for Justice Freedom and Hope. A protest march and rally beginning in the Sydney Domain with Charles' powerful prayer. 40,000 First and Second Peoples, Christians and others joined in solidarity. The March had been endorsed at a launch held in Balmain Town Hall on the 4th July 1987, by high profile Australians, including then then President of the Uniting Church Rev Ian Tanner.

It was in May 1988 when the 5th Assembly met that Revs Harris and Gondarra with other UAICC leaders called for a Covenant to bind the UCA and the UAICC together in relationship under God. This was endorsed by the full Assembly by acclamation.

It took another six years before the 7th Assembly in 1994 formalised this Covenant through the exchange of statements and the gift of a sacred painting. Rev Professor Andrew Dutney refers to these as the 'Covenant instruments' (see pages 9-15).

In 1996 the UCA through the [Assembly Standing Committee \(ASC\)](#) apologised to [Stolen Generations](#) for the part we had played in taking children from their parents and grandparents and the long-term harm and generational legacies of this trauma, many years before the Australian Parliament offered its Apology. The 8th Assembly in 1997 [affirmed this Apology](#) and added commitments we would make as a Church.

The 12th Assembly Meeting in 2009 endorsed a new [Preamble to the UCA Constitution](#) recognising the sins of the past and our part in them and declaring that God had been in this ancient land well before the invaders arrived, sustaining the First Nations Peoples. This constitutional change was upheld by Synods and Presbyteries and advised to the 13th Assembly in 2012.

For the first time, in 2014 the Church was called to a Week of Prayer and Fasting. A Destiny Together, a prayer vigil on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra, brought together hundreds from across the nation. Thousands more joined in prayer vigils in their homes and towns throughout the week. Crying out to God for justice for First Nations Peoples, and in particular, about the injustices of the so-called Northern Territory Intervention.

At the 14th Assembly in 2015, the World Council of Churches 'Statement on the Doctrine of Discovery' was affirmed. This '[Statement](#)' repudiates the 'Doctrine' and its devastating affects upon Indigenous Peoples.

In a show of moral leadership to the nation, the 15th Assembly in 2018 affirmed First Peoples as Sovereign. This meeting also endorsed the [Statement from the Heart](#) (2017) with its asks for a constitutionally enshrined [Voice to Parliament, Treaty negotiations and Truth telling](#). Rev Dr Chris Budden's book *Why Sovereignty Should Matter to Christians* gives a deeper insight and invites Christians to engage with the challenging questions sovereignty presents.



## Reconciliation and Renewal

The Uniting Church's theological and missional foundations are expressed in the document: [The Basis of Union](#).

*"The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity. God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end."*

It is this reconciliation and renewal, the unfinished work of Christ, which we are called to partner in, that drives the UCA's commitment to the Covenant with Congress, and more broadly, to seek justice for First Nations Peoples (see [Budden and Rickard Theological Foundations](#)).

### THE UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was approved by the General Council of the United Nations in 2007. The Australian Government endorsed the Declaration in April 2009 (see [document](#)). The UCA in its life, decisions, policies and advocacy will be guided by the Articles of the Declaration. We seek in our Covenant relationship to reflect the universal human rights which flow from the source of all creation and which point to the new creation, the new humanity, the end in view for the whole creation.

# Covenant Action Plan

**This inaugural Covenant Action Plan (ACAP) seeks to give ‘shape’ to the UCA’s binding covenant relationship for the national body of the Church, the Assembly. It gives direction to all business units of the Assembly in the formation of strategic and action plans for their boards and respective staff teams. It is a dynamic document, which will be regularly reviewed to ensure it is relevant, contemporary, and challenging.**

Members of the 14<sup>th</sup> Assembly, 2015 meeting in Perth WA bound together in covenantal relationship (UCA President Stuart McMillan and UAICC Chairperson Rev Dennis Corowa).





Item	Date	Actions	Resources
<p><b>Launch ACAP -NAIDOC</b></p> <p><b>16th Assembly 2022 include 'Act of Remembrance'</b></p> <p><b>Commission Gadigal artwork for Charles Harris Room</b></p>	<p>June 2021</p> <p>July 22 To be completed March 2021</p>	<p>The President UCA and UAICC Chairperson/ President to read to each other with the Covenant painting present and instruments resigned.</p> <p>Post to Assembly and UAICC web pages. Email to all Executive Leaders and Synod leaders.</p> <p>Media including National Update and social media platforms. 'Act of Remembrance' posted as video and shared to all Synod Comms units.</p> <p>Walking Together and Justice Circles to promote.</p> <p>Promote through National Update, Assembly and Synod Comms via video and/or photos</p>	<p>Comms budget</p> <p>Secretariate budget savings?</p>
<b>Commemorate all significant dates</b>	Commenced 2018 December 2021	Calendar link on Walking Together web page	
<b>UCA and Australian National significant dates</b>	<p>Completed 2020 annually</p> <p>Completed 2020 annually June 2022</p>	<p>Develop, distribute, and promote worship resources.</p> <p>Promote the local stories from worship and events held.</p> <p>Produce a high-quality video 'Our Story' (similar to UCQ's)</p>	<p>Day of Mourning, Reconciliation Week</p> <p>NAIDOC Week</p> <p>Destiny Together fund balance</p>
<p><b>Resources produced</b></p> <p><b>Walking Together Formation short course</b></p>	<p>Completed 2019 December 2021 January 2021 December 2021 March 2022</p>	<p>Format all significant documents and load on Recollect</p> <p>First co-delivered, with First Nations UAICC leader Feb/March 2021</p> <p>Promote with all Synods and Colleges together with online - ULearning platform.</p> <p>Onboarding all staff</p> <p>Standards for Ministry to include this Course or like offering in requirements for formation.</p>	<p>Banner (pull-up) Acknowledgement Resource</p> <p>Budgets Assembly Business Units/ Synods/Colleges</p>
<b>Walking on Country</b>	Dec 2022	All Assembly business units have arranged for all staff to participate (city and heart lands).	Operational budgets 2021-22
<b>Welcoming and inclusive buildings</b>	Dec 2021	<p>Acknowledgements/banners/artwork</p> <p>All buildings including in foyer of 262 Pitt St</p> <p>Possibly develop a welcome poster in First Nations languages</p>	Operational budgets all business units
<b>Strategic Plans</b>	June 2022	All strategic plans reflect the shared commitments of the Covenant	Operational budgets
<b>Staff and Board targets</b>	<p>June 2022</p> <p>July-Dec 2023 Dec 2023</p>	<p>All business units begin preparing for the next triennium, and their boards</p> <p>With the aim of all business units having a minimum of 1 or 10% First Nations People on staff, whichever the greater.</p> <p>Each Board in line with their strategic objectives will look to have 1 First Nations member [Interns/traineeships, natural attrition, be creative and make skills matrix assessments]</p> <p>Review progress and targets</p>	Operational Budgets

<b>Sovereignty Affirmation</b>	Commenced March to June 2021 July 2021	The ASC Sovereignty Practical Applications Task Group (SATG) work and recommendations to ASC. Develop and promote Covenanting resources and program for congregations. Agencies and schools Covenanting resources promoted ASC (SATG) Recommendations to 16th Assembly	Budget SATG meetings
<b>Domestic advocacy and relationships</b>	Sept 2019 June 2020 March 2021 June 2021 June 2022	Uniting First Peoples Network established Joint media and advocacy with UAICC Joint Advocacy Protocol endorsed by ASC. To be applied by all Business Units All business units have established a relationship with National UAICC All boards have the connection with UAICC and Uniting First Peoples Network within their strategic engagement	UCare Aust Budget UCare Aust staff time Budget and staff allocations Operational budgets
<b>International advocacy and relationships</b>	June 2020 June 2021 June 2022	'Pacific Step Up' Micah submission on behalf of combined Churches UWorld ensures First Nations voice  Joint Advocacy Protocol endorsed by ASC, to be applied by UWorld  UWorld has a connection with UAICC for international relationships and advocacy e.g Pacific Conference of Churches. The UWorld Board establish strategic directions which frame the engagement with UAICC and First Nations Peoples	Operational budgets
<b>Reporting Review</b>	August 2022, 2023 March 2024	Annual reporting to ASC by ARU and UAICC National Executive Annual Interim reviews in conjunction with reports Full review for the next triennial ACAP 2021-2024	



# Covenanting Statement

## 7<sup>th</sup> Assembly, 10<sup>th</sup> July 1994

### **PRESIDENT, UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA, DR JILL TABART:**

We meet in the presence of God who through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God and to one another in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our unity “transcends cultural, economic, national and racial boundaries”. (Basis of Union, Paragraph 2). In this sharing of bread and wine we recall God’s gracious covenant with us and the whole creation and anticipate the joyful celebration of the fulfilment of God’s rule of love and justice among us. In the meantime, as people who share in this covenant, we are called to carry out faithfully Christ’s command to love one another and to order our life in the church in truth and justice. We who are non-aboriginal members of the Seventh Assembly, representing all members of the Church, make this covenanting statement.

Long before my people came to this land your people were here. You were nurtured by your traditions, by the land, and by the Mystery that surrounds us all and binds all creation together.

My people did not hear you when you shared your understanding and your Dreaming. In our zeal to share with you the Good News of Jesus Christ, we were closed to your spirituality and your wisdom.

In recent years we non-Aboriginal members of the Uniting Church in Australia have had the privilege of journeying with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and with other Aboriginal people. We have become more aware of the sad impact that in earlier times the church and our culture had on your people.

So, on the one hand, we give thanks with you for those of our people who have lived among your people bearing faithful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ which brings hope and liberation to all. We give thanks to God who has empowered and encouraged your people to stand firm and exercise moral leadership throughout these two centuries.

But on the other hand, we who are non-Aboriginal members of our church grieve with you, our Aboriginal and Islander brothers and sisters. We grieve that the way in which our people often brought the Gospel to your people belittled and harmed much of your culture and confused the Gospel with western ways. As a result, you and we are the poorer and the image of God in us all is twisted and blurred, and we are not what God meant us to be.

We lament that our people took your land from you as if it were land belonging to nobody, and often responded with great violence to the resistance of your people; our people took from you your means of livelihood, and desecrated many sacred places. Our justice system discriminated against you, and the high incarceration rate of your people and the number of Black deaths in custody show that the denial of justice continues today.

Your people were prevented from caring for this land as you believe God required of you, and our failure to care for the land appropriately has brought many problems for all of us.

We regret that our churches cooperated with governments in implementing racist and paternalistic policies. By providing foster-homes for Aboriginal children, our churches in reality lent their support to the government practice of taking children from their mothers and families, causing great suffering and loss of cultural identity. Our churches cooperated with governments in moving people away from their land and resettling them in other places without their agreement.

I apologise on behalf of the Assembly for all those wrongs done knowingly or unknowingly to your people by the Church and seek your forgiveness. I ask you to help us discover ways to make amends.

In 1988, the Heads of Churches called for a secure land base for dispossessed Aboriginal people, an assured place in the political process for Indigenous people and an openness to get to know one another and learn from each other's culture and values. We commit ourselves to those objectives.

We rejoice in the promotion of understanding and commitment to change engendered by the Reconciliation Process and the High Court's native title decision and subsequent Commonwealth legislation. In the words of the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, these changes presage: 'A New Partnership'.

We recognise, as was declared in the Assembly's 1988 Statement to the Nation, that the Australian people and this church continue to benefit from the injustices done to your people over the past two centuries. We believe it is right for the Uniting Church to make reparations to you for land taken from your people and used by the churches which became part of this church.

The Church has already made transfers of property to Aboriginal people in recognition of our history. At this meeting the Assembly will determine its response to the further specific request from the Congress for the transfer of a proportion of the Church's assets to the Congress as reparation and as a means of supporting the Congress in its mission and service programs.



In 1988 you invited us non-Aboriginal members of this church to enter a covenant with the members of the Congress. We seek to journey together in the true spirit of Christ as we discover what it means to be bound to one another in a covenant. Christ has bound us each to himself, giving himself for us, and he has bound us to each other with his commandment 'Love one another as I have loved you'.

It is our desire to work in solidarity with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress for the advancement of God's kingdom of justice and righteousness in this land, and we reaffirm the commitment made at the 1985 Assembly to do so. We want to bring discrimination to an end, so that your people are no longer goaled in disproportionate numbers, and so that equal housing, health, education and employment opportunities are available for your people as for ours. To that end we commit ourselves:

1. to work with you towards national and state policy changes;
2. to build understanding between your people and ours in every locality;
3. to build relationships which respect the right of your people to self-determination in the church and in the wider society.

We acknowledge that no matter how great our intentions however, we will not succeed in our efforts for reconciliation without Christ's redeeming grace and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit at work in both your people and ours.

I pray that this covenant will unite us in a multi-racial bond of fellowship which will be a witness to God's love for us all and a constant challenge to the continuing racism which oppresses you and separates us in this land. I pray that it will thus help us all to move towards a united Australia which respects this land in which we live, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all.

**CHAIRPERSON, UNITING ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHRISTIAN CONGRESS,  
PASTOR BILL HOLLINGSWORTH:**

When God created the heavens and the earth, He gave humankind his habitation and placed him within his bounds. When He did this, He gave humankind stewardship over the bounds of his habitation. We are also told in the Bible that when God had finished creating it was good.

For many thousands of years aboriginal people moved in harmony with creation and subdued it as necessary by hunting, fishing and gathering thus respecting God's command and allowing the earth to sustain us. Our laws were developed by our relationship with the land our intricate system of inter-tribal government. Trade was established which has never been acknowledged or understood appropriately by European researchers.

In 1788 this relation with creation was violently disrupted by the invasion of the European which robbed us of our stewardship of the land which God gave to us.

Your ancestors came to us in different ways and we saw little of our caring God in them. They did not come to us as God's will would dictate, but to dispossess us, take our children, rape our women, kill our men and boys and destroy our culture, reject our values and beliefs and ultimately claim our lands as their own.

As a direct result of this violent dispossession, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lived as strangers and outcasts in their own land.

Whilst the church attempted to stem the decimation of our people and culture by providing missions and sanctuaries, in very many instances it did not attempt to understand our ways, our laws or social and economic structures.

We agree with you that the church, which had a responsibility to be the conscience of the invaders, in many instances relinquished this responsibility and joined with the invaders in a great many atrocities by smoothing the pillow for what was believed to be a dying race. Many of our people look upon the church in our country as condoning what was happening and watched the church stand by as our future was slowly being shortened by westernisation, assimilation and policies of prejudice.

Along with the past governments of Australia, the church is held accountable in our society for the injustices/atrocities inflicted on our people.

Contrary to the belief of the invaders that they had a divine right to take possession of this land as their own, the God of righteousness, truth and justice has sustained us with the belief that one day we would be recognised as the true stewards of this land. This has come to pass through the High Court decision which was handed down in the Mabo case.

It is good and right that the church should repent of any of its actions in support of a policy that violently discriminated against and oppressed God's stewards of this land.

The UAICC believes it is just for the Uniting Church, as a result of its enlightened understanding of the Gospel implications of creating new community, to offer a practical response to the past history of dispossession and resulting disenfranchisement of Aboriginal and Islander people from their social, economic and spiritual development of Australia, by taking action to empower the UAICC ministry by offering to share the assets of the Uniting Church. It is difficult for us again, to recall the atrocities of the past and agree to walk towards you and offer forgiveness because many of our people feel your position of influence in our present society reminds us of who committed these great offences.

As a result of the violent dispossession and resulting isolation from economic empowerment in Australia, within a great number of our people there has developed a deep anger and resentment of European people.

Therefore it would be wrong to just say “I forgive”, without reaching a commitment to work together to lay a new foundation upon which we may build a more just future together by ensuring that the Uniting Church plays an active role in providing adequate resources to address the present disadvantages caused by the past injustices and dispossession by the invasion of this country. Your commitment to be practical in seeking to be united in this relationship will be assessed by your decisions to resource the Congress ministry and to be actively involved in ministry alongside and with Aboriginal and Islander people to change the present disadvantage.

Because it is pleasing to God to love one another, and it is our commitment to do so, we invite you on behalf of Congress members to develop a new relationship by entering into the struggle of those issues that presently are the cause of continuing injustice resulting in broken relationships.

You seek our forgiveness because your understanding has been enlightened by the Spirit of the living God to recognise the failures and mistakes of the past and you desire to establish a new relationship based upon real recognition, justice and equality.

We come to this covenanting table with our gifts of Aboriginal spirituality, our culture, our Aboriginal way of loving and caring, our instinctive concern and a willingness to share and teach our history and every good aspect about being Aboriginal and Islander.

Our commitment to walk together with you as equals will be measured by our willingness to share with you our friendship and our love for God’s creation. Our people have survived on the fruits of this country and have harvested from gardens as diverse as nature can offer. We give to you our foods, drinks, the flesh of our animals, the fish of our waters and birds of the air that have sustained our people for generations gone by.

We pray that God will guide you together with us in developing a covenant to walk together practically so that the words of your statement may become a tangible expression of His justice and love for all creation. We ask you to remember this covenant by remembering that our land is now also sustaining your people by God’s grace.



UNITING ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER  
CHRISTIAN CONGRESS



Uniting Church in Australia  
ASSEMBLY

# THE COVENANT PAINTING PRESENTATION

SEVENTH ASSEMBLY, UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA 1994

**Presented by Pastor Bill Hollingsworth, Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) Chairperson to Dr Jill Tabart, President Assembly Uniting Church in Australia, on the 10th July 1994**

The painting we present to you contains many sacred stories to do with the Wukandi ceremony which Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra spoke of in his sermon. The painting shows the sacred places of significance to the Golomula, Marraju, Marrakulu and Dhartiwyu Clans. It cannot be copied or used in any other way without the permission of Clan elders.



Each Clan has a separate pattern, and this painting uses the patterns of the Golomula Clan. It is the story of the Wagalak Sisters.

The four Goannas in the painting symbolise the four Clans we have named, who form an alliance together, with responsibilities to the land. Central to the story in the painting is water – this sacred water which is called ‘Mirriny’ is a sacred symbol to Golomula.



Clans are grouped together in an alliance called a Ringitj, which has important responsibility for the land, law and ceremony. In the sacred ground shown in this painting, many ceremonies are held; the Wukandi, already mentioned, initiation ceremonies, cleansing ceremonies and ceremonies to teach men as they move through the stages to the Dhalkara and Djerrikay stage, i.e. law men.

This painting has been thoughtfully and carefully prepared, knowing that we are learning to covenant with each other that we shall stand in solidarity with each other, in a spirit of understanding – that we shall share each other's pain and struggle.

You members of Assembly and visitors are being initiated in receiving this painting – you are initiated to stand with us, the members of Congress in our struggle.

Even though you cannot understand the deep meaning of this painting, the more you seek to discover Aboriginal Spirituality, the more your Spirit will touch ours, and our covenanting together will become a reality. This painting we offer as a sign of our covenanting together.



*These words were written by Rev. Dr Djiniyini Gondarra OAM for the presentation.*

*Authorised use of the painting image for Covenant purposes can be obtained through Stuart McMillan, Assembly Consultant Covenanting.*

