

# Uniting Aboriginal & Islander Christian Congress FAQ



The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC or Congress) was established in 1985. The UAICC practices holistic ministry with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples by responding to spiritual, physical, social and cultural needs in an empowering way, and works to address the injustices of colonisation. The UAICC provides a culturally safe place for First Peoples' own theology to be explored, which the Uniting Church and UAICC recognise as being contextually different from that of non-Indigenous people.

The Uniting Church entered into a Covenant relationship with the UAICC in 1994. This relationship is often described as Covenanting. Both Congress and the Uniting Church have responsibilities to participate in, and engage with the broader mission of the Church and what it means to be a uniquely Australian Church in pursuit of biblically informed reconciliation and justice.

## The Structure of Congress

National Congress is the body responsible for the leadership, coordination and oversight of UAICC across Australia. The senior leader and spokesperson for National Congress is the National Chairperson, whose role is different from the National President of the Uniting Church Assembly. Membership of National Congress is comprised of leaders from across the different Synod Congress bodies in the States and Northern Territory known as Regional Councils. The way UAICC is structured is different in each Synod to better serve community needs. Congress in Victoria reformed mid-2024 and operates through the governance of a Regional Council made up of both First and Second Peoples. Unique to Tasmania, the board of management for Leprena Cultural Centre stewards UAICC Tasmania's ministry and mission. Both the Victorian and Tasmanian Congresses have unique stories different from the other, and are expressions of UAICC that offer leadership on First Nation issues in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, and contribute to the mission and ministry of National Congress.

## The Congress Symbol

The symbol of Congress has five significant elements:

- **The dove**, drawn to reflect an Aboriginal interpretation of the sign of the Holy Spirit.
- Important Aboriginal leaders used the **fighting stick** to stop people fighting. It is a sign of peace, reconciliation and friendship.
- **The cross** is made of two message sticks. The horizontal stick is a message stick used to pass messages between Aboriginal people. Here, it symbolises the word or 'message' of God that brings life.
- The symbol of **the hands** was first used during the revival that swept through many Aboriginal communities around the time of the birth of Congress during the mid-1980s. The hands indicate that all people belong in the body of Christ. They are a sign that Congress does not want separation; nor does it want to practise racial discrimination.
- The outer **black U** reflects part of the Uniting Church's own symbol, and the colours are the same as the Aboriginal flag.



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## Can anyone be a member of Congress?

No. Only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be members of Congress. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of the Uniting Church are members of Congress. Membership is otherwise governed by Congress itself, and may include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are not members of the Uniting Church, but may be members of other denominations.

## How do I engage with Congress?

Everyone is invited to respectfully engage directly with Congress' theology, congregations, faith communities, cultural centres, leaders and members. However, it's important to remember that Congress' ministry and mission is primarily to resource and witness to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is not required or able to respond to every request received from the wider Uniting Church membership.

## Is Congress part of the Uniting Church?

Yes. Congress is its own self-determined Christian entity that came out of the Uniting Church in 1985 to form its own identity, mission and ministry. UAICC entered into a special and mutual relationship with the Uniting Church in 1994. This relationship, which we call Covenanting, informs the ministry and mission of the other in pursuit of biblically informed reconciliation, truth and justice in this country. To learn more about the Congress story and how it came to be, read: William W. Emilson, 'Charles Harris: A Struggle for Justice' (2019), MediaCom.

## Does Congress have Ordained Ministers?

Yes. Ordination of UAICC members is through the Uniting Church, or more directly through a Congress Regional Council. Placements within UAICC or the Uniting Church are interchangeable, with a priority to fill Congress placements with First Nations lay or ordained Ministry Agents.

## Does our Congregation need permission from Congress before we engage with Traditional Owner Organisations or other Aboriginal people?

No. The mission and ministry of Congress is to serve the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders within the Uniting Church. The goal of Covenanting is to build meaningful relationships between First and Second peoples within the church, and this practice also informs how this might also be done outside of the church. UAICC encourages congregations and faith communities to Covenant or engage with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It often releases position statements and resources around Social Justice Issues which are useful to inform engagement with other Indigenous communities from a Uniting Church perspective.



Resource available online at: <https://victas.uca.org.au/resources/covenanting/>



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