

# Disability Inclusion report to Synod 2022

This report focuses on three areas:

1. Disability Action Plan 2019-2022
2. Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (DRC)
3. Impact of COVID-19.

## 1. DISABILITY ACTION PLAN 2019-2022

### Background and Context

In 'welcoming and entertaining strangers, we welcome angels without knowing it' (Hebrews 13:2), this Plan builds on previous Plans of 2000-3 and 2016-2018. Such Plans are an intentional means of eliminating discrimination towards people labelled by disability, and aim to enrich the Body of Christ.

Faith communities are not exempt from application of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA), and statutory entities are required to develop Disability Action Plans. Whilst faith communities are not mandated to do so, this Synod is the only known such entity to have done so. Over the past 20 years each Plan has been submitted to the federal Human Rights Commission as a demonstration of the Synod's commitment.

At its meeting of 15 June, 2019 Standing Committee resolved (19.40.3):

- a. To endorse the Disability Action Plan, materially in the form presented, as attached to the original of these minutes; and
- b. To recommend the approval of the Disability Action Plan by the Synod at its meeting in July 2019.

The Plan has been operational since Synod's adoption of the resolution; located within equipping Leadership for Mission (eLM), and with the Disability Inclusion Advocate having responsibility for its oversight.

At its meeting of 9 October, 2021 Standing Committee resolved to accept and note the presentation of a progress report about the Plan.

### Progress of 2019-2022 Plan

Referencing the Matrix of Actions <https://victas.uca.org.au/download/296/resources/6911/disability-action-plan-2019-2022> (p 16-20), a summary of completed and ongoing actions in each focus area is as follows:

### Church Councils and Presbyteries

#### To ensure disability issues are at the forefront

In ensuring disability issues are at the forefront of considerations, it is always encouraging to have conversations with congregations seeking to enhance access, in its various manifestations: physical, social, attitudinal. The Disability Access Fund (DAF), an outcome of the 2000-2003 Plan, continues to provide a range of grants to support upgrades for congregations. A smooth application process between congregations, presbyteries and Synod is in place. When physical access is optimal, an increasing number of congregations are displaying the Access symbol as a means of promoting welcome and participation.

## **To ensure people with disabilities are fully participating in worship, social and leadership roles**

Participation in worship, social activities and leadership roles varies greatly across the Synod. There are some fine examples where this is evident, and over the course of 20 years there has been an increasing awareness about the importance of greater engagement with and of people with disabilities, which is mirrored in society. However, it often continues to be painfully slow in the church.

A Mental Health Kit was produced and launched in 2019 by Prof Alan Fels, a Commissioner for Victoria's Mental Health Royal Commission.

<https://victas.uca.org.au/download/262/ministry-mission/7317/mental-health-kit-2>

Hard copies have also been produced, widely circulated and are still available. It contains a range of worship and support resources, personal accounts and 'congregational tips' to welcome and support individuals and families experiencing mental health concerns.

eLM has also supported the 'roll-out' of Mental Health First Aid Courses (MHFA), with an accredited facilitator. An initial course was provided for people in leadership positions across the Synod, followed by Presbyteries organising their own (some joint, and some courses run on-line owing to COVID).

An outcome of this was a request from presbyteries for a deeper theological exploration of mental health. In June 2021, a seminar was organised with Rev Prof John Swinton, Aberdeen University, who hosted a seminar '[Mental Health: does religion/spirituality support or hinder?](#)'

Further development of Rev Dr Kylie Crabbe 3 Synod 2021 Bible Studies has been completed. Titled: Finding the Path Home: An exploration of the Intersections of Identity, Disability, Social exclusion and Healing, the Studies have been released to the Synod; more broadly, the Assembly's General Secretary also proposes to distribute them. [WORKBOOK-BIBLE-STUDY.pdf](#) (uca.org.au).

In conjunction with Assembly's Transforming Worship Circle, the resource 'Called to be a Church for all: Assembly liturgy regarding people with disabilities' has been produced and distributed widely across Assembly, including our Synod.

<https://resources.uca.org.au/cudw/worship-resources-and-publications/item/3030-called-to-be-a-church-for-all>

Development of an Autism awareness resource is a recent focus. A video trailer

'Autism and Congregational Life' was launched in April as part of Autism Awareness Week. Five interviews, conducted with UCA persons, outline the issues encountered in being involved in congregational life. Further videos and resources are under development and will focus on (1) individual's lived experience (2) parental perspectives, and (3) theological insights of interviewees

<https://victas.uca.org.au/ministry-mission/disability-inclusion/>

## **Synod Operations**

### **2.1 Ensure Synod/eLM events and activities are accessible**

Following the Assembly 2018 resolution (18.18) to develop some national disability access guidelines, Assembly requested work to be undertaken with UnitingCare Australia to produce the document: 'Guidelines for Disability Access'

<https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/680?keywords=disability%20access%20guidelines&highlights=eylwjoiZ3VpZGVsaW5lcyIsIjEiOiJkaXNhYmIsaXR5Iiwil6ImFjY2VzcyIsIjQiOiloZ3VpZGVsaW5lcykiLC1lIjoiZGZlYWJpbGl0eS4ifQ==&lsk=a715f151c5e16f13c2a2e8bd2bcc32f9>

This has been distributed and promoted across the Assembly and provides a blueprint for the planning of all events.

### **2.3, 2.4, 2.5 Property access compliance, self-audit and funding**

With the advent of Essential Services Measures, discussions are continuing with Property Services to ensure disability access is included within Annual Property Maintenance Inspection Checklists. A ratings system is under consideration in which a minimum standard is required.

Camping Services are undertaking significant works at Adekate, Grantville and Merricks as part of its UCC Business Plan 2020-2025. This includes accessibility in and around those properties.

### **2.6 To ensure people with disabilities are fully participating in worship, social and leadership roles**

Assembly 2018 adopted the 'Statement of Access and Welcome' (p 16-17), which this Synod contributed to. It outlines the Assembly's theological rationale and commitment to people marginalised by disability, and provides a point of reference for all areas of the UCA's life.

<https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/647?keywords=Statement%20of%20Access%20and%20Welcome&highlights=eylwIjoiXHUyMDE4c3RhdGVtZW50IiwMSl6ImFjY2VzcyIsIjIiOiJ3ZWxib21lXHUyMDE5IiwNCi6IndlbGNvbWU7IiwNSi6InN0YXRibWVudCIsIjIiOiJ3ZWxib21lIiwOCi6InN0YXRibWVudCwifQ==&Isk=6eb54c0a0f746cbdb247a2b1f649f76d>

### **2.7 Enhance communication with people with disabilities**

There is a range of initiatives in this section regarding enhanced communication by Synod entities with people with disabilities.

Work is to be undertaken between the Communication Units of Synod and Uniting VicTas to develop and share a repository of appropriate images.

The MHFA courses, as mentioned, have been completed.

Discussions are to be had with a Disability Access consultant to provide a combined seminar with Uniting VicTas, focussed on optimal use of web-based responses, Easy English and Communication Access symbols.

### **2.8 Study opportunities are accessible**

These conversations with Pilgrim are ongoing. Issues have arisen regarding optimal support of students who self-identify with particular needs. The University of Divinity is also mindful of this and it is hoped that both proactive and reactive strategies will further develop.

### **2.9 Employment obligations under the DDA**

This continues a similar statement in the 2016-2018 Plan. In current conversation with Synod's Lay Consultative Committee and Uniting VicTas' Supported Employment Unit, it is hoped that Synod will support an employment opportunity (including federal govt. subsidy) for someone to contribute their skills.

### **Synod Institutions**

Whilst these entities (Uniting VicTas, Uniting Age Well and UCA Schools) all relate to the Synod to varying degrees, the objective was to encourage the need to consider and address discrimination towards people with disabilities. These entities are aware of the federal Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability (DRC), which is due for completion by September 2023. Recommendations from the Royal Commission are pending.

## **DISABILITY ACTION PLAN BEYOND 2022?**

The Ministry and Mission Committee has received and endorsed a proposal, to be considered and ratified by the 2022 Synod, for development of an ongoing Plan.

## **ROYAL COMMISSION INTO VIOLENCE, ABUSE, NEGLECT AND EXPLOITATION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY (DRC)**

The Assembly has established a National Task Group (NTG) to respond to the Royal Commission. This Synod has established a Task Group, chaired by the Disability Inclusion Advocate, who also represents the Synod on the NTG.

In anticipation of the recommendation for greater protections of 'at risk' people, the NTG, in conjunction with the National Safe Church Unit, will be developing protocols and practices. These will impact our work in Synod Operations, as well as our ministry practices in Presbyteries, Congregations and Agencies.

In addition to considering the Recommendations of the DRC in 2023, the NTG has established a process for the second half of 2022 called 'Overarching Principles Working Group', in which representatives from across the Assembly and UnitingCare Australia, attending four seminars, will develop a set of responses applicable to different sectors of the UCA. The three key areas are:

- governance and decision-making;
- access to, and adequate complaints resolution processes and institutional safety; and
- awareness and use of supported decision-making and choice and control.

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19**

The pandemic has certainly created mixed responses for people with disabilities in relation to participation in worship and congregational life. Whilst each person's situation is unique, some of the issues that have emerged are:

- A deeper sense of loneliness for some people whose social connections have ordinarily been limited
- For medical reasons, some people may not be vaccinated. How might that impact their future participation in congregational life?
- Owing to personal care needs in the morning, some people have welcomed the greater ease of not having to be at worship by a certain time. Worship online has made it easier to participate
- Feedback about the need for more captioning of online worship has been received.

*For more information, or to engage in deeper conversations contact*

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