

## Membership in Congress and the Uniting Church

Congress has been talking about two quite difficult questions about membership.

- i. Should Congress still maintain its position that members must be First Peoples, and
- ii. How does Congress include people who wish to be actively involved with Congress but who do not wish to be members of the Uniting Church?

The National Executive is recommending:

- i. The members of Congress need to be First Peoples, and
- ii. That there be a new form of membership to allow active, committed First Peoples who are not part of the Uniting Church to join Congress and shape its life and decisions.

There is a third membership issue that has to do with the relationship between Congress membership and membership of the Uniting Church (and attending and voting at synod or presbytery, for example).

Like all organisations the Uniting Church has a Constitution that spells out different types of membership – baptised, confirmed, members-in-association – and how people are recognised as members. In our church membership is recognised by local congregations or, if you are part of a faith community, by the presbytery.

When it comes to First Peoples, you can be recognised as a member of the Uniting Church through your local Congress congregation. And when you are recognised as a Uniting Church member you are also recognised as a member of Congress.

This means that in Congress and the wider church belonging and exercising leadership in the wider church depend on the same membership.

For the church this can cause two kinds of problems:

- i. People can be very involved locally but are not ready to join formally. This means they cannot be Elders, be part of Church Council or vote when things need to be decided.
- ii. There are people who are confirmed members, but who never or rarely attend church and are not involved with the church's life. Yet if some important issue comes up they can still vote.

So the ASC has agreed to a new form of membership: affirmed members.

An 'affirmed member' is someone who is confirmed and/or baptised, and who commits themselves to the life of the congregation. To be on Church Council, to become an Elder, to vote, you must be an 'affirmed member'. This is about belonging and being involved locally.

However, if you want to be involved with the wider church, if you want to go from your local church into other councils of the church, you must be a confirmed member. This is the way you have to join up if you want to shape the wider church's life.

Drawing on this model, and considering Congress' issues it is recommended that:

- i. Congress continues to recognise First Peoples who are part of the Uniting Church through baptism, confirmation and members-in-association.
- ii. Congress also recognises people as 'affirmed members,' which will allow them to be UCA Elders and be part of the church Council.
- iii. Congress introduces a new form of membership – 'active members'. Active members are baptised people [??] who commit themselves annually to being part of Congress. 'Affirmed members' would automatically be considered 'active members'. Active members can be engaged in all parts of Congress, but can only be part of presbytery, synod or Assembly if they are confirmed members of the church.

The recommendations are:

- (i) "Affirmed member of Congress is a member of the Church or a member in association who has accepted the Church Council's invitation to become an affirmed member and who the Congregation recognises as an affirmed member because of his or her active participation in the Congregation's life.;
- (ii) "an active member is a person who has been baptised in any denomination by water and in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who makes an annual commitment to the life and values of Congress".
- (iii) membership of the Uniting Church and Congress may be held on a membership role kept by the regional council (similar to membership of Faith Communities, Regulation 3.9.2 (b)).
- (iv) there be an additional new category of membership, called 'Covenanting member,' which is open to Second Peoples who are committed to walking with Congress, and are recognised as such by the regional committee. Covenanting members can speak but not vote, decide issues or hold office.

The National Executive further recommended that the National Conference seeks the following changes to the Uniting Church Regulations:

Regulation 3.2.1 (a) to read: "All Aboriginal and Islander members of the Church have a right to be members of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress ("the Congress").