

Senator Roberts Question on Notice: Across the Uniting Church's community service portfolio, which covers aged care, retirement villages, youth, mental health, NDIS, foster and Aboriginal services, early learning and day care, how much money does the Uniting Church get from the government each year, and is this a factor in your religion-free submission?

Answer:

The Uniting Church in Australia is governed by four non-hierarchical, inter-related councils, each with different responsibilities:

- Congregational (local)
- Presbytery (regional)
- Synod (state)
- Assembly (national)

The submission was from the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania of the Uniting Church in Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania) and in the short time available to answer the question, we are only able to respond on its behalf.

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania did not receive any input or involvement from other councils of the Uniting Church (including other Synods or the Assembly) in the preparation of its submission. Nor did it receive any input or involvement from its incorporated institutions which, under the governance of their respective corporate boards of directors, and with their own staff, overwhelmingly hold and carry out the Uniting Church in Australia's community service portfolio within Victoria and Tasmania including aged care, retirement villages, youth, mental health, NDIS, foster and Aboriginal services, early learning and daycare.

The incorporated institutions of the Uniting Church in Australia operating in Victoria and Tasmania in the areas of aged care, retirement villages, youth, mental health, NDIS, foster and Aboriginal services, early learning and daycare receive the majority of their revenue from Governments. These entities are registered charities and this information is publicly available on the ACNC website.

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania is grateful for the incredible work carried out in the community by these incorporated institutions and the Government support which makes this possible, but it does not receive this revenue. To the extent that revenue is received by the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania from the Commonwealth Government, the amount is much smaller. Last financial year, the percentage in relation to Victoria and Tasmania is reported to the ACNC as being less than 0.5% of revenue.

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania adopts positions on issues in society and the world based on their consistency with the prayerful discernment and consensus-based decision making of its Council (the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania) and that of the Assembly which, under the Constitution of the Uniting Church in Australia, is responsible for matters of doctrine and worship including the promotion of the Uniting Church's mission.

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania holds a meeting of 'delegates' from across the congregations that takes place currently every 18 months. The Assembly holds a meeting of 'delegates' from across Australia that takes place currently every three years.

The Uniting Church seeks to bring God's vision of a reconciled and renewed world into the present, to reflect God's love for everyone, work for justice and peace and follow the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught what it means to love one's neighbour and one's enemy and whom himself challenged the systems and structures of oppression in his society. We are called to act with integrity, ensuring that our words and our deeds are aligned.

The full Statement to the Nation from the inaugural National Assembly meeting of hundreds of Uniting Church delegates from congregations across Australia in 1977, from which we quoted a relevant section in our submission, is:

People of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches have united. A new church has been born.

We, who are members of the first Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia address the people of Australia in this historic moment. The path to unity has been long and at times difficult, but we believe this unity is a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race.

We acknowledge with gratitude that the churches from which we have come have contributed in various ways to the life and development of this nation. A Christian responsibility to society has always been regarded as fundamental to the mission of the Church. In the Uniting Church our response to the Christian gospel will continue to involve us in social and national affairs.

We are conscious of our responsibilities within and beyond this country. We particularly acknowledge our responsibilities as one branch of the Christian church within the region of South-East Asia and the Pacific. In these contexts we make certain affirmations at the time of our inauguration.

We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision-making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.

We pledge ourselves to seek the correction of injustices wherever they occur. We will work for the eradication of poverty and racism within our society and beyond. We affirm the rights of all people to equal educational opportunities, adequate health care, freedom of speech, employment or dignity in unemployment if work is not available. We will oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms.

We will challenge values which emphasise acquisitiveness and greed in disregard of the needs of others and which encourage a higher standard of living for the privileged in the face of the daily widening gap between the rich and poor.

We are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for their use and enjoyment.

Finally we affirm that the first allegiance of Christians is God, under whose judgment the policies and actions of all nations must pass. We realise that sometimes this allegiance may bring us into conflict with the rulers of our day. But our Uniting

Church, as an institution within the nation, must constantly stress the universal values which must find expression in national policies if humanity is to survive. We pledge ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere - the family of the One God - the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth the One who gave His life for others.

In the spirit of His self-giving love we seek to go forward.

The Uniting Church affirmed its commitment to cultural diversity in the statement adopted by the Fourth Assembly in 1985, *The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church*. This statement remembers that Jesus Christ "made peace between people of every race, culture and class". It states that such unity is "a goal to be achieved as we commit ourselves to one fellowship to achieve justice, affirm one another's cultures, and care for any who are the victims of racial discrimination, fear and economic exploitation".

The 2005 Synod meeting of the hundreds of delegates of the Uniting Church across Victoria and Tasmania resolved:

05.4.3.3 The Synod resolved:

- (a) That it is opposed to the incitement of hatred against people on any basis, including that of religion;*
- (b) To acknowledge and welcome open dialogue between faiths, including critique and criticism, provided that such dialogue seeks to be respectful, accurate and objective, is open to gaining new understandings, and is willing to admit errors;*
- (c) To support the Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001 as achieving a balance between being a 'safety net' for preventing incitement to hatred of people based on their race or religion, while allowing for legitimate freedom of speech;*
- (d) To advise the Premier and Leader of the Opposition and all Members of Parliament in Victoria of this resolution.*

The above statements demonstrate that the governing councils of the Uniting Church and the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania believe that freedom of speech is not absolute and reasonable restrictions can apply to serve the common good and protect groups of people from harmful speech. It is reasonable to discuss where those lines should be drawn and there will be different views across the Australian community on where such lines should be drawn.