THE ROLE OF THE TONGAN NATIONAL CONFERENCE IN THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the role of the Tongan National Conference within the Uniting Church in Australia. It will do so through the interdisciplinary methodology of a progressive theological reflection as exemplified by Judith Thompson. This line of approach presupposes the identifying of a presenting problem – what is the Tonga National Conference and what is / ought to be its role and authority in the Uniting Church? In order to clarify how this presenting problem has emerged, it is necessary to provide some historical account of its origins and how the Conference has emerged into an annual gathering that is one of the largest in the Uniting Church. Following Thompson, one of the most recent conferences (2017) is described firstly in terms of a raw narrative before being subject to analytic critique. Critical to the method of a progressive theological reflection is due awareness to the role of the author as a participant observer. In this instance the writer has been chairperson for the Tongan National Conference for seventeen years. The autobiographical dimension to this thesis is consistent with patterns of study to be found in diasporic theological studies and what Rebecca Chopp has described as a ‘poetics of witness’. The telling of stories is especially apposite here as a Tongan epistemology is established in the cultural practice of talanoa. The methodology adopted must allow for Tongan practice and custom as well in order to render Thompson’s methodology authentic. In this instance there is need to balance the
Uniting Church side of this history with the ongoing relationship of the Tongan National Conference to the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga and its decision to set up an overseas vahefonua or outlying district in Australia. In order to hold together the interdisciplinary nature of Thompson’s progressive theological reflection the Tongan metaphor of ‘rolling out the mat’ (Fofola e fala) around and on which matters of substance are discussed.

The initial idea for this thesis was prompted by a proposal I drafted to the Uniting Church’s National Reference Committee requesting an examination of the ways the Tongan National Conference might be incorporated within the formal structures of the Uniting Church. That task is inherently difficult within the interconciliar polity of the Uniting Church, even though this church has made several major statements on what it means to be a culturally and linguistically diverse church. The task proved very difficult for the Reference Committee because it would have involved considerable changes to the Uniting Church’s Constitution and Regulations. This thesis, therefore, is an attempt to find a way forward so that the Conference can continue to be an effective body both within the Uniting Church and as a bridge between it and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. The importance of that bridge is described against the decision of some congregations within the Tonga Parish and the wider Tongan congregations of the Uniting Church to
form a vahefonua, an outlying district of the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga while in Australia.

How the Tongan National Conference came into being – as well as how it functions through sharing, hospitality and worship – is described. This thesis develops the traditional metaphor of the fala (mat)—a place where people sit for fellowship, learning and theological reflection—to express the role and purpose of the Tongan National Conference. In particular, this thesis demonstrates how the Tongan National Conference as a fala has been enthusiastically embraced by second- and third-generation Tongans as those generations seek to manage questions of identity while dealing with contemporary social and political issues that have arisen through being members of the Uniting Church.
CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

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May God be the glory now and always. Amen.
Chapter 1

Establishing a Method:

Rolling out the Mat of Theological Reflection

The purpose of this dissertation is to critically evaluate the role of the Tongan National Conference in the Uniting Church in Australia. That is not a straightforward aim. The Tongan National Conference is one of twelve national conferences now to be found under the umbrella of this ecumenically-inspired church ‘on the way’. The setting up of those conferences was encouraged by the host church but done so in a way that was not covered by its Constitution, Regulations, or its foundational document, The Basis of Union. There is no reference to any, let alone all, such conferences in the polity of the Uniting Church. This apparently benign neglect is not offset by any of the declarations made by the Uniting Church with regards to its being multicultural (1985)\(^1\) or ‘one church, many members’ (2012)\(^2\). And yet, all the while since its inception in 1987,\(^3\) the Tongan National Conference has met annually and grown in size to represent the single largest gathering of men, women and children within the Uniting Church outside a handful of megachurches.

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\(^2\) Ibid.

\(^3\) Minute of the 1st Tongan National Gathering in Point Piper, NSW (Mitchell Library Sydney) Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) records held in the State and Mitchell Libraries. Ref: 99193 – ACG (accessed 10 October 2015).
It should come as no surprise that a number of questions should have then emerged. They have not yet been adequately addressed. What is the status of the Tongan National Conference in the life of the church? What is its role? What is its function and its reason for being? These questions – and variations of such – can be read and posed in a number of ways. From the perspective of the denomination the issue that presents itself has to do with how to manage diversity. The levels of cultural and linguistic diversity were not foreseen when the church was first established. From the vantage point of members of the Tongan congregations in the Uniting Church in Australia the key concern can easily become one of how cultural values and ways of being Christian be preserved in an otherwise alien setting. For others the status and role of the Tongan National Conference can become more political. If the denomination as a whole decides upon a course of action which is deemed to be contrary to Tongan cultural practice, might the Tongan National Conference provide a vehicle for dissent? And, yet again, is it possible for those who wish to promote the status of the Tongan National Conference as one particular expression of the claim to be a multicultural church, then argue that this benign neglect is a form of white privilege that must be called to account?

These are just several of the possible scenarios that lie beyond the posing of these seemingly innocent questions. There is no formal process for them to be raised in the councils of the Uniting Church. This thesis is the first sustained attempt that seeks to address them. In the absence of any evident process there arises a need to clarify what method might be most appropriate for this
enquiry. How might this need to explore a current issue in the life of a diasporic church be placed in the emerging body of biblical and theological work done on Pacific churches (and their theology) in general?

This task is not slight. The methodology needed is not one that is sits neatly within the fields of biblical studies, a systematic theology, a Christian ethic or an exercise in church history and missiology. It is not immediately obvious how some of the fresh insights in Pacific scholarship can be applied to questions surrounding the Tongan National Conference. There are a number of tensions to negotiate: the most notable of these has to do with the underexplored relationship between an Oceanic theology and biblical hermeneutic, on the one hand, and a diasporic theology, on the other. What is the relationship between the two?

It is well known that island cultures are Bible-conscious. In recent times there has been the development of an Oceanic hermeneutics. It has been inspired primarily by the work of two scholars living in diaspora – Nasili Vaka’uta in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Jione Havea in Australia. This work is inclined towards a postcolonial suspicion of the missionaries and their legacies – and the desire to draw upon the traditions of island culture as a complementary text of Scripture. Both Vaka’uta and Havea are Hebrew Bible scholars which can mean that this Oceanic hermeneutic is more likely to focus upon a diachronic reading of that scriptural text and the cultural texts of the islands. It could be argued that this hermeneutic does always engage with the person
and work – the Christ-event – to be found in the gospels and epistles of the New Testament. The dilemma for the Tongan National Conference is that this hermeneutical strategy is currently a rather academic enterprise; the conference is more overtly based within the life of the church and is a function of the ecclesia rather than the academy.

The hermeneutical work of Havea and Vaka’uta bears some resemblance to the recent work of theologians in ‘the liquid continent’. Where the biblical scholars have placed scriptural and cultural texts in conversation with each other, diverse theologians have striven to develop forms of contextual theology. Some of the most notable of these works are Sevati Tuwere’s theology based on the vanua, Cliff Bird on the pepesa and Ama’amalele Tofaeono on the aiga. In each one of these instances there is a desire to retrieve images and patterns of relationship taken from culture and the local environment. It is a retrieval that carries a postcolonial criticism: it is designed to reach behind the missionary legacy and recover aspects of customary knowledge and wisdom. It invariably represents a suspicion of a Western theological methodology, most conspicuously evident in Tofaeono’s writings In terms of doctrine these contextual theologies are more likely to focus upon how ideas to do with the land, the sea, the air compose a worldview that is reckoned to be an expression of ‘the household of creation’. The emphasis is

on the doctrine of creation and how Jesus may be seen to enter that world. The emphasis, then, is on the Incarnation, localized images of Jesus and a respect for his teaching. There has been less wrestling with why this Jesus was put to death and how the ‘word of the cross’ leads to salvation and a theory of Atonement.

There has not yet been any attempt to arrange such theologies into models that might illustrate how a point of doctrine addresses or is informed by some cultural custom. In the absence of such these endeavours are open to the criticisms made by Ma’afa Palu. His response is based on the conviction that the methods of those whom he calls the Pasifikans exchange the biblical text and confessional witness for a cultural text. Making a case through “speaking in truth to one another in love” Palu took issue with the substitution of the Biblical text with legends, myths, customs and the physical surroundings of the Pacific. The justification for such was established in the belief that Jesus was born into a “Hebraic context”: how would his ministry and teaching had unfolded in the Pacific.

Palu’s was especially strong in his criticism of the pioneering work done by Sione ‘Amanaki Havea on a ‘coconut theology’.

thousands of Christians in the Pacific believe in the Christian faith, but they believe in Christ in an abstract form.”6 Havea had made the controversial claim that the Christianity the nineteenth century missionaries had brought to Australia was a ‘foreign religion’ housed in a ‘western theological pod’. It was now time for theologians in the Pacific to leave behind ‘the Pacific Christ as a picture’ and explore a ‘Pacific Theology as a theme’.7 In other words, Palu observed, Jesus (and the Good News) was being “uprooted” from a Jewish history and culture and becoming a “trans-plant” in Pacific soil. Accompanying this move was the underlying assumption that the “Good News was already present before the missionaries came to the Pacific.”8 The burden of Palu’s critique lies in his response that “for the theological enterprise to be truly Christian it must remain founded on the person, teaching and saving work of the Christ, the crucified Savior and risen Lord to whom the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments … are our unique source of testimony”.9 Of potential significance for the Tongan National Conference was Palu’s conclusion that these Pasifikan “theological constructions [are] profoundly impractical [at] the grassroots level of the local church.”10 Their work was “widening … the gap between the professional theologians and the laity.” It is as such “doing a great disservice to local churches.”11

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6 Ibid., p. 31.
7 Ibid., p. 32.
8 Ibid., p. 33.
9 Ibid., p. 35
10 Ibid., p. 34.
11 Ibid., p. 41.
Palu’s critique was relentless, especially in the case he made with regards to the theme of the Pacific Christ. What the Pasifikan theologians were exploring was an idea and a Jesus who is not destined for the cross. Their emphasis was not on the salvific work of Christ but rather an idea that would “‘teach us’ in ways that will be comprehensible to us.”12 This Pacific Christ is no longer an historical person; he becomes a “figment of our own imagination”.13

Palu’s critique needs to be heard. It is more than likely that most members of the Tongan National Conference are unaware of the Pacific Christ which he is calling into question. Whether he exhausts the possibilities of a contextual Christology is more open to doubt. Palu’s reading of the theological task is informed by the ‘scientific’ approach he associates with Tom Torrance.14 There is little awareness of the methods of a world Christianity and contextual theologies which seek to address the question, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” It is arguably this kind of question – with a method well-grounded in the biblical witness and the classical doctrinal areas of the person and work of Christ – which would warrant further examination in the context of the Tonga diaspora in Australia. This agenda still lends itself to an enquiry into the specific needs and hopes of a Tongan community no longer resident in the islands. Palu is at his weakest in his awareness of how a contextual Christology can actually be in conversation with a classical Christology. He is unaware of how the Princeton-based theologian, Daniel Migliore, argued that such Christologies

12 Ibid., p. 38
13 Ibid., p. 39.
14 Ibid. pp. 44.
have arisen because the classical approach he associates with Torrance was silent on the issues in life that require redemption in diverse specific contexts.  

This work on an Oceanic hermeneutics and a Pasifikan theology skirts around the life of the Tongan National Conference. There are those present who have been exposed such lines of enquiry but they are in a minority. The Tongan National Conference is yet to have a sustained theological conversation on how Jesus - his person and work – is to be understood for those living in diaspora. The primary benefit of such scholarship is its capacity to give permission to ask questions (especially with regards the missionaries and western culture) and draw upon cultural wisdom and knowledge. With regards the latter it is now a standard practice – both in diaspora and the original home islands – to examine carefully the etymology and roots of a word alongside the use of proverbial sayings, heliaki. There is little (If any) research that has been done on the role performed by the cultural practice of proverbs in the doing of theology, That is so despite work having been done on how heliaki can assist in nurturing reading and literacy in general. The irony is that much theology arising out of island experience is littered with heilaki. According to Matagi Vilitama the ‘cultural life of island communities abounds in proverbial sayings’. It is the mark of an oral culture. The tendency is for the proverb to

illustrate an action or disposition. It seldom sets the agenda for the discussion that ensues. It is inclined to provide an imaginative link between a theological claim that is being made and its adherence within its own cultural setting. These proverbs are not the same as an indigenous spirituality that binds a particular people to its reading of the earth, the sea and the air. These sayings are expressions of cultural wisdom rather than particular legends and myths.

It is not a straightforward process to move from an Oceanic hermeneutic and a Pasifikan theology to the life and witness of the Tongan National Conference. The problem lies in the act of migration and the rupture it brings. The evident need is to find some bridges that cross the divide between island and newly inhabited continent. There are three that come to mind.

The first has to do with the use of a liquid imagery. Winston Halapua first made use of metaphors of waves and tides to signify ‘the embrace of God’. The method and metaphor explored further by Vilitama in his work on a diasporic ecclesiology. In this instance he turns attention onto those who have crossed the moana (the ocean) for the sake of a new life elsewhere. This act has profound consequence: those who migrate to large cities are no longer bound in the same way to village life and the place of the ekalesia (the church). The solidity of that social distance has given way to a fluidity where those once gathered within the embrace of a village are now scattered across large cities.

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The former culturally cohesive community is now fragmented. The ekalesia is no longer necessarily at the heart of diasporic life. The theological response adopted by Vilitama is by way of the need for a more fluid understanding of the church. The idea of a fetuiaga Kerisiano carries the idea of a gathering rather than a formal institution. It is more suggestive of comings and goings, like the ebb and flow of waves, ripples and tides.\(^9\)

The case could be made for the Tongan National Conference being something of liquid church: it is an event with comings and goings. It does not have a formal institutional presence and authority. It is gathering rather than a council. It is a conference which possesses an executive but lacks the resources at present to be an acknowledged council of the larger church in which it finds itself.

The second bridge is courtesy Havea and Vaka’uta: the Oceanic hermeneutic they have developed privileges the method of talanoa – that is storytelling and communal discussion. The distinctive nature of an island hermeneutic – which links the Pacific biblical scholars with those in the Caribbean – now has an established place in the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) (); Havea is on the editorial board of an island series published by Semeia. There have been several talanoa conferences held in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand. The tendency of this work is towards a postcolonial hermeneutic

\(^{19}\) Vilitama., pp. 22-24.
that seeks to recover indigenous insights and furnish alternative stories and readings to the authority of a received understanding of Scripture.

These *talanoa* conversations and island hermeneutics have informed the thinking of some members who attend the Tongan National Conference meeting. Neither Havea nor Vaka’uta haver addressed any of the conferences over the years – but their works lies in the background as an example of a contextual for a biblical scholarship that calls into question the simple acceptance of a Western presented gospel.

The practice of *talanoa* should be seen alongside the third bridge – that is, the rolling out of the mat, (*Fofola e fala kae talanga*). The importance of the mat -and the *talanoa* that happens around the mat – is such that it has become a method for the doing of theology as well as a metaphor for that task.

The metaphor is established in the common practice of rolling out of the mat in the Tongan household. The mat is what people sit on because, in a traditional Tongan fale or house, there are no chairs; the mat is often rolled out when people gather in the common room. It is rolled out when visitors gather and can then become a metaphor of welcome, hospitality and inclusivity. It serves as an invitation to conversation about matters of common interest. It can also fulfil a religious or spiritual role. In the evening in a Tongan household, the mat is rolled out for the daily evening family prayer time. It is not hard to see how the mat – and its being rolled out – can become a metaphor for the
annual gathering of the Tongan National Conference which turns on themes of hospitality, conversation and worship.

The mat carries cultural relevance and meaning because it is not imported like carpets for the house, but it is really the product of weaving the leaves from the pandanus tree. In order to get a deeper appreciation of the place of the mat in Tongan society, some attention should be given to how they come into being. The mats (fala) are woven from the leaves of pandanus trees (lou’akau). They are cut usually by the men and dried in the sun before the women weave the strands into mats. There are many types of mats. Some are finer than others – that is, they are more precise and detailed. The finer the mat, the more valuable it becomes. The very fine mats are not used for sitting upon. They are used for ta’ovala; these are the wrap-around mats which Tongan people wear around their waists as a sign of respect. There are mats that are specially used for ta’ovala and they are smaller in size. The mats that are used to sit on are larger and often woven to fit the size of the meeting room. These are the mats that are rolled up and kept in storage until there is a meeting or gathering of some kind: then the mat is brought to the meeting space and rolled out.

The summons to roll out the mat becomes, then, a call to conversation. It becomes a time thought of in terms of its being the right time for such conversation. The talk that happens is an intentional form of talanoa. The talanoa is led by the elders in the family. It is a conversation that invites people
to participate. It is certainly not one directional where the elders give instructions. It is a time for open conversation and listening to each other, all sitting on the mat. Sometimes individuals ask question and the answers may come from anyone who may wish to speak.

The conversation can move into songs. Singing is also part of sitting in the mat and is a communal activity. In fact, even when the women are involved in the weaving of the mat, singing a song that all know is common practice. It helps keeps the sense of timing in the act of weaving.

The mat fulfils many functions. It provides a site and sign for multiple acts of cultural performance for an oral culture like the Tongan. It becomes a setting for storytelling or talanoa. These stories – and myths - are passed down through generations. The storytelling can reach back behind the coming of the missionaries to indigenous stories of gods and the ancestors’ version of heaven. Tongans had stories to tell about their gods and their version of heaven. Now the storytelling is about the Christian stories taken from the Bible.

It is evident that there is a close connection between rolling out the mat and the practice of storytelling (talanoa). The theological importance of talanoa has been gradually acquired. In terms of culture talanoa could describe many sorts of conversations ranging from those which happen across age groups to what takes plan when men sit around their kava bowls.
Under the influence of Jione Havea and Nasili Vaka’uta talanoa has become something of an accepted pattern of doing biblical hermeneutics. It has become the preferred method for a number of conferences which have been held in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand. In this context Havea has described talanoa as an invitation to have conversation around modes of interpretation that appeal to migrants who practise biblical and theological reflection on lands in which they are foreign. The overriding concern is for how might ‘we’ read scriptures and engage with the sacred realities on lands, like Australia, where First Peoples are disliked, displaced, and disadvantaged? Havea makes use of the customary practice of talanoa to develop theological forums which encourage South Pacific Island theologians to participate. Examples of such can be found in Havea’s anthology on Talanoa Ripples Across Cultures, Disciplines. The articles here have moved from being oral presentations – subject to a form of talanoa refined by academic expectations – into a literary form. What is evident in the collection is a wrestling with a diasporic identity and the possibility of a distinctively island hermeneutic. Seforosa Carroll thus wrote on ‘Being a Stranger at Home and Away’; Sela Mafi Taufa participated in the talanoa around the theme of ‘The Sum of Us: Contesting Contours of Tongan Young Women’s Identity in Diaspora’. Vaka’uta reflected on talanga as a Tongan mode of interpretation.

21 Jione Havea, Talanoa Ripples: Across Borders, Cultures, Disciplines, (Palmerston North: of the Directorate Pasifika@Massey, 2010).
The methodological concern espoused by Havea is shared by Vaka’uta. Under his care the idea of hermeneutical conversations played out in and around the *talanoa* attracts the qualifying descriptive terms of rhythms and voice. This work can be seen as the rolling out of a theological mat. Of particular interest here in Vaka'uta’s anthology is the account that Talita Toluta’u gave of three Tongan women whose stories became a documentary film in New Zealand. It went with the title *Talanoa: Matala ‘oe Fonua*. Toluta’u drew out how the space between what was said and what was not said just as important as what was said. These stories were not merely stories; they are also *talanoa*.

In terms of the program of the Tongan National Conference *talanoa* could describe many sorts of conversations ranging from those which happen across age groups, around the meal tables, through to what takes place in plenary sessions.

These bridges are of use in the sense that they are readily translatable to the context of what actually happens in the annual gathering. There are waves of people; there are comings and goings; there are conversations which are *talanoa*; these conversations can ebb and flow between life lived in Tonga and across the *moana* in Australia. They take place on a metaphorical mat

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24 Ibid p.115
that has been rolled out not simply for conversation itself, but rather for a theological purpose surrounding life lived in a new land.

And here lies the challenge. The matters that need to be addressed lie at the intersection of Tongan life and experience in diaspora, on the one hand, and an institution which is established on a different worldview. The Uniting Church represents the union of three denominations the histories of which were fashioned in the United Kingdom – the Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist. The self-understanding of the Uniting Church turns on an interconciliar polity and a method of consensus decision-making. At face value that type of polity might seem to be congenial to cultures that thrive on communal discussions and decisions. That assumption, though, is misplaced. The actual ethos and practice of the Uniting Church can be a mystery to Tongan congregations. The interconciliar process is formal: it depends upon the showing of cards indicating whether a speaker or member of a council feels warm or cool to a proposal. There is a set of regulations to abide by as well as particular process outlined in A Manual for Meetings. The Manual has never been translated into Tongan, nor any other language other than English.

The burden of seeking to find lines of connection between the minority cultures and the dominant cultures always seem to lie on the side of the migrant culture. In the circumstances the methods of rolling out the mat, talanoa and envisaging a more liquid church must be able to engage with an established western academic practice.
The rolling out of the mat sits well with the practice of a progressive practical theology. In this instance the particular form of theological reflection is that which is associated with Judith Thompson in *The SCM Study Guide: Theological Reflection*. Her method of progressive theological reflection is, ‘quintessentially, an experiential activity which can only be assimilated, appreciated and mastered by the actual doing or performance of such’. For Thompson theological reflection is a process by which explicit connections are made between belief and practice.

Thompson assumes a ‘basic 5-Step’ process: those steps have to do with first focussing on an event; the next step is to fill out the memory of that event. The third movement is to find connections between the ‘reliving of that experience’ from the ‘religious tradition’ before moving on to revisit the original narrative in a more critical mode. The final step is to consider what action now seems justified.

It is evident then that this practice of theological reflection is like a spiral. It is seeking to progress the issue under consideration into a theological repositioning that leads to further action. It is praxis-oriented and hence a progressive theological reflection has a strong affinity with the quest for a

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25 Ibid
26 Ibid p.3-5
27 Ibid., p. 2.
liberation theology. It is also can be seen as a way of seeking to delve into the religious tradition and allow its resources to address a particular matter. It is not looking for a selection of proof texts from the Bible to justify this action or that. It is as such seeking to reflect good practice and transformation.

Thompson is well aware that there are other models of theological reflection. She sets this particular expression alongside those associated with Laurie Green’s reflective spiral, Emmanuel Lartey’s five-phase cycle, Stephen Pattison’s critical conversation, and Gillie Bolton’s narrative reflection.

Thompson identifies three broad types of the process in theological reflection. In the first theological reflection is used ‘fairly loosely to mean any ruminative activity making connections between life and faith and, speculating about other ways of being and thinking in relation to belief’. In this instance it is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Thomson notes that ‘there are no rules for doing or evaluating this practice of reflection. It is simply a description of a cognitive process that takes place quite spontaneously and not with much rigour or critical analysis among the faith community’s members’. According to Thompson the second type is one where theological reflection may be used

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28 Ibid., pp. 22-24.
29 Ibid., pp. 26-27.
30 Ibid., pp. 29-31.
31 Ibid., pp. 58-59.
32 Ibid., pp. 59-61.
33 Ibid., pp. 61-63.
34 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
35 Ibid. p.8
36 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
as ‘an umbrella term almost synonymous with practical theology to cover any
thought-out activity that seeks to correlate theological insights with current
social issues and events.’ The third type of theological reflection is ‘a much
more precise, disciplined activity undertaken methodically, rigorously and
consciously to integrate belief and practice.’ It seeks to relate what has
happened in contemporary situations to the resources of the theological
tradition.

It is this third option that is at work within this thesis. The intention is to subject
the practice of the Tongan National Conference to a disciplined inquiry along
the lines of a progressive theological reflection. This task has never been
attempted before. It will focus at one point upon a particular annual
conference – the one held in 2016 – in order to let that gathering stand as an
example of what happens in the life of the Tongan National Conference. In
order to make an appropriate theological reflection in this event – and its
significance for the Uniting Church – there will be a need to examine some
aspects of the history of the Conference as well as the role of myself as a critical
participant. These things are assumed as a matter of course in this third method
Thompson identifies in the practice of theological reflection.

There are a number of steps to this praxis. The first is usually one in which the
presenting problem or issues that require attention is described. The second

37 Ibid., p. 9.
38 Ibid.
step is more subjective: what is my role? On the one hand, I am clearly a participant. On the other, the methodology of a practical theological reflection requires me to be a critical observer. As part of that role the third step is to establish a thick description of what is happening. That usually takes more the form of a narrative but also requires identifying of where does the power lie, and what kind of techniques of persuasion are at work. The fourth step is to consider what biblical and theological ideas or themes are most useful in this setting which leads into a fifth step which has to do with how these ideas might be applied. The underlying assumption of this method of theological reflection is that it does not envisage a neat resolution of issues: it conceives of the matter as being one of a spiral, into the ongoing role to which this method can continually be applied.

In this instance the third step is modified by the need for some history. How and why did the Tongan National Conference come into being in the first place? Who was responsible? What did they imagine would be its future? Was this initiative being driven by the Tongan diaspora itself or was it a consequence of steps taken within the Assembly of the Uniting Church – and, if the latter, then what might be the ongoing responsibilities of the Uniting Church? This historical task allows a writing up (as far as is possible) of the evolution of a national conference. It is breaking new ground. It must lead to the question whether the 2016 conference and the aspirations now being expressed within the membership of the Tongan National Conference are consistent with what was set in place at its formation.
The key to this method of progressive theological reflection is to draw upon Thompson’s work and use it as a frame of reference. There is a need for some care in employing a method which has evolved out of and is largely dependent upon an alien culture. There are times when Thompson makes the case for the use of the imagination and spiritual exercises like those associated with Ignatius. Such practices are not known in Tonga: this method must be able to engage with the culturally appropriate use of the mat in what has been, by tradition, an oral and communal culture.
Chapter 2

Hearts on Fire

At face value the easiest point of access into the question of authority and status is by way of a description of an annual gathering. The method of a practical theological reflection is to begin with a description. The aim is to provide a narrative that will in due course require critical reflection and a careful account of the role of the one providing the description. In terms of Thompson’s model of a progressive theological reflection what happens in a conference is the first stage of the spiral. It is the event in which my own role of being a participant and a critical observer is most obviously played out. It is the site in and through which competing hopes and power plays within the Tongan diasporic community are acted out. In keeping with Thompson’s method, the conference is itself the occasion where implicit theologies and biblical understandings become evident. From the vantage point of this thesis the actual occasion of a conference is a time and place where the dilemma of its status most vividly presents itself.

For the Uniting Church it is an exercise in cross cultural ministry. Every national conference is attended by members of the Assembly staff and usually also the President of the church. How they engage and address the conference is a window into how those who hold power in the structures of the institution of the Uniting Church view the conference and its potential.
In this instance the conference selected for attention is the 2016 annual gathering. What now follows is an example of what Clifford Geertz has described as a ‘thick description’. The subsequent account is not simply an objective reporting of what took place. Geertz made room within ethnographic research for the immediacy of subjective, personal involvement alongside the collection of data. This thick description of one recent Tonagn National Conference is designed to record as fully and accurately as possible what transpired. It is done so through a lens provided by the self who is acting as a critical participant. It is understandably a delicate process. In terms of a recording of the histories of minority cultures within the Uniting Church this description is the one and only such description of any national conference. It fills an oral history vacuum.

The 2016 conference was the twenty-ninth such gathering since they began in 1987. Over the years the numbers have grown remarkably from the twenty six that attended the first meeting to fifteen hundred men, women and children in recent years. The 2016 conference was held at the Meroo Christian Conference Centre in Kurrajong. The move to Merroo back in 2011 away from Marrickville Community Centre and Newington College in Stanmore in Sydney itself had enabled a new environment and ethos of expectation to take root. At face value the shift may have seemed odd. The Blue Mountains in the

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middle of winter is far removed from where the overwhelming majority (if not all) likely attenders live; the season itself is alien.

The Centre nevertheless had benefits that former venues did not have. Meroo had live-in and catering facilities. The provision of meals was part of the package negotiated for the conference and that seemingly ordinary transaction opened up the possibility of attendees being more fully engaged. It meant that those coming did not have to cook like they had done so in previous years in other venues. In the past the preparation of food was a hospitable cultural act in and of itself. In that respect it echoed the practice of Matagi Vilitama’s description of the Niuean *umu* where knowledge and skills are passed on and common concerns debated.\(^{40}\) The other side to this loss was a gain. Those attending the conference now had more time to participate in the various programs of the conference for the whole weekend. This logistical change enabled a more disciplined and formal participation in communal affairs.

The venue with its auditorium was able to hold a thousand people in a manner that was suitable for a conference in a mode of celebration. On this occasion the second-generation team had worked on the Thursday before the conference began in order to set up the sound system for the auditorium,

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\(^{40}\) Vilitama, ‘On Becoming a Liquid Church’, pp. 209-238.
lightings and posters. Their task was to set a welcoming, lively and interactive environment for the opening service.

Those attending the conference arrived on the Friday in cars and buses. Those from interstate flew in from Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra and Brisbane. Some were picked up from Sydney airport by friends and others found their way to Merroo Christian Convention Centre independently. The place started to buzz and people were gathering in groups as they met and enjoying catching up with one another. There were youth groups practising their songs for the opening service. The cold wind of the Blue Mountains in winter did not matter as people were engaging with each other and looking forward to the weekend. There was a vibrant pulse of expectation.

Of particular note was the arrival of the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, Rev Dr Ahio and his wife Loukinikini. Their arrival attracted considerable attention among the older Tongans who are highly respectful and loyal to the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. The presence of Dr Ahio and his wife underlined the importance of the relationship between the Uniting Church and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga.

The tone of welcome and hospitality is captured in the Tongan word fe‘iloaki: it means to warmly greet and embrace. It was indeed the word that could be used to describe the activities happening at the conference centre as people
arrived. There was much fe’iloaki. These expressions of welcome are a way of ‘knowing one another’ for that is what fe’iloaki more literally means.41

Now these gestures and protocols of welcome should not be underestimated. In terms of cultural practice greetings and arrival (like leavings and farewells) are ritual events. They matter. They have been bound up with traditional understandings of genealogy, place and social structure. These things have arguably lost their power in diaspora but acts of welcome and arrival are nevertheless more than just a simple coincidence of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time. There are underlying assumptions to do with the va – with the space among and between peoples – and with what might be described as the most key Tongan value of all, faka’apa’apa, respect.

In the context of living in diaspora Sisilia Tupou-Thomas has described both the attraction and the pressures brought to bear upon this cultural virtue. The underlying framework for Tongan culture is one of honour and shame. It is not the same as that of a western emphasis on individualism and personal success. Writing herself from the perspective of being a first generation Tongan migrant Tupou-Thomas carries with her the expectation that rites of respect – and the accompanying practice of humility – are to be observed and nourished. Welcome and greetings are more than acts of acquaintance and first

appearance. They are signals of respect, status and place – even, if and when, a subsequent generation may not be as familiar with those expectations as those who have gone before them.\textsuperscript{42}

There is more than cultural habit and practice happening in these rites and actions. Some aspects of culture are being transferred or merged into established ecclesial practice. In a service of worship, the greeting is one part of acknowledging that we are coming into the presence of God. Graham Hughes argues that this act of greeting in worship is part of entering into a time and space of specialness. It is a time of focus that combines freshness and familiarity.\textsuperscript{43} In terms of Vilitama’s liquid ecclesiology the welcome is, in a way, transferred from the liturgy to the actual arrival at the end of a journey. In some instances that journey has been substantial in matters of distance, time and cost. There may not be a formal liturgical greeting or cultural ritual but the reason why these welcomes are happening is due to the people’s common life together in Christ.

This linking of arrival and welcome to liturgy and worship is not as strange as it might first appear. These acts of fe’iloaki were taking place against a background of preparations for the opening service. Loud music could be heard across the dormitories as the bands started practising in the auditorium.

In the midst of this noise and mass of young people was a further marker of cultural identity. What is worn – clothing – fulfils that role alongside food and language. Michele Saracino describes in general how ‘what we wear expresses something of who we are through. It also covers our vulnerability. Our clothing both reveals creativity and conformity. For Saracino clothing is indeed spiritual.

In preparation for the opening service youth groups were wearing the Tongan traditional clothes with the ta’ovala. That is a kind of mat wrapped around the waist and worn originally as sign of respect to the royal family. Nowadays, it is generally worn when Tongans go to church. Sometimes a lighter form of the wrap-around, the kiekie, is worn instead of the ta’ovala. Youth groups from different Tongan congregations were wearing either the ta’ovala or the kiekie. – and thus acknowledging that this gathering was to be held in a sacred space. Some ta’ovala or kiekie were of one colour, others were of aloha or multi-coloured and inscribed with Tongan patterns. It was clear that a lot of work had gone into preparing these youth groups for the opening service. Their clothing was revealing cultural identity and situating that within a theology of what David Jensen, likewise, writing on thick descriptions, referred to as ordinary life.

An hour before the opening service, the Tongan Youth Group band from BethShalom Uniting Church in Perth started to rehearse the songs for the service. The words were projected onto two large screens above the stage so that people could see from the back of the very large auditorium. The band began singing a series of lively praise songs and inviting people to join in with singing, chanting and clapping. The songs were focussed on the theme selected which was ‘Hearts on Fire Your Kingdom Come’.

This theme represented a fusion. It was a hybrid theme selected some months before by the executive of the Tongan National Conference. It represented a mix of the theme for the triennium of the Uniting Church’s National Assembly (2015-2018) and the season of Pentecost which was coinciding with the timing of this conference. The Assembly theme was ‘Hearts on Fire’; This was the first time that the gathering had been organized around the theme of the Assembly. The songs were mostly about the Holy Spirit and about its influence on people’s lives.

One such hymn, much loved by Tongans of all generations, is Ko e Laumalie ‘o Penitekosi. It summons the Holy Spirit to come down like fire, wind, a dove and the morning mist. It is invited to descend upon the house and protect the church and become its advocate. The coming down of the Holy Spirit is accompanied by the hope that a hard heart would be softened in much the

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47 Minutes of the 14th Triennium Assembly Uniting Church in Australia, Perth 12-18 July 2015.
way that a solid rock becomes soil. In this instance the parable of the sower seed is assumed. The hymn ends with a call to receive our prayers. This hymn was most appropriate for the occasion – that is, a gathering held at Pentecost on the theme of ‘Hearts on Fire’. It was also in keeping with the tendency of a Tongan congregation to privilege the language of the Father and the Spirit. The hymn set the theological platform for the gathering itself.

The music, the colour and the exuberance of the young people created a sense of celebration. Images of fire were projected onto the screen. The prayers that followed drew people’s attention to the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. The secondary clause ‘Your Kingdom Come’ was, of course, taken from the Lord’s Prayer. The singing of the Tongan Lord’s Prayer which is well known by the majority of Tongans, including the younger generation, was a highlight of the prayer. It is a prayer that is sung in every service of worship and said in daily family prayers.

That the conference should have included in its theme wording taken from the Assembly’s current triennium was itself a marker of identity. It represented an ongoing commitment to the life and participation within the Uniting Church in Australia. It did so even while the President of the Free Wesleyan Church in Tongan was warmly welcomed and present within debates. The Assembly’s theme of ‘Hearts on Fire’ had actually not been selected due to a desire to celebrate the Pentecostal season. In his concluding speech as President, Stuart McMillan from the Northern Territory, identified how the image of fire had arisen
out of his engagement with the First Peoples of the land. He had been inspired by the Yolnu expression, *bala limurr roniyirr njurrngitijil*, meaning ‘let us return to the white ash of the fire’. That fire was first depicted as the ‘fires of this ancient land and her sovereign peoples’. They were the fires ‘which have warmed and nurtured generations’; they were the fires ‘around which creation stories have been told and retold’. The elemental nature of fire was perceived to be one which ‘refines and lights the way’ and, only then, at the conclusion of his opening remarks did McMillan refer to fire being ‘the symbol of the Holy Spirit at work’.

This image of fire was one of two organizing principles at work in McMillan’s address to which this thesis will return in due course. The outgoing President placed another Aboriginal term alongside the original Yolngu expression: that term was *rringi* which refers to ‘the intrinsic value of a relationship’. McMillan wove the two together by declaring that ‘my heart burns brightly for the relationships we have in this culturally diverse community of Christ called the Uniting Church’. His heart ‘burns with love for the relationships we have nurtured, certainly since Union but well before, with our international partner Churches’. McMillan was clear: he drew upon Romans 12:5 to indicate that “We belong to one another”.

In the course of this farewell address McMillan referred to how the ‘connection’ and ‘the priority’ he had given to the twelve national conferences since the Uniting Church had ‘shaped and blessed’ him. The *rringi* relationship he had
experienced with each one of them had spiritually enlivened him through the triennium. McMillan argued that ‘the rich linguistic and cultural diversity’ of the Church should be seen as ‘an absolute gift of God’. It was his belief that ‘the Spirit of God is transforming our Church in a truly intercultural fellowship of reconciliation’. The church was being ‘opened’ up further to catch a glimpse of ‘something more of the mystery of God in the process’. For this mystery to be realized ‘[o]ur practices, our theological education, indeed everything about us needs to be reshaped by and through this cultural diversity’.48

In keeping with an established custom McMillan, being the President of the Assembly, was the guest preacher at this opening service. In his sermon he acknowledged the theme of the conference and its connection with the Assembly’s triennial theme of “Hearts on Fire” and the connection of “Your Kingdom Come with the Lord’s Prayer.”49 McMillan spoke about the Kingdom of God being already present; the presence of Christ was being acknowledged as already here when we gather. He said that we are compelled by love and confidence in Christ whose Spirit burns in our hearts with love for the whole creation.50 McMillan further preached that in worship the church is being renewed constantly by the Holy Spirit as part of the celebration of the Day of Pentecost. Finally, McMillan drew upon John Blackett’s *Fire in the Outback* which tells of the revival that began at Galiwin’ku

50 Ibid
on Elcho Island in Arnhemland, and spread across the top end of Australia and through the centre like a wild fire in 1979. McMillan also referred to the evangelist Rrurumbu Dhurrrkay and Djiniyini Gondarra who were both used by the Holy Spirit to carry the gospel to other places in Australia, bringing transformed attitudes to health, hygiene, work as well as reconciliation and love between families, clans and tribes that had been fighting for many generations.

These images of the revival among Aboriginals in Arnhemland were employed in order to be a strong reminder to the Tongan National Conference of the work of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. How this sermon preached out of the office of the President of the Assembly - coupled with the final report to the 2018 Assembly at the conclusion of the triennium – might speak into the matter of the purpose and role of the Tongan National Conference becomes a live issue. What does this homiletic language of renewal, reconciliation and belonging to Christ uttered by the highest elected office in the church mean in practice?

That McMillan’s sermon should pose the question of purpose and role should be seen in association with the presence and address of Ahio. Here was the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. Through its worship and meeting procedures the conference was doing something that very rarely happens. The principal elected officers of the sending and receiving churches

51 ibid
52 John Blackett, Fire in the Outback, (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1997).
were assembled in the same place at the invitation of the liquid ecclesial body – the conference of Tongan churches – that was indebted to and marked by both.

Ahio brought greetings from Tonga to the Tongan National Conference. He declared himself to be moved by the theme of the conference and the enthusiasm of the young people. Whereas McMillan had referred to the revival in Arnhemland, Ahio referred to the Pentecost experience on the northern island of Vava’u in 1834. The revival had soon spread to the rest of Tonga. The missionaries at the time referred to this revival in terms of its being Pentecost. The story of the Tongan revival, as recorded in the first volume of Harold Wood’s Overseas Mission of the Australian Methodist Church, has been told and retold in Tongan churches by speakers and preachers over many years, just as ‘Ahio did.

Through their respective sermons and address McMillan and Ahio had woven together the theme of the conference – hearts on fire – with the event which is the annual gathering of the Tongan National Conference. The dilemma that arises is how is any relevant action supposed to flow from sermons and greetings. Is that work to be done by the conference itself – which lacks an established reporting role in the interconciliar life of the Uniting Church? Or

54 A. Harold Wood, Overseas Mission of the Australian Methodist Church Vol.1 Tonga and Samoa (Melbourne Aldersgate Press 1975) 56
55 Ibid
should the Presidents of the two churches find ways of working out more clearly what these words mean for the well-being, oversight and contribution of the Tongan diaspora to the Uniting Church in Australia?

This theme of “Your Kingdom Come Hearts on Fire” (in Tongan Ke hoko mai ho’o Pule, Vela mafana e loto kotoa) permeated the whole opening worship service: it was present in the prayers, the singing and in the contributions by the many youth groups that followed the preaching and the greetings. The whole service lasted two and a half hours. It was full of energy and very colourful. The backdrop to the stage was decorated with coloured lighting that made the stage stand out as the rest of lights in the hall light were dimmed. Even after the Benediction was pronounced by McMillan, the people did not leave. The mood was one of anticipation. The conference was on fire.

The program for the weekend was made available after the service. The theme Your Kingdom Come, Hearts on Fire (Ke hoko mai ho’o Pule, Vela mafana e loto kotoa) was splashed across the front cover. It consisted of a cross held by flame of fire rising from a heart. The first night finally came to an end when the people were asked to move to their dormitories for the night. It was then after midnight.

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Saturday morning began at 6.00am with the younger generations having an exercise session called Zumba which was incorporated into their early morning devotion. Zumba is an aerobic and fitness exercise that involves a certain amount of leaping to keep up with the rhythmic music. It is not the kind of activity that would be normally associated with Tongan church conference. That it should happen – and be deemed to be acceptable – is itself a sign of living in diaspora. It is further testimony to Vilitama’s understanding of liquidity and how a younger generation participate in a highly globalized world of influences. Zumba was created by a Colombian dancer named Alberto Perez. It emphasizes a concern for body and appearance in a way that is far from inherited tradition.\(^57\)

Meanwhile, the older and senior members had their devotions huddled around the fireplace. It was a cold; it was the beginning of winter. The fireplace was an apt setting for the devotions led by Rev Mosese Taufa (Auburn, New South Wales) on the theme of the Holy Spirit. The Tongan hymn ‘E Laumalie hifo mai (Holy Spirit come down) pervaded the intercessory prayers.

The main events of the Saturday morning were three keynote speakers. The first of these speakers was the Rev Dr Seforosa Carroll, manager of UnitingWorld’s partnerships in the Pacific. She spoke on the work of UnitingWorld in relations to the islands and the urgent effects of climate

change. Tonga was singled out as one of those nations where some of its islands are already being affected by the reality of climate change.\(^{58}\) She challenged the conference members present to think about ways of creating awareness of their responsibilities to minimize the global effect of climate change.

Carroll argued that islands in the Pacific are at the forefront of climate change. For Tuvalu, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands, time was running out. Their future was already uncertain. It was not a matter of if, but of when.\(^{59}\) Within two years (2014-2015), for example, Tonga, Vanuatu, Fiji and Samoa have experienced destructive category 4 and 5 cyclones. The effects of El Nino were currently being experienced in the highlands of Papua New Guinea as were parts of Vanuatu and Fiji. Carroll reminded the Tongan National Conference that climate change is everyone’s problem and responsibility. The challenge, she insisted, was to rethink our theologies of creation, salvation, stewardship and home in the Pacific context. Pacific Island leaders needed pastoral support to meet the challenges facing them. It was for this reason that Carroll insisted, UnitingWorld had conducted workshops on climate change in Tonga in 2016 which had been led by two Tongan ministers from the NSW/ACT Synod in Australia, Alimoni Taumoepeau and Nau ‘Ahosivi.

\(^{58}\) Seforosa Carroll presentation to TNC 2016
\(^{59}\) ibid
This presentation by Carroll was the first time climate change had been expressly featured at any one of the Tongan National Conferences. There had been some personal discussion in the past while Ahio had included references to such in his address to the annual meeting of the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga. What was being presented here was of a different order. The Tonga National Conference was being presented with an issue of wider concern within the Pacific. In terms of the interconciliar structures of the Uniting Church the Tongan National Conference was being included within the work of one of the Assembly’s department – and that was being done in a way which does not happen in meetings of synods and presbyteries.

The dilemma arising here constitutes what, if any, expectation was being made on members of the Tongan National Conference? What might the Assembly of the Uniting Church be asking of the Tongan National Conference? Or, was the address one of information sharing and the building of relationships without any specified end intention? The same questions surround the subsequent presentations and opens up the need for clarification as to why Assembly officers are addressing a national conference which has no formal status in the decision-making processes of the church as a whole.

Carroll’s presentation was complemented by a report from the second speaker, the National Director of UnitingWorld, Rob Floyd. He discussed the long-standing relationship between the Uniting Church and its partner churches, especially the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. It was one of forty-
seven partner church relationships between the Uniting Church in Australia and other churches overseas, mainly in Asia and the Pacific. Floyd likewise referred to the work of the churches as the shared mission of the Holy Spirit. 60

The third speaker was the National Director of Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Ministry of the Uniting Church, Rev Dr Apwee Ting. He gave an update of his work nationally. He reported that of the one thousand nine hundred and fifty congregations of the Uniting Church throughout Australia, one hundred and ninety-one are culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD). 61 Through the responsibilities of his office (as it was then designated), Ting works alongside such communities and congregations of the Uniting Church. He described the Tongan National Conference as the largest of the twelve national conferences; it was also the first to have begun in the Uniting Church. Ting observed that the Tongan National Conference was unique in its cohesion and passionate faith. He said that he felt truly inspired by the Conference and that the Tongans were an encouragement to other national conferences. 62

Ting’s address raises important issues. The practice has been for the occupant of the office he holds to attend every conference. The reports of these presentations are not housed anywhere. It becomes difficult then to note what changes, if any, have occurred in the way in which a national director has addressed the Tongan diaspora. It is conceivable that the report from one year

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61 ibid
62 Ibid
to the next – irrespective of who the person is – is much the same. What Ting was reporting did not represent any step further along the way of addressing the status of national conferences.

These three addresses complemented the work and intention which lay behind McMillan’s sermon in the opening service. It was clear that those who held key offices within the life of the National Assembly of the Uniting Church believed it was important to attend the Tongan National Conference. Their very presence was a recognition of some sort of role and purpose. They did not need to attend. The meeting of the Tongan National Conference does not impose upon them the same kind of requirements with regards reporting and accountability within an interconciliar church. It is an invitation which might be unwise to decline but it is in terms of polity entirely discretionary.

This tacit acknowledgement of role and purpose also possesses an alternative form of potential. On account if its weight of numbers it is conceivable that the Tongan National Conference can become a vehicle for cultural expression as well as an instrument of protest directed back at the Uniting Church. It could become a vehicle of discontent. Now, in theory, being such a powerful force to the contrary might play itself out in any one of a number of ways. So much would depend upon the issue and how that might play into the hopes and aspirations of cultural identity. In a way which could never have been foreseen at the time of its inception, the particular issue that had the capacity for such
a line of protest has surrounded the Assembly debates and resolutions to do with same gender relationships.

In the course of the morning session the Rev Dr Hedley Fihaki made a seemingly innocent request: he asked the Tongan National Conference Executive to seek out the recognition of the Tongan National Conference as a council of the Uniting Church. Ting advised that it would be very difficult to pursue this proposal because of the structure and regulations of the Uniting Church. Now that response needs to be unpacked further. Was Ting responding this way in order to deflect attention away from the concern for same sex relationships and how that might play itself out in the wider politics of the church? Or, was he reluctant to find a way to follow through on Fihaki’s interest in the actual status of the conference? The two questions are closely related but they are not the same. Was Ting sufficiently aware of the nuances in the question and how a desire to follow through on the issues to do with being a council and reportable to the Assembly (or synods and presbyteries) might be pursued?

The decision was taken to refer the proposal back to the proposer (Fihaki) for more background work to be done before it could be discussed again. Now at face value Fihaki’s proposal was an investigative one; to start a talanoa and conversation in order to find out how the Tongan National Conference can be recognised as one of the councils of the Uniting Church. Fihaki cited in his argument the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Congress (UAICC) and the Korean Presbytery in Sydney as examples of such councils. The meeting
resolved that there is a committee that will meet soon to look at structures and they can this into their consideration.\textsuperscript{63} In a manner that might prove rather unsettling for leadership in the Tongan National Conference, given his beliefs on same sex relationships, the case could be argued for Fihaki naming the very issues to do with status and authority that needed to be asked. Was Ting’s response a lost opportunity?

After the morning tea on Saturday morning the conference divided into different age groups. Each had their own programs and activities. There was the adults’ program for the most senior retirees or \textit{toulekeleka}. The younger generations had three programs that ran in parallel according to age groups: the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Generation were defined as those young people who are aged between 13 to 30 and are not married; the Step-Up Group comprised those young married couples with children, between the ages of 21 to 40. Then there were the Sunday school children with their own program. Each program based their activities on the conference theme. The conference was thus constructed in an integrated fashion that was sensitive what has been described as generational criticism.

The adults and \textit{toulekeleka} (most senior retirees) agreed to a proposal to send a Tongan National Conference Choir to Tonga for the 150\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of Tupou College. This College is a boys’ secondary school owned by the Free

\textsuperscript{63} Hedley Fihaki, ‘Proposal’, The Minutes of the Tongan National Conference, Saturday 11 June 2016
Wesleyan Church of Tonga. Many of the Tongan ministers and Tongan leaders in Tongan congregations of the Uniting Church have been students at Tupou College. Eventually, one hundred and forty one members were willing to form the Tongan National Conference Choir and represent the Uniting Church in Tonga.\textsuperscript{64} This decision was a clear sign of the strong bond that exists between the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and the Tongan National Conference of the Uniting Church in Australia. In terms of a contextual expression of faith the decision to send a choir was also a recognition of the role of music and choirs in the life of Pacific Island communities.

This particular conference sought to address some internal matters of structure. It did so by way of a review but without specifying how any changes with regards to how the conference might relate to either the Uniting Church in Australia or the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga. The Executive oversaw a revisit of its Mission Statement. The current intention read:

- to provide an opportunity for Tongan people in the Uniting Church, and non-Tongan leaders who minister to Tongan people in the Uniting Church;
- to gather as God’s people, to have fellowship, and to nurture each other along the way of Jesus,
- and to share any issue that concern them.”\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{64} ‘Minutes of the Tongan National Conference,’ 2016.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid
The Tongan National Conference developed these statements being mindful of the growth of the annual gathering and to ensure that its activities were in line with its goals. There were also four goals specified under the Mission Statement, each goal with objectives and key strategies and measures of success. This revision was a major piece of work by the Conference. The four goals identified can be listed as follows:

- develop the Tongan National Conference’s spiritual growth and relationship with God;
- develop and foster a Tongan National Conference Youth Educational Leadership Plan;
- improve the Tongan National Conference’s efficiency and effectiveness in its operations and practices;
- and to build and maintain relationships between Tongan National Conference and other Tongan and non-Tongan congregations in Australia and beyond.  

The Mission Statement did not seek to clarify relations with the councils of the church.

While these discussions were happening the other aged-based programs were running. The co-ordinator and mentor for the 2nd Generation program in the main hall was the Rev Charissa Suli. She had been pioneering the growth of this

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66 ibid
2nd generation group for the past seven years.\textsuperscript{67} This age cohort was the largest group at the conference. They were organised into three levels: Surfing — this study was for those who have just started out in their faith journey and unpacked the theme of the conference; Snorkelling – this Bible study gave participants the opportunity to explore more deeply the theme of the conference; Scuba Diving - this Bible study was geared towards those ready to jump into the deep end of the theme of the conference and were not afraid to ask the hard questions about the implications of the theme for their life.

This use of seawater metaphors is, of course, indicative of the liquid understanding of the church Vilitama discerned as helpful for the Niuean diasporic context. It is also a reflection of the many references to do with being a liquid continent and an island and Oceanic hermeneutic pervading Pacific theological and biblical scholarship.

The second generation program is clearly designed to address the particular issues that are faced by those who have been born in Australia. Their experience differs from their parents. It can be argued that they are forever running the risk of being ‘caught between two cultures. Jemaima Tiatia from Aotearoa-New Zealand has conducted interviews and levels of formal

\textsuperscript{67} ibid
consultation within the Pacific Island communities in that country which have not yet happened in Australia.\(^6\)

The program falls within the goals of the revised mission of the Tongan National Conference. The nurture of a youth leadership requires a deepening biblical sensitivity and knowledge. This conference was helpful in so far as it drew out some of the difficulties; the program ended with a debrief and the report that followed noted that young people at the Tongan National Conference all come with different faith levels. It has been challenging to meet the spiritual needs of the young people. There is an unfair expectation upon the 2\(^{nd}\) Generation team to meet every spiritual need. The reality is; this is impossible. Ministers and their elders need to think about the spiritual growth of their young people in the local churches. All spiritual nourishment needs to begin at the local level.\(^6\)

The Step-Up Group was primarily for young married couples and their children. There were about thirty in this group. Their program was more structured with guest speakers leading. Drew Hanna and Adrian Greenwood came from the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania to help Elvina Kramer who was the leader of the Step-Up Group. The Step Up group in discussions about different ways of leading devotion and bible reflections. Haloti Kailahi and Charissa Suli assisted


\(^{69}\) Ibid
in running a bible study group both in Tongan and English. They studied the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42 with special reference to roles of Tongan women in family and the Tongan society. The exploitation of women in the traditional kava ceremony did not escape the group’s attention. Women prepare the kava and serve the men’s kava circle in social gathering, sometimes for long hours and even all night. She sits and does this for the men, while the men enjoy their conversations and sing songs. The Step Up group came to the conclusion that this act is exploitation and oppression.

The eighty young children had sporting activities. They were supervised by Salesi Faupula, Stella Naimet and Kamaloni Tuiono. They also had story-telling mainly with Bible stories and skits built into their afternoon. Sunday School in the Tongan congregations have in the curriculum the telling of Bible stories to the children. This is part of the children’s Christian formation. The bible stories are built into songs, skits and story-telling in Tongan congregations’ Sunday Schools curriculum.

In the afternoon all the young people from both the 2nd Generation and Step-Up came together in the main hall for what was called a Praise Party with live bands and colourful disco lights.

In the meantime, the older generation had their electives in a smaller hall in another part of the conference venue, away from the loud music and praise party. The subject matter for their panel discussion on the relationship between

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the Uniting Church and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. It fastened especially upon the issues facing Tongans who live in Australia. The problem presented is compounded by the sometimes unclear and complex relationship between the two churches. There have been splits within Tongan congregations. Some have remained with the Uniting Church, others have joined the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga which now has a branch in Australia.

The panel was made up of the Chairperson of the Tongan National Conference, Jason Kioa, the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, ‘Ahio and the Minister of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga Region of Australia, Siotame Havea. The discussions identified issues relating to Tongan division of the Free Wesleyan Church and the dysfunctionality in their church life in Australia. The occasion was an opportunity for some members of the Tongan National Conference to air their frustrations to ‘Ahio and Havea. In the early 1970s and 1980s Tongans who were members of the Free Wesleyan Church who had migrated to Australia were encouraged by the Tongan church to find their home in the Uniting Church in Australia. Unfortunately, since the Free Wesleyan Church was established in Australia as a formal region (Vahefonua)2010,71 there have been tensions between Tongans who are in the Uniting Church and those who are in the new Church before the formation of the Vahefonua. At the end of the discussions, it was clear that the Free

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71 Uniting Church Assembly Standing Committee Reports, ‘Consultations with Tongan Congregations in Australia’, (2009).
Wesleyan Church of Tonga has established itself in Australia for the long term. How this state of affairs ought to be reconciled with the partnership agreement signed in Tonga on the 10th June 2004,\(^{72}\) which specified the following:

1. Mutual Recognitions

The Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWCT) and the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) recognise that:

(a) The UCA is providing for the spiritual and pastoral care of Tongan people through congregations related in various ways to councils of the Uniting Church in Australia. In this agreement where reference is made to the UCA it includes Tongan congregations and bodies of the UCA.

(b) The number of Tongan people worshipping in congregations of the FWCT in Australia has steadily grown. These congregations operate legally under two different incorporated bodies.

(c) The members of the FWCT in Australia have sought to be related to the FWCT in Tonga for many years.

(d) In response to repeated requests to clarify their relationship with Tonga the 2001 FWCT Conference agreed to establish a trial “District” in Australia. This “District” in Australia was to include all Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga congregations in Australia.

\(^{72}\) Agreement Between the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and the Uniting Church in Australia concerning the Recognition of a District of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, in Australia 26/10/2008.
(e) The FWCT Conference has delayed the confirmation of the “District” at its 2002 and 2003 meetings to allow further consultations to occur with the UCA.

(f) Extensive consultations and discussions have occurred since 2001 concerning the proposed “District” including leaders of the FWCT and the UCA, Tongan members of the UCA, and members of FWCT congregations in Australia.

(g) That the prime concerns of both the FWCT and the UCA are for:

(i) The provision of good quality spiritual and pastoral care for Tongan people originally from the FWCT.

(ii) Harmonious and cooperative relations between Tongan people in UCA and FWCT in Australia congregations.

2. Agreement and Understandings

The FWCT and the UCA mutually agree to the recognition by the FWCT Conference of the District of the FWCT in Australia as a means of providing for the spiritual and pastoral care of Tongan people worshipping in FWCT in Australia congregations.

This agreement is made with the following understandings:
(a) That the District will seek to have cooperative and open relations with the UCA (including its Tongan congregations and bodies).

(b) That the UCA (including its Tongan congregations or bodies) and the FWCT in Australia District will not seek to attract members from the other.

(c) That the FWCT and the UCA will continue to work to strengthen relationships between the FWCT in Australia District and the UCA.

(d) It is understood that the FWCT will be responsible for the oversight of the FWCT District in Australia.

(e) That consideration will be given by the UCA to inviting observers from the FWCT in Australia District to attend meetings of UCA Presbytery and Synod in which FWCT congregations are situated and other relevant bodies of the UCA such as the Tongan National Conference.

(f) That consideration be given by the FWCT to inviting observers from the UCA to attend meetings of the FWCT in Australia District.

(g) The UCA and FWCT will seek to provide assistance, as they are able to facilitate the ministry and mission of the FWCT in Australia District.

That the FWCT and the UCA explore the possibility of meetings (or retreats) involving Tongan ministers from the UCA and the FWCT in Australia District.

3. Concerns and Issues

If issues or concerns arise concerning the activities of the FWCT District in Australia or the UCA (including its Tongan congregations and bodies) then the following process will be followed:
(a) If the FWCT has concerns or issues about how the UCA is relating to the FWCT District in Australia or has a special request, then the FWCT in Tonga will raise the matters with the designated officer of the UCA responsible for international relationships with the FWCT.

(b) If the UCA has issues or concerns about the activities of the FWCT District in Australia or has special requests the designated officer of the UCA will raise these matters with the responsible officer or body within the FWCT in Tonga.

This panel discussion was a very challenging forum; it was also obvious that the Tongans who are now part of the Uniting Church would find it difficult to return to the Tongan Methodist Church. Their children were born into the Uniting Church and they have committed themselves to *The Basis of Union* and the journey of the Uniting Church. There were very few comments from ‘Ahio and Havea about the issues raised as they too acknowledged that the Tongans in the Tongan National Conference were fully immersed in the life of the Church in Australia. The question left hanging at the end of the forum was, in effect, how can the Tongans in these different denominations work together in Australia?73 There format of the panel discussion was thus satisfactory from the perspective of an airing of issues; it was unsatisfactory from the perspective of being able to advance matters needing to be addressed – and here the absence of Assembly staff was potentially problematic.

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In the nature of Tongan culture meal time forms another fellowship event. The dining room was located alongside the main auditorium where the Praise Party for the young was coming to an end. According to tradition there is a prayer to give God thanks for the meal before the meal. The place was already full of praises and the noise of people enjoying the music. It was time to eat. The environment in the room was sufficient to accept that grace had already been offered. It was a time and place of much activity and energy. Some were having their dinner; some were arriving for the Saturday night concert; the band kept playing. It seemed like no part of the program would stop before the next began. All the while the theme of Your Kingdom Come, hearts on fire could be seen on screen saver mode on the screen.

Saturday night was set aside as a Tongan cultural night with celebrations of song and dance. It was also set aside as the night when the Tongan National Conference fund-raised for their activities during the year. This event was publicised in the program months before. Up to thirty groups performed. Each group brought something unique and the costumes showed considerable creativity. The Tongan traditional solo dance or tau’olunga was performed by young girls. There was the war dance or kailao performed by a group of young boys. There was the all-age community dance called lakalaka, the stick dance or sokee and the sitting dance or ma’ulu’ulu. All the events were performed with music and actions. Each group also brought money as donation to put on their dancers. This action is called fakapale. The Tongan word means an
offering in appreciation of the dancers’ effort. Theoretically the fakapale should be money for the dancers to keep. However, in a Tongan fund-raising event like this one, all donations went the Tongan National Conference.

The funds were dedicated to two main activities. The first was the production and distribution of the ‘Ohofononga.\(^{74}\) This word literally means ‘food for the journey’. In this instance the word represents a daily scripture reading commentary facilitated by Tongan ministers in the Uniting Church on a quarterly basis. It is modelled on With Love to the World, followed by a daily Bible reading commentary which follows the Common Lectionary Reading for the year. The other project funded by the fund raising of the evening was the 2\(^{\text{nd}}\) Generation activities during the Conference. There were guest speakers and the hire of equipment for their various activities were funded.

The evening was full of colour and activity. Besides a disc jockey with recorded music there was a brass band from the Mascot Wesley Uniting Church. At the end of the event the total collected was $24,600.\(^{75}\) The celebrations ended before midnight as Sunday in the Tongan understanding is to be kept holy.

The focal points for the Sunday was worship and variations of such. The weekend had been full of praise and hospitality. The practice of the Tongan National Conference is to begin and end in worship. The Sunday morning


program started with early morning devotion in the main hall at 7.00am. The main service was due to begin at 10:00 am. For worship the Tongan people wear their best clothes. On this particular Sunday, there was the newly formed Tongan National Conference Choir leading the service accompanied by the brass band.

On this occasion the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga was the preacher. The auditorium was soon packed with all ages. Most people wore the Tongan traditional dress with the fine mat wrapped around the waist. It was colourful and the air was filled with hymn singing. The choir conductor signalled the beginning of the service and then asked the people to all stand for the Introit, *Be Holy for I Am Holy*. Everyone who spoke Tongan sang. President ‘Ahio preached on the actions of the Holy Spirit within the church from the beginning when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples and through the early church. ‘Ahio asked “What is the Kingdom of God?” Then answering his own question, stated “it is where God reigns in the hearts of human beings. God reigning in you is the most wonderful thing you can ever experience.”

Following the sermon there was the celebration of Holy Communion. The Rev Suli, the most recently ordained member of the Tongan National Conference, presided. There were eight serving stations to cope with the large numbers of

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78 Ibid
people. The choir sang softly during communion. Half an hour later the
distribution finished. Then the choir led the congregation (and thus the
conference) in the singing of Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus* which led into The
Benediction.

On the Sunday afternoon there was another combined program for all ages.
Some twenty-five groups from different congregations had prepared musicals,
songs, skits and action songs. Their messages varied from themes relating to
the theme of the conference to items that were interpretations of the struggles
that young people were going through in life. The items were original. They
showed the creativity of the young people. The costumes and stage
decorations were rich in variety. Suli and her Second-Generation team
combined with Elvina Kioa-Kramer with her Step-Up team to create a full and
rich program. The he President of the Uniting Church, Stuart McMillan, reflected
on his experience:

> one could laugh, cry all in awe of the gifts and in the ways the young
> people of different congregations of the Tongan National Conference
> articulated their understanding of scripture and their experience of life
> into action songs, skits and dramas.”79

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After dinner on Sunday night there were a further two different programs running. One was a youth rally; they had their own guest speakers and music. The older and senior members had a choir fest and a sharing of speeches called Po Hiva. The elderly members of the Conference, those above the age of 80, were given opportunity to share their spiritual reflection on the theme of the conference. The Conference concluded with worship on Monday morning led by the Chairperson of the Tongan National Conference, Jason Kioa. During the service, Kioa invited people to speak and share their experiences of the weekend. He also reflected on the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, noting the message behind the theme, Your Kingdom Come, Hearts on Fire, was not a one-off event but a continuing commissioning for all followers of Jesus to go out as witnesses in worship, mission and service. One of the roles and purpose of the Tongan National Conference was to make disciples.

This particular conference exemplified several concerns that go the heart of considerations to do with the function of the Tongan National Conference. Its regularity - it being an annual event – and its size mean that it is potentially the most powerful Tongan body in the Uniting Church. It possesses social and theological capital beyond any single congregation. It provides a level of voice that cannot be found in any presbytery or congregation. It performs a vital function of worship, fellowship and cultural solidarity while creating a

forum for intergenerational issues to be named and addressed in a way that could not be done at a local level. The Tongan National Conference possesses a power to inspire and set hearts on fire – but, in actual terms of the conciliar make-up of the Uniting Church, its power is indirect and confined to its capacity to influence those who attend.

This conference demonstrated how the Tongan National Conference is able to address some matters that can be dealt with within the confines of these constraints. It is evident that priority is given to intergenerational matters through the programming as well the reporting back from younger generations. With regards the latter point youth are given a voice and encouraged to identify issues of concern to them in life and faith in a way that would most likely not be possible back in Tonga. It is, of course, equally evident from the report presented by Suli’s team that these issues are very complex and beyond the capacity of the second generation team itself. It is likely that the same is true of the ministers present as well. That is due to the way in which this kind of intergenerational issues are not just church matters. They are complex issues that permeate education and social well-being in general.

There are some matters which are of a different order. They come from without. They can be named and may attract some lobbying, but they cannot be resolved within the work of the Tongan National Conference. At this particular conference, the two contentious issues that again played themselves out had to do with same gender marriage and the relationship with the Free Wesleyan
Methodist Church in Tonga. The resolution of these matters lies beyond the power and the authority of the Tongan National Conference to resolve.

The same gender issue comes from the church at large: it is dealt with at an Assembly level. The awkward question that arises or the Tongan National Conference is whether to leave room for discussion and perhaps guidance and explanation on a matter seldom talked about in a traditional Tongan culture. Or should the matter be put on hold, and attempts like those of Fihaki to influence the mind of the Tongan congregations, be discouraged lest it unsettles the experience of fellowship, hospitality and common worship.

It is no surprise that the relationship with the Free Wesleyan Church. Of Tonga should surface. It is a perennial subject. The conference can once again provide a forum for the expression of ideas and concerns, but it is not able to manage any diplomatic advantage. Ahio and Havea’s silence means there is little progress that can be made by the members of the Tongan National Conference that can actually assist discussions between the Assemblies of both churches. The right to pursue these negotiations does not lie with the Tongan National Conference at all. Partnership agreements are with the Assembly: the right to call a minister lies with congregations, presbyteries and synods and not national councils of the cultures intimately concerned. There is no devolution of power and authority on these matters.
The 2016 conference thus enables a thick description of what happens in one of the annual Tongan National Conferences. Its very nature as an event which combines worship, business and hospitality lends itself to the process of theological reflection. For that to occur in a well-established way it is critical to follow through on a number of steps. The first of these is to consider the role of the participant-observer; the second is to consider how and why did the Tongan National Conference come into being in the first place. Is what is now emerged consistent with that original intention? How well have those first hopes been fulfilled as might be evident in the 2016 event?
Chapter 3
The Positioning Question

One of the critical issues for any form of theological reflection is the need to position oneself. The reason for that necessity lies in the way in which the reflector is a participant in the issues being raised as well as a detached critical observer. It is an ambiguous role that requires some careful handling. The ever present risk is that the summons to be detached will be compromised.

In terms of method I am a participant observer in this research. That risk noted above is evident in Kolb’s understanding of theological reflection. Participant observation generally has three phases or stages to experiential learning, namely seeing, reflecting and learning. To these three stages Daniel Kolb has added a fourth – that is, theorising. The research process becomes one of “experience, reflection, theory and action.” 81 In actual practice Kolb begins with the identification of a specific concrete experience of the learner, who then distances himself/herself sufficiently from the event. The intention for the researcher is to become an observer of the situation, rather than an actor within it, in the hope of being able to view the matter with analytical detachment.

This method of theological reflection is not well known throughout the Pacific. It is much more common for theologies in the Pacific to be concerned with biblical hermeneutics, contextual theology and postcolonial readings of the missionary legacy. The practice of theological reflection is different. It presupposes a self-conscious desire to interpret ministry and events in some form of theological framework.

This vocation of being a participant and a detached observer is not entirely alien to fakatonga, however. That is not to say that such an act is easy. The very nature of a communal system is to draw in all participants in the search for a common mind. The ideal goal of the talanoa method is to secure faaitaha, which does means literally common mind. The capacity to be detached, to take step, to create critical distance is a learned behaviour, requires education and requires a degree of permission-giving. Sometimes the one who performs this task assumes role on the grounds of their status in the hierarchical system. What is distinctive about this thesis is how it is seeking to lay claim to be a participant and detached observer in a theological reflective method that is responding to forms of Tongan ministry.

The task of doing theological reflection brings together two horizons. The first has to do with the self. It is carried out by a particular person who has exercised a particular role. There is a level of specificity attached to this role. The way in which the role is exercised is not simple and straightforward. The participant observer has a personal history that has informed the way in which they will
approach the issues at hand. The other horizon has do with the event itself—and, in this instance, the Tongan National Conference attracts its own history and a cast of characters. For the purposes of this thesis the Tongan National Conference will be regarded not merely as a conference: it is also an event. One of the consequences of this double role of the participant observer is the need to give an account of one’s self and why the matter being explored is reckoned to be important. There is then a subjective side to this enquiry. It is not uncommon for the autobiographical to feature in the construction of a theology. For much of Christian history that did not happen, though. The reason for that hesitation lay in the risk of diverting attention away from the proper subject of theology—which is God.82

Hugh Kerr has named this turn to the subjective in terms of a concern for the positioning question.83 Writing in *Imagining a Way* Clive Pearson has shown how this particular kind of question is, in fact, a response to Kerr’s seemingly innocent question, ‘Where are you from?’ Pearson’s notes that this question looks like a rather casual greeting—it has the feel of a ‘chitchat conversation’—but it is indeed so much more. In the case of doing theology it is seeking to locate the writer or theological reflector. ‘Where are you from?’ suggests geography and hence place and space. That seems obvious enough but Pearson, making use of Kerr, goes a step further. It is also relational. It reveals

82 Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*,
where you did your theology, who has influenced you and how your
theological perceptions have been shaped.\(^{84}\)

This same concern for the positioning question was raised in Pearson’s *Faith in a Hyphen*. This work was designed to give voice to and reflect upon the experience of a range of theologies from minority cultures within the Uniting Church. It was noted that there was a certain pattern beginning to emerge in non-western theological reflection in the Uniting Church. The first step was subjective. It involved the telling of one’s own story. That step was often followed by a desire to identify a handful of biblical texts that helped explain that personal experience. This biblical work then made way for an initiative undertaken by the Korean practical theologian, Myong Duk Yang, who initiated the first series of cross-cultural and diasporic biblical studies. The transition into the agenda of a systematic theology usually then focussed upon Christology and the question of “who is Jesus Christ for us today?” – the important question then became the description of who is the ‘us’ and why did this particular ‘us’ stand in need of a Christ who heals, redeems, restores, reconciles, and is just.\(^{85}\)

The current practice of noting our subjective role has much to do with the increasing diversity of culture and gender in the doing of theology. It is a


\(^{85}\) Clive Pearson, ed, *Faith in a Hyphen*
consequence of the emergence of a contextual theology where there is recognition that not every cultural setting is the same.

For the sake of assigning a theological importance to the positioning question the work of Jung Young Lee on Marginality was crucial. It has indeed become a practice of diasporic theological thinking to make use of what Lee has described as the ‘autobiographical turn’ in theology. Lee himself was writing out of the experience of being a Korean immigrant to the United States who lived on the west coast of the United States after completing his postgraduate theological studies. He became what another diasporic thinker, Peter Phan, has called ‘an accidental theologian’ – that is, a theologian who was formed by circumstances out of a particular experience in life. For Lee this reference to the autobiographical turn did not mean that he regarded autobiography as being theology per se. Rather, he saw the ‘telling [of] my story … as a basis for theology, indeed the primary context for doing my theology’. The telling of my story can perhaps be the point of interface between theology and a doctrine of providence in and through which God acts upon the subjective pilgrimage of faith.

In Lee’s particular case he had become troubled by the way in which Asian migrants like himself exist on the margins of the American public society. In

order to explain that dilemma he created a parable of the dandelion. The golden flower/weed reminded him of the fields of dandelions that would bloom every spring around his home village to the north of Pyongyang. They signified his Koreanness, both in terms of its past and due to its colour. Now living in suburban California, he noticed that the green swathe of lawn is occasionally pockmarked by dandelions. No matter how hard he tried to remove them and have a lawn like his neighbours they would reappear – and so, by way of analogy, Lee felt that he could not remove his Koreanness while living in America. Lee duly created a theology of marginality where he does not seek ‘to be free of the two different worlds in which [he] exists but to live in both of them without being bound by either of them’. 

Lee proposed a framework for faith and cultures that justifies and undergirds the development of diasporic and contextual theologies. It is one which seeks to do justice to the benefits of being on the margins and makes a case for marginality itself being central to his theological reflection. Mindful of living in a pluralist culture and living in a diverse church, Lee asserted, that there are points at which all are on margins. Lee thus sought to address the dilemmas of a contextual theology not by moving one or another group from the margin to the centre, but by redefining marginality itself as central. Behind Lee’s theory of marginality is a reading of the hyphenated Jesus-Christ as ‘the divine emigrant’. 

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89 Ibid., pp. 10-13.
90 Ibid., pp. 55-64.
91 Ibid., pp. 77-100.
Lee’s theory of marginality is bound into his reading of the autobiographical turn in theology. He was very self-aware that the perceptions that arose from his subjective experience were peculiar to himself. They could not represent another gender, another age, another person but they, nevertheless, reflect an experience which could transcend the individual and speak into the self-understandings of others. 92 It is this dimension to his theology – the balance between the autobiographical and marginality – that has resonated with much cross-cultural and diasporic theology within the Uniting Church. 93

It is one thing to identify both the need for this subjective work in the practice of theological reflection; it is altogether another matter for a Tongan to speak on the self. It is a long journey. One of the features of an indigenous communal society is the sense of belonging to a whole. The tendency is to think in terms of the ‘we’ (kitautolu). The word for ‘I’ (ko au) which literally means ‘the me’, ‘it’s me’. It represents a polite presence like the response to being named or being called. It does not carry all the many associations that the word ‘I’ in English relates to self and subsequent derivatives like myself and selfie. In terms of myself I first became aware of a more personalized and embodied sense of self, of being an individual, when I was singled out at school to leave Va’vau and study on Tongatapu. And yet, even so, the communal sense is inclined to

92 Ibid., pp. 8-10.
be the dominant mode: ‘we are’ is more than ‘I am’. The ‘I’ belongs to and serves the ‘we’.

The reason why it becomes important for this story of the personal self to be told is several fold. It is necessary from the perspective of the progressive theological reflection method. It is also important because the expectation of a thesis in the professional doctorate of ministry is to reflect upon one’s own personal ministry, It is also necessary because of the role I have played in the Tongan National Conference and how my approach was informed and shaped by my experience of migration, living in diaspora and becoming a citizen. It is also needed because of the roles I have played within the councils of the Uniting Church and through those experiences be left with the questions which govern this thesis. These reasons are like the threads (lou’akau) of a mat (fala) that, when woven together, represent myself as a participant who is a critical observer. Being a migrant also enables a telling of a personal narrative where the autobiographical subject – ‘me’ – is both bound to churches back in Tonga as well as having now been a member and minister of the Uniting Church in Australia for nearly thirty years. The matters needing to be negotiated between what might be called the homeland churches and those in the new land are thus a part of the personal experience of myself.

The telling of this personal story unfolds in several stages. The first has to with my being raised in Tonga itself. If I had belonged to another generation that was born in Australia, my story would not be the same. There is something
irreducibly personal about our life stories which means my autobiographical turn, to use Lee’s language, cannot be someone else’s. It is peculiar to its subject and hence there is something intimately personal about what happens in the act of theological reflection.

In a manner of speaking I can appropriate Lee’s accent on marginality. I do not come from the main island group of Tongatapu. I am from the Va’vau group. There were few white people (palagi) in my early life. I did not grow up in the largest denomination, the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. On account of my formative experiences I am attracted to people on the edge.

Lee’s insights have helped clarify my role as a participant-observer. In my case I was born and raised in Tonga before migrating to Australia in 1981. I grew up as a son of a minister in the Free Church of Tonga which is an offshoot of the Methodist Church of Australasia. I went to a Tonga High School, the Government High School (not Tupou College, which is the Methodist Boys’ College) and was raised in the Free Church of Tonga rather than the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. (The main difference between these two denominations is that the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga has the partnership relationship with the Uniting Church in Australia. The Free Church of Tonga does not. Both originated from the same root.)

In order to understand my role as researcher there is an evident need to be aware of the history of how these two churches split. Over the course of time I
have become a member of the Uniting Church in Australia which has a relationship with the church in which I was nurtured. The split occurred during the time of the missionaries in Tonga. King Tupou 1 wanted the Free Church of Tonga to be independent of its link and governance with the Methodist Church of Australia Harold Wood’s *Overseas Mission of the Australian Methodist Church Vol 1 Tonga and Samoa* (1975) has described the events in detail that led to the establishment of the Free Church of Tonga in 1885.94 Shirley Baker, a Methodist missionary, set up the Free Church of Tonga with the blessing of King Tupou 1. The Rev Egan Moulton, one of the most influential missionaries ever to work in Tonga, remained in the church with links to the Australian Methodist Church; he continued his great work on the translation of the Bible into Tongan and the composition of *Tongan Hymn Book* still used by Tongans in the Uniting Church today. The church that continues to have the links, indeed a partnership with the Uniting Church in Australia, is the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga.

Having done my tertiary education at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji from 1973-77, I returned to Tonga and worked as a secondary school teacher – teaching maths, science and English at Tonga College (‘Atele), the Government boys’ boarding school. In time I became a public relations officer for the Government Tourist Office; I worked on Tongan radio. I moved with my family to Australia in 1981 (Sydney for 6 months, then to Melbourne). Sydney

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has long been regarded as ‘the arrival city’ for Tongans in Australia. I arrived in Australia with a student visa to study for a certificate in public relations and middle management. Because of a powerful cyclone in Tonga which destroyed our family home, I stayed in Australia for work in order to rebuild our family home. I overstayed my visa which made me an illegal migrant. The Immigration Department arrested me and put me in the Maribyrnong Detention Centre for ten days. It was there in the detention centre that I started my journey of becoming a minister in the Uniting Church. It was through a unique experience of praying to God to let me out of the detention centre that I made a promise to serve Him in this land. I did not set out to be a minister nor a practical theologian; however, my experience led me to where I am now.

My story can be compared with that of Sisilia Tupou-Thomas who is also a Tongan-born minister of the Uniting Church. Writing in the preface of Faith in a Hyphen, Tupou-Thomas tells the story of her journey of becoming a Tongan-born Australian. Along the way she poses a set of questions: who am I? Where am I now? She speaks of her identity as a hyphenated Tongan-Australian who had also lived in New Zealand before migrating to Sydney. Questions about her identity in a foreign land are also asked. She compares her life experience to living in-between the islands of Oceania and the continent of Australia.

96 Ibid.
Both Tupou-Thomas and I belong to the first generation of Tongans living in Australia and we are members of the Tongan National Conference. We are not alone. There are many Tongans, like Tupou-Thomas and myself, who have migrated to Australia. According to the 2006 Australian census the number of Tongan-born Tongans living in Australia was 18,420. Those who laid claim to Tongan-descent increased to 32,695 by 2016. Tongans thus make up the third largest Pacific Island community in Australia after Samoans and Fijians. They are ‘diasporic’ in the sense of being a dispersed population living in multiple locations, yet they maintain transnational ties to the homeland and across the diaspora. Further, while Tongans are not in exile as such, as is the case for ‘classic’ diasporas that have emerged due to forced exile from a homeland, there are many social, economic and environmental barriers to returning back to Tonga.

Of critical importance, of course, are the actual reasons for migration. Writing in her Tongans Overseas Between Two Shores Helen Morton describes the practice of ‘Leaving Tonga for Our Future’. She listed the following reasons for Tongans migrating overseas: these include the desire to secure better (economic, educational and lifestyle) opportunities for themselves and their families as well as a desire to help their families back in Tonga who benefit


primarily through remittances. In talanoas and conversations with Tongans in the Tongan National Conference, these are certainly the main reasons for migration. It was certainly true in my case.

It is now well known that for those who are immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers that religious belonging can be a critical pull factor in the decision to set out for a new land. That has certainly been the findings of Susanna Snyder who adopted a variation on the progressive theological reflection method – in this case identified as being ‘on the way’ to a performative and liberatory theology - for her study on asylum seekers in the United Kingdom. For migrants to Australia from Tonga, the work of the Methodist missionaries has profoundly influenced those who have migrated overseas.

The formation of Tongan congregations in the countries of destination is a sign that life in and around the church continues to offer a sense of identity when Tongan people are in a strange land. For my own personal role as a participant-observer, being a part of this custom is the very reason why I am undertaking this project. It is part of the spiral.

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100 Susanna Snyder Asylum-Seeking, Migration and the Church, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 15-50.
My experience of coming to Australia is well-expressed in terms of Rebecca Chopp's the 'poetics of witness' or 'testimony'. As a Tongan migrant, I came to Australia from Tonga in 1981 as a confirmed member of the Free Church of Tonga and later joined the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. I was encouraged by my home church in Tonga when I left with my family to attend the Uniting Church in Australia because it represents the Methodist Church family and the Methodist tradition in Australia. When I attended worship for the first time in 1981, it was at a small congregation in Parkington Street, Kew in Victoria. The majority of the congregation were Anglo-Celts. However, there was a small group of Tongans who worshipped in English on Sunday morning with the Anglo-Celtic congregation and then worshiped in Tongan on Sunday afternoon using the Tongan Hymnal and liturgies of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. It was, in effect, a combination of bilingual services and cross-cultural experience. Remembering back over those years, there seemed to be no difference in the two liturgies. The only difference was the language. Sharing the Tongan language provided a powerful sense of belonging.

It so happened that the minister of the congregation at the time was Rev George Harris who had been a missionary to Tonga in the 1960s and, in fact, crowned King Tupou IV of Tonga at his coronation in 1965 in the Palace Chapel.

in Nuku’alofa, Tonga. Because of his experience as a missionary, Harris was able to nurture and spiritually care for this small Tongan congregation in Kew, Victoria. Worshipping in English in the Uniting Church congregation on Sunday morning and worshipping in Tongan in the same Uniting Church congregation on Sunday afternoon was a formative experience for these Tongans. The worship life of this Tongan congregation acted as a binding agent that was sufficiently familiar in an otherwise very different cultural setting.

It was indeed a timely coincidence that Harris had been a missionary to Tonga as indeed had been his predecessor, Rev Ronald Woodgate. Both missionaries had been Presidents of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, Harris 1963-69, and Woodgate 1956-61. The leadership of these two former missionaries reminded the Tongans in this congregation of the home church through their very presence, their network of relationships, and their sensitivity to cultural values. Their ministry was also a witness to the strong partner relationship between the two inter-related denominations.

James Latu, a Tongan born minister of the Uniting Church, has described Harris and Woodgate’s support – alongside that of Harold Wood and others – as being crucial for the nurturing of the first Tongan congregation made up mainly of students and their families in Melbourne: that fellowship first began meeting

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102 https://www.google.com/search?q=Rev+George+Harris+crowned+King+Tupou+IV+of+Tonga&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiv84HWnNbeAhVOWHO0KH5ovCNMQsAR6BAgEEAE&biw=1920&bih=938 (accessed 15 November, 2018)

at Wesley Church in Lonsdale Street in 1969 and would eventually move to Hyde Park. ¹⁰⁴ Latu noted the importance of a ‘warm fellowship’, pastoral care, ‘and at times financial support’ with the fellowship and the generous hospitality shown to them by a number of palagi.¹⁰⁵

The congregation’s life together at Hyde Park exemplified the role the church could play in helping Tongan migrants to transition from one society to another. Latu declared that the coming of the Tongans “to Hyde Park brought new life to the place”¹⁰⁶. There was a growth in membership and more programmes with Bible studies, choir practices and other social activities like volleyball and tennis. In anticipation of future points of tension in the life of many mixed churches Latu acknowledged the occasional complaints concerning ‘food left over, pig fat on the floor’ and things not being put away.¹⁰⁷ Some of the cultural differences between Anglo-Celts and Tongans as far as cultural practices emerged.

The cross-cultural experiences between the Anglo-Celts and the Tongans in this congregation in Kew was a small sign of what has become a most significant influence on in the life of the Uniting Church in years. The helpful experiences in Tonga and the cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity of Harris

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 95-96.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid p.96
¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
and Woodgate laid the foundation for the growth of the small Tongan congregation in Kew which developed into a large cross-cultural congregation that eventually outgrew the size of the church buildings; the congregation had to be relocated to the larger Canterbury Balwyn Road Uniting Church in 1990.

In reflecting upon these early days of Tongan ministry in Melbourne Latu concluded that:

Sharing one Church Council with Tongans and Palagis worked very well. Both languages were used in both services. We had shared activities that helped us understand our differences and we had great fun.\textsuperscript{108}

Latu himself would become the first Tongan-born minister to be ordained in the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania; that was in 1987. He would be the leader of this first Tongan congregation of the Uniting Church in Melbourne.\textsuperscript{109} Latu was instrumental in the setting up of the first Tongan National Conference and, indeed, he became the first Secretary of the Tongan National Conference in 1987. He held that office through until he retired in 2010. In the emergence of the Tongan National Conference the role of personalities and the relationships they bring with them has been crucial.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p. 97.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p.95.
There are similarities between what happened in Melbourne and the formation of Tongan congregations happened in Sydney. In an interview with Andrew West of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Osai Faiva, at that time the General Secretary of the Tonga Parish (a cluster of sixteen Tongan congregations in Sydney), noted that on arrival in Australia “we, [Tongans] look for something that is familiar to us, so the church is the first thing we turn to. That is why the church plays a very important role in maintaining Tongan language and culture.”\(^{110}\) West further observed that for these new arrivals, the church is not only a place of worship but a central point where Tongans exchange news about their homeland and, sometimes, network for jobs.\(^{111}\) “The links between the Tongan community in Australia and Tonga are very strong,” Faiva reported, “that’s why we remit a very significant part of our income to support the remaining relatives at home.”\(^{112}\)

The Australia in which this Tongan community now resides is one of many cultures. Australia has undergone a ‘reinvention’ through changes in immigration laws and who can now become citizens.\(^{113}\) Surrounding this shift or reinvention is an abiding question discerned by Dennis Dutton: who should now be seen as ‘one of us’.\(^{114}\) That reference back to one of us was accompanied by a question mark. In the background lies a history of the White

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\(^{111}\) Ibid.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.


Australia policy which had denied access to Pacific Island communities until the early 1970s. Of particular importance was the legislation enacted soon after Federation in 1901 which sought to exclude Pacific Island labour.

The question mark also testified to the ongoing presence of various forms of racism evident in Gwenda Tavan’s study, The Long Slow Death of White Australia. Tavan wrote at a time which marked the rise of One Nation, incidents of Islamophobia and much talk of border security. In a review in The Age (21 May 2005) a series of questions was posed: When did the White Australia policy end? Was it in 1956, when the total ban on Asian migrants was modified, with the Liberal-Country party government deciding that a small number of “distinguished and highly qualified persons” from Asia could be admitted? Or in 1958, when the government abolished the infamous dictation test? Or perhaps in 1966, when the progressive duo of Peter Heydon, secretary of the immigration department, and his Liberal minister, Hubert Opperman, allowed non-European residents to be admitted to citizenship on the same basis as other residents? Or was the end of White Australia the achievement of Labor’s Al Grassby, as is commonly believed, when in 1973, he declared in favour of Australia as a ‘multicultural society’? Or was the passage of the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975 the crucial event? Or should Malcolm Fraser who, in the late 1970s, allowed more than 70,000 Vietnamese refugees to settle in Australia, be given the main credit?

As Tavan makes clear in *The Long Slow Death of White Australia*, the process of ending White Australia was bureaucratic, incremental and often obscured from view. But is White Australia really dead? Although immigration and refugee policy is no longer officially discriminatory, its implementation sometimes makes it seem so. In this fascinating study, Tavan documents the efforts of a vast range of academics, activists, journalists, politicians and public servants, who worked to establish a non-discriminatory immigration policy. The White Australia policy, it has been argued by critics, was abolished by stealth in the 1950s and 1960s. Tavan shows that in some ways this was true, in that immigration officials were always fearful of a public backlash if the increasing numbers of non-European migrants became widely known. There was, however, much evidence of public support for the changes that were taking place. Ironically, the much greater publicity accorded to the Whitlam government’s rhetorical shifts (immigration actually declined during the early 1970s) has obscured, in Tavan’s view, the “important role that some senior officers had played in achieving the policy liberalisations of the 1950s and 1960s” – most notably the role of departmental secretary, Peter Heydon. Tavan’s study thus raises the larger question of the historical importance of professional public servants in shaping, and managing, political change in Australia more generally.117 On occasion that psychology of exclusion could

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117 Ibid.

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manifest itself in forms of populist political movements like that of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party. One nation has a strongly nationalist platform. Hanson and other party members have denied claims that the party is racist. Hanson says that "criticism is not racism" about her statements on immigration and race. Hanson has also said that she enjoys the company of other ethnicities and welcomes people to Australia whatever their origin but does not want other cultures to overly influence Australia. On other occasions this kind of view could find itself expressed in more mainline political policies such as those put forward by John Howard who in his 2001 Federal Election Campaign Launch where he said “we have a proud record of welcoming people from 140 different nations. But we will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come.”

These political and cultural tensions over citizenship and immigration always have a human face. Drawing upon the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Clive Pearson has written of the need for the Uniting Church to come to terms with its own changing face and do so in a way in which the stories of the faces of those who are different from those in power are heard. I personally experienced the force of the immigration policy and law when I went through series of court cases between 1983-86. I was arrested and put in Maribyrnong Detention Centre in Melbourne for eleven days for overstaying my student visa,

118 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pauline_Hanson%27s_One_Nation (accessed 16 November, 2018)
while applying to be a permanent resident in Australia. My reason for that action was because of Cyclone Isaac which hit Tonga in 1982: the storm destroyed our family home.\textsuperscript{121} I wanted to stay in Australia and work to help my family in Tonga.\textsuperscript{122} The family High Court case decision changed the Migration Act in 1986.\textsuperscript{123}

The debate in Parliament about the 1986 amendment to the Citizenship Act made no reference to any such constitutional issue. The Parliament appeared to assume that deeming certain Australian-born children to be 'non-citizens' in itself enabled them to be deported, and that this understanding was sufficient to remove a key basis for appeals by the children's parents against deportation. Elvina, our third daughter who was an Australian citizen because she was born here while we were illegal migrants, was the last example of such before the law changed.


Our court case from 1983-86 attracted media coverage. The Queen’s Counsel (QC) acting on our behalf was Ron Merkel. Michael Gordon reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (29 April 2014) that

Merkel was given a blunt lesson in realpolitik, Australia-style, soon after he appeared as senior counsel in a High Court case in 1985 that dramatically extended the application of natural justice and procedural fairness under Australian law. The Problem was, the victory did not save his client, a Tongan pastor who had overstayed his visa, from the threat of being deported, along with his wife and two daughters, one of whom had been born in Australia. It was then that Merkel decided to make a personal approach to the then immigration minister, Mick Young, the knockabout former shearer with a colourful turn of phrase, an acute political antenna and a strong commitment to social justice. They met in the foyer of the Hyatt Hotel in Melbourne, where Merkel told Young the family’s story, showing pictures of Jason Kioa’s daughters and describing Kioa as a model citizen and rising leader in the Uniting Church. "Are my people really trying to chuck this family out?" Merkel recalls an incredulous Young asking, after he had completed his pitch. "Yes, they are, minister," he replied, before Young assured him not to worry. "Leave it to me," the minister said. It was then that Merkel suggested that the minister’s intervention might make a “fabulous” human interest story, once Kioa’s future was assured. But, before Merkel had finished articulating the suggestion, Young brushed it aside. "There are no votes
in my electorate for keeping blacks in the community," he said flatly. And that was that!124

We were given permanent residency in Australia in 1987. The situation in which we had found ourselves had come to the surface again in 2005 when I was elected Moderator of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia. The Age newspaper carried a report on 26 September 2005 under the heading “From Detention to Church Leader”. It read

When Jason Kioa, a former Tongan public relations officer, was arrested and thrown in the Maribyrnong detention centre in 1983, he made a bargain with God that if he got out of there, he would serve the church for the rest of his life. Two decades later he has made good. Yesterday he was elected Moderator of the Uniting Church synod of Victoria and Tasmania, making him the first Pacific Islander to lead an Australian church. Currently the minister at Melbourne’s Wesley Uniting Church, he said yesterday those 11 dark days in detention had made him more understanding as he rose through the ranks of the Uniting Church, the nation’s third-largest denomination. "I tell you, I’m very passionate about those who struggle, because I have struggled through processes and through government departments and through the processes of the church," he said yesterday. "Through the journey from Maribyrnong

Detention Centre to now I have learnt to actually feel my gut feeling, and my heart aches for those who are struggling on their way, whether they be asylum seekers, illegal migrants or indigenous people.¹²⁵

This experience is clearly a formative and companion experience. It marked out my route from being a bit of a ‘loose cannon’ to a pathway of ministry and leadership. It was much more than just a rather dramatic rite of passage: the actual court case was reckoned to be the most important in the field of immigration law in the 1980s. The pressure and the insights that arose as a consequence profoundly affected my perception on ministry and how I have understood the role of the Tongan National Conference and my particular role as its chairperson. This experience is like a filter. It has sensitised me to the possibility of injustice, caricature and racism.

For seventeen years (from 2001-2018) I had been the chairperson (sea) of the Conference. The position description was not the same at the end of that tenure as it was in the beginning. As a matter of fact, there was no formally written up position description until 2015 when the Tongan National Conference Executive put it to paper, along with descriptions of a Mission Statement” and a set of “Strategic Goals”.¹²⁶ This organizational restructure


¹²⁶  ‘Role Description of the Tongan National Conference Chairperson’, Minutes of the Tongan National Conference, 11th April 2015.
overseen by Tangi Steen an academic from South Australia. The underlying aim was to tighten up proceedings.

The duties of the Chairperson are defined generally in the following manner.

- To supervise the conduct of the TNC and its affairs;
- To sign minutes of the TNC meetings as being a true and correct record of the decisions;
- To guide and supervise the affairs of the TNC and its members having regard to the objects and activities of TNC;
- To represent the TNC at the meetings of Chairpersons of all National Conferences of the Assembly;
- To represent the TNC to the Annual Conference of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Tonga;
- To be the public spokesperson of the TNC when necessary. The Mission Statement (Taumu’a Ngaue’a e TNC) reads:

  - The Tonga National Conference provides an opportunity for Tongan people in the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and the non-Tongan leaders who minister to Tongan people, to gather as God’s people, to have fellowship, and to nurture each other along the way of Jesus, and to share any issues of concern.\(^{127}\)

\(^{127}\) TNC Mission Statements and Goals Minutes TNC 2016
The Executive has also developed the following strategic goals (Kaveinga Ngaue á e Konifelenisi) based on the results of a survey of its members about their wishes for the future of the Tongan National Conference.

- The Tonga National Conference Executive develops
  
  GOAL 1: To develop and nurture TNC’s members' spiritual growth and relationship with God.

  GOAL 2: To develop and foster a TNC-youth educational and leadership plan, including a succession plan.

  GOAL 3: To improve TNC’s efficiency and effectiveness in its operations and professional practices.

  GOAL 4: To build and maintain strong relationship between TNC and other Tongan and non-Tongan congregations in Australia and abroad through outreach.

These goals are now in the process of being further developed by the recently established TNC Think Tank, chaired by Rev. Haloti Kailahi.

The position description formally arrived at by the TNC has meant that two distinct roles have been identified. The first of these within the Tongan congregations of the Uniting Church, and the other with the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. There are issues dealing with the Tongan diaspora and its
relationship to the Uniting Church in Australia and, as well, the Tongan National Conference has to negotiate specific issues with the Free Wesleyan Church back in Tonga. In both roles the Tongan National Conference serves as a bridge between the sending and receiving denominations. What was not anticipated was the public role the chairperson might play in the country at large.

The way in which these discrete threads can come together in an actual situation occurred around the controversy surrounding the ABC television series *Jonah from Tonga* written by and starring comedian Chris Lilley from Sydney’s north shore. The series greatly distressed the Tongan community. Here, for the first time in the life of the TNC, was a public issue which required a role that was endorsed by the then Assembly’s President, Reverend Professor Andrew Dutney. 

On 26 November 2013, Lilley confirmed that he would be reviving Jonah Takalua (who had been a character in *Summer Heights High*) for a new show in 2014, titled *Jonah From Tonga*. The series was originally posted online on the ABC iView service, available for viewing by Australian residents, and on BBC iPlayer in the United Kingdom, from 2–4 May 2014, before airing on ABC1 from 7 May 2014 and BBC 3 from 8 May 2014. The series was labelled “racist” and “creepy” and resulted in protests from academics and Tongan youth.

concerned at the inaccurate and demeaning portrayals of Tongan culture. There was also criticism of Lilley’s use of the term brownface.\(^{129}\)

On what grounds Lilley felt justified in creating this mockumentary is unclear. *Jonah from Tonga* was unlike the kind of work produced by the two laughing Samoans in Aotearoa–New Zealand, Etuaiti Ete and Togifa Fepulea‘i. These two comedians of island descent were familiar with culture and the idiosyncrasies of migration and living in diaspora. They were speaking from within the culture about the culture of *fa’aSamoa*.

By way of comparison Lilley was educated at Barker College and presumed to know Tongan culture and experience. Lilley lacked what the pastoral theologian, Lydia F. Johnson, has described as interpathy in *Drinking from the Same Well*.\(^{130}\) Interpathy is the capacity to demonstrate empathy for another culture while recognizing that there are limits – that there are boundaries – as to what one can know of another culture and empathize with.

This new series was built around a character named Jonah Takalua, a rebellious 14-year-old Australian boy of Tongan descent. Takalua had previously been a character in another of Lilley’s work, *Summer Heights High* (2007). In that first series Lilley had acted out the role of three characters – including Takalua – in order to investigate different experiences of being a high


school student. The other two roles he played were of a schoolgirl and a male teacher. Jonah was to be the disruptive, delinquent personality.\textsuperscript{131}

To his credit Lilley acknowledged that as a white man in his later thirties he could not easily pass for a Tongan teenager. In order to rectify that situation he surrounded himself for a time with young Pacific Islanders and “just naughty teenagers” in order to make himself, so he claimed, familiar with their behaviour and speech patterns.\textsuperscript{132} Lilley reckoned “I knew that physically I didn’t really look like a Tongan kid but if you surrounded him enough with the other kids and got the hair right, maybe people would get the illusion”. \textsuperscript{133} Jonah was the most challenging of the three roles but one which, so he concluded was “the most rewarding to watch, perhaps because he is the most different to me”.\textsuperscript{134}

In \textit{Summer Heights High} Jonah is effectively made into a representative of the second-generation Tongans in Australia. He was born in Tonga but has not grown up in the integrated concept of culture that Robert Schreiter has identified in his \textit{The New Catholicity}. In this cultural system a young person belongs to a culture through birth and is nurtured into its ways through a

\textsuperscript{133} Jace, ‘Television Blog’.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
customary upbringing where you know what is expected of you, where the patterns of authority lie and your cultural identity is a given.\textsuperscript{135} In the television series there is a radical rupture: Jonah is the second youngest of five children; his family emigrated when he was three and his mother died when he was six years old. Jonah is raised by his father, Rocky. He lives with his father, his sister, two cousins and an aunt. He shares a room with his three brothers. His schooling is problematic. Here he is now living inside Schreiter's alternative to the integrated concept of culture, a globalized concept of culture. The latter model differs in the way in which identity and belonging need to be invented within a mix of cultures and disparate influences. It is not clear what the patterns of authority are and where the traditional ways have been seriously compromised.\textsuperscript{136}

The storyline tells of Jonah having attended three schools during a period of eighteen months. He has been expelled from both. In the first case he set fire to a student’s locker; in the second he defaced the Principal’s car by spray-paining a penis on it. He had also threatened violence towards a teacher, Miss Wheatley.

The storyline concludes on a redemptive note. Johan takes a remedial reading course at Gumnut College with the one teacher with whom he can identify. In


\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., pp. 53-60.
the final episode he tells his story to those gathered at College. It expresses the difficulties of his situation while it is also clear that now he is returning to Tonga to live with his uncle. The series end with his tag line of *DICK*tation scrawled throughout the school.

At the conclusion of the series, Jonah had been expelled from school. His father, Rocky Takalua, had sent him back to his homeland of Tonga to live with his uncle and their family in order to get Jonah’s life back on track. At the time Michael Idato, the television critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote that ”Jonah Takalua is well on the way to becoming the voice of his generation.”137 Lilley’s work in this series was generally well received by the television industry. Dean Flannery for CBC News said that “Jonah was funny even his situation was not”.138 Stephen Dinham of the Australian Council for Educational Research saw in Jonah’s story ‘a recognizable figure who exemplified a particular group of students who struggle in school, failing in literacy and falling behind their peer group while trying to cover up their difficulties with bravado and disruptive behaviour’.139 Dinham constructively argued that the Polynesian Pathways program in which Jonah is made to participate as a way of embracing his Tongan heritage suffers from the same problems that many such programs

experience in schools across Australia. “What he really needed to do was deeply engage with Polynesian culture, which is a very rich one, and through that be challenged and really get some depth out of it...Unfortunately, a lack of time, resources and skills generally render these programs ‘shallow’ and ‘tokenistic’.”\textsuperscript{140}

It was acknowledged by some critics, though, that Lilley had crossed some boundaries. There were those who took exception to the psychology of Jonah informing a teacher that his father had molested him;\textsuperscript{141} there was disquiet about the example set by Jonah referring to others as ”homos” and telling adults to ”puck-off”.

Unlike \textit{Summer Heights High} the sequel, \textit{Jonah from Tonga}, was a ratings disaster. It was later announced that the entire series would screen at select cinemas in several Australian cities followed by a Q and A with Lilley. These events were subsequently cancelled, with refunds given and the website created to promote them removed.

The criticism was global and as strong in the United States as it was in Australia. It evoked an on-line campaign from young Tongans under the caption of

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
being Proud Poly and who reckoned the show to be "creepy" and “racist”.\footnote{Adam Duggan, ‘Sorry Miss! Tongan Community Launches Protest Against Comedian Chris Lilley's Juvenile Delinquent TV Character Jonah, Branding It “Racist” and “Creepy’’, \textit{Daily Mail Australia}, 15 May, 2014; https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2628943/Were-not-criminals-Tongan-community-launch-protest-against-comedian-Chris-Lilley’s-TV-character-Jonah-branding-racist.html (accessed 20 November, 2018).} Lilley himself was especially called out for a white man donning a brown face and thus acting out a “white man’s stereotype”. The problem was intensified through the real Pacific Islander boys in the show having “no real voice of their own to act as a contrast”. They were, in effect, being asked “to play second fiddle to caricatures of themselves”.\footnote{Emily Orley, ‘The Brownface Controversy Surrounding “Jonah From Tonga”’, \textit{BuzzFeed News}, 8 October, 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/emilyorley/the-brownface-controversy-surrounding-jonah-from-tonga, (accessed 20 November, 2018).}

This television series led to a burst of protest in which the Tongan National Conference was to the forefront. The Tongan community in Australia took offence and raised the issue with the ABC through the Assembly Office and the Uniting Church Media Officer. A media release from the Uniting Church to the ABC was sent by the then President Andrew Dutney.\footnote{Matt Pulford, ‘Tongan Youth in Australia a Source of Pride not Prejudice’, UCA Media, 4 June 2014.} The ABC Sunday program invited myself, the Chair of the Tongan National Conference and the Leader of the Next Generation Team, Charissa Suli, to participate in a live panel on the ABC Sunday night radio program. It gave the Tongan National Conference a public face, speaking out on an important issue that deeply touched Tongan Australians.
The programme deeply distressed the Tongan membership of the Uniting Church. The Assembly duly released a statement, calling for a greater focus on the positive achievements of young Tongans in Australia.\textsuperscript{145} That statement coincided with the Tongan National Conference holding its annual conference in which there were reckoned to be many positive young role models participated at the conference. It was noted that the Tongan National Conference “is the biggest national gathering of Uniting Church members”, attracting more than 1000 people from around the country. The Assembly called for the company responsible Princess Pictures, “to send a representative to this conference to listen to the voices of Tongans who are unhappy with the \textit{Jonah from Tonga} program, and feel that they have been singled out and denigrated as a distinct ethnic group,” Dutney argued that

\begin{quote}
[a]s members of the same body of Christ we share that pain that their nationality has been singled out for ridicule on the national broadcaster. Young Tongan leaders make an amazing contribution to our Church and our country. They deserve our pride not this kind of prejudice.\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

As chair of the Tongan National Conference my role was to claim that ‘the portrayal of Jonah sent the wrong message on so many levels. The fact that such a racially-based program can be conceived in the first place is symptomatic of a larger failure by the Australian media – a failure to reflect the

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
reality of Australia’s multicultural society. Where are the voices in the Australian media that tell of the successes of our young people and the challenges faced by the Tongan community?’

At that time, as the chairperson of the Tongan National Conference, I took up the invitation by the ABC Sunday Night program to join a panel which included Suli, the Tongan National Conference 2nd Generation leader. Here was an occasion where the Tongan National Conference had an explicit public role to play. It also received support from the Assembly office of the Uniting Church. The *Jonah from Tonga* incident gave the Tongan community an opportunity to respond with an upsurge of outrage from throughout the world. It was left unaddressed, however, those questions to do with the role and status of the Tongan National Conference.

Writing at the conclusion of his article on the origins of Tongan ministry in the Uniting Church Latu observed that representatives of Tongan congregations were now meeting annually. He saw the Conference as ‘an initiative of the Assembly to enable Tongan members to play a role in the life and ministry of the Uniting Church encouraging their voice to be channelled into the decision-making processes of the church’.

The burden of this thesis is to explore this claim made by Latu. To what extent has the TNC acquired an appropriate standing, status and authority within this ch

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Chapter 4:
Forming the Tongan National Conference.

Becoming the chair of a body like the Tongan National Conference means stepping into a living tradition. The conference both precedes and proceeds on its own momentum regardless of the time any individual spends in a position of leadership. In the case of the Tongan National Conference Its purpose had first been expressed prior to my coming onto the scene as chair. From the perspective of a current participant / observer it will exist beyond my time.

The self-evident nature of this observation masks an important consideration which is held together by a set of questions. Why did the Tongan National Conference come into being in the first place? Is what has unfolded in keeping with the hopes that were present birth at its birth? Were the questions that now surface with regards to its role and status anticipated in the beginning? How active were staff members of the Uniting Church in its formation? How does their vision compare with what is now in place? Has the Uniting Church honoured its commitments?

In order to address these questions, there is need for some historical research. Whether there are full and adequate resources for such work is doubtful. So much depends upon a handful of minutes and oral traditions. There has been no attempt made to write up any of the formation stories of the annual
conferences held by minority cultures within the Uniting Church. That work still needs to be done. The Tongan culture is an oral culture. It is given to a sharing of perspectives. It is communal. It is less common for the Tongan method to be historical in the western sense – which is not to say that such an approach is unimportant. Quite the reverse. This work needs to be done for the sake of a Tongan diaspora seeking to find its place inside the way in which the dominant majority within the church gives an account of itself. It also needs to be done in order to show how the actual initiative for the Tongan National Conference lay with the staff of the Uniting Church Assembly.

The formation of the Tongan National Conference did not simply just happen. It did not emerge out of a vacuum. In terms of origins there is a distant horizon as well as one which is more recent. With regards the former there is the history and legacy of the Methodist mission from Australia to Tonga. At another level is a series of Assembly decisions made by the Uniting Church itself beginning with the declaration made in 1985: We Are a Multicultural Church. In terms of ministry and an ecclesiology this declaration and those which followed laid out an inclusive and welcoming theological vision. The way in which the Uniting Church defined itself held out the promise of a way of being the church which bound life together in Christ and cultural diversity. The more immediate origins

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of the Tongan National Conference presupposed both the mission to Tonga and the aspirational claim to be a multicultural church.

At one level its emergence was a consequence of the Uniting Church in Australia having declared itself to be a multicultural church. That decision was made by the Assembly in 1985 – that is, seven years after the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in Australia had formally come into union. In the foundational document of the new church, the Basis of Union, there is no specific reference to indigenous peoples, nor to the possibility of cultural and linguistic diversity within its membership. This omission should be set over and against the commitment expressed in Paragraph 2 that this new Australian church would be committed to the ‘whole church’ – and, in particular, to ‘Churches in Asia and the Pacific’. With the benefit of hindsight Paragraph 2 would later be invoked in the case to be made for the 1985 declaration on the grounds of its desire to ‘seek special relationships’ with these churches. It had also spelt out that ‘Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries.’¹⁴⁹ It can be seen that an openness to being a culturally and linguistically diverse church was implicit in the foundational documents of the Uniting Church.

¹⁴⁹ Basis of Union of the Uniting Church n Australia
The embedded theological assumption to be found in the Basis of Union evolved around a commitment to reconciliation in and through Christ. That commitment is core. This emphasis on reconciliation was not surprising given the ecumenical nature of the new church. It looked to an understanding of Jesus Christ who ‘has made peace between people of every race, culture and class.’ It saw this unity as ‘a gift of God’ and, for a pilgrim people on the way to a promised end, as ‘a foretaste of the reconciliation of all things in Christ.’

**We Are A Multicultural Church**

The declaration *We Are A Multicultural Church* sought to build upon the prayer that Christ’s disciples might be one. This theological confession was given priority at a time when the makeup of Australia was undergoing a radical change. The Uniting Church had come into being in the immediate wake of shifts in Australia’s immigration policies during the Labour Government of 1973. The nation was on the brink of being reinvented but the Basis of Union had not adequately reflected what that might mean in terms of the membership and identity of the new church. This declaration that *We Are A Multicultural Church* sought to build upon that first step into ecumenical recognition and union.

The declaration welcomed the progress that had been made in Australia over the preceding couple of decades when ‘people of many races and cultures [had come to] live together’. The church rejoiced ‘that successive governments [had] substantially removed racial criteria from the policies
covering the selection of migrants and the reception of refugees’.\textsuperscript{150} It set out, in particular, to welcome ‘groups of people from Asia and the Pacific’. Now it was evident that these shifts in immigration policy were making themselves felt within the membership and congregational makeup of the church itself. At the time of union, the references to Asia and the Pacific had been to churches overseas; that was no longer entirely appropriate.

This shift in membership was interpreted as a ‘reminder’ of the church being ‘both a product and agent of mission’. In response to this deepening self-understanding of its being and purpose the freshly designated ‘multicultural Uniting Church’ sought to position itself as a ‘sign of hope within the Australian community, and particularly to those who are pushed to its fringes on racial and economic grounds.’\textsuperscript{151} That aim demanded an imperative of ‘full participation of Aboriginal and ethnic people, women and men, in decision making in the councils of the Church’. \textsuperscript{152} This claim to full participation embraced the ‘equitable rights in the use of Uniting Church properties and access to its resources’.\textsuperscript{153} The concerns and perspectives of indigenous and migrant members of the church were to be included ‘in the agendas of the councils of the Church.’\textsuperscript{154}

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid
This move to inclusion was not confined to ‘the prayer of Christ’. *We Are A Multicultural Church* argued that openness to change was a response to the Holy Spirit. It was not justified, for instance, on the basis of a subsequent tendency of the Uniting Church to place all people under the umbrella of being made in the image of God. The emphasis here was clearly on the Holy Spirit and implicitly bound to the confession of belief in Christ which it followed. There was no reference whatsoever to any indigenous spirit of the islands to be found in Oceania. This turn to the Holy Spirit was made on the basis of a tacit understanding of the gifts of the Spirit interpreted within an understanding of what constitutes the church. The expectation that the declaration bore witness to the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing about change to the life of the church ‘because of the creative contributions of people of different racial and cultural groups’.  

This reading of the Holy Spirit is of interest because of the way in which it expects ecclesial change. It anticipates that the inclusion of these diverse cultures will be an agency of change without specifying the form that this change might assume. It situates the presence of the Tongan diaspora – and, other diasporas – within a working of the Holy Spirit.

It differed in this respect from the subsequent reference to the Spirit in the revised *Preamble to the Constitution* (2012) which was designed to

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155 Ibid
acknowledge the Aboriginal peoples as first people and all others, colonizers and other cultures, as second peoples. There is a clear distinction to be made. In the revised Preamble there is knowledge of God the Creator; the Spirit is then named. It comes second in order and thus assumes a purpose not normally assigned to the Spirit in a classical pneumatology where its work is to provoke the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. With regards to Aboriginal culture the Spirit was declared to be ‘already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony’.¹⁵⁶ The apprehension of its presence is not tied to ‘the prayer of Christ’. The comparison can be made with the unusual contextual claim that ‘[the same love and grace [evident through God the Creator and Spirit, both apart from any biblical mediation] was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.’¹⁵⁷

In matters of organization We Are A Multicultural Church recognized that ‘ethnic congregations’ allowed for worship ‘in familiar languages, to hear the Gospel in terms of our several identities and cultures, and to provide pastoral care for all our people’.¹⁵⁸ There was a desire expressed for bilingual worship: the reason for such was rather contrary to what might have been deduced in subsequent decades. Monocultural and monolingual ethnic congregations ran the risk of becoming culturally bound and rather detached from the wider

¹⁵⁷ Ibid
¹⁵⁸ Ibid
Uniting Church. *We Are A Multicultural Church* saw things differently. The risk it foresaw was of the ‘rest of the church’ becoming ‘insulated from the hurts and struggles of Australia’s minorities’. The risk and the need for ‘fellowship across racial and cultural boundaries’ was in the opposite direction to what the dominant majority might come to understand in the future. The familiar complaint that emerged was that multiculturalism was something other, migrant, ethnic cultures ‘did’ was anticipated by the Assembly’s statement.

The declaration agreed to in 1985 was not merely theoretical. It was not simply a theology devoid of practice. It foresaw a complexity of relationships at a congregational level; it realized that ‘first generation settlers often seek the security of a congregation of their own culture and traditions’. The Assembly looked forward to the establishment of multicultural parishes where congregations would be ‘be culturally mixed and some of which met separately for reasons of language’. It also recognized the need for special ministerial education programs and due awareness of the theological and ecclesial traditions of the churches from which these cultures had come. The declaration held out the possibility of theological study being done in both countries – Australia and diverse homelands.

*We Are A Multicultural Church* was a document of its time. In the life of the Uniting Church it possessed the quality of being a kairos moment – it was the ‘right time’ for such a declaration. In the subsequent years, references would be made repeatedly to the Uniting Church being a multicultural church. Those
ordinary, everyday comments are most often made without any knowledge and awareness of this document which set so many things in motion. That lack of knowledge is, of course, a problem. It means the claim can be made – ‘we are a multicultural church’ – in a way that is detached from the strategies and specific policies that flowed from the confession. For some reason or other the Uniting Church has seldom captured the urgency that is to be found in the declaration itself. The word *kairos* - had it been used - might have done that. The language of being a *kairos*-ike document has never been applied to *We Are A Multicultural Church*, however. It is indeed more usual for *kairos* to be used in association with a crisis of some description. The most obvious examples have been those to do with the *Kairos* documents that have arisen out of South Africa and Palestine.\(^{159}\) This document is not like those. Being a *kairos* moment can be seen, rather, in the light of the declaration, as theological necessary.

In terms of its timing *We Are A Multicultural Church* saw itself as being a response to the triune nature of God. It was theologically justified. Seongja Yoo (later Yoo-Crowe), the first National Director of the Assembly Multicultural Ministry would describe the statement as an historic and bold commitment in response to the calling of God to the churches of Australia in our time.\(^{160}\) In matters of timing the document was looking back to what was in and what was not in the *Basis of Union*. It was reflecting deep-seated changes in the


nature of Australian society. It was also aspirational. The hopes it held – and the steps it believed needed to be put into place – looked towards a future yet to be realized. It expressed and conveyed a sense of people on the journey towards being a truly multicultural church but is not there yet. The formation of the Tongan National Conference was to be one more step along that way. The possibility of its evolution depended on this declaration.

The more obvious way of describing why the establishment of the Tongan National Conference was necessary is to look at the details of the first gathering. Who were the key figures? How did they attract the support of others? What did they expect to happen? They are the practical questions – they are worthy of historical interest. The case can be made for a delay in such a description, though. Those questions belong to immediate causes but there were some which lay further back in history. What made the first gathering possible was the ‘special relationship’ with the church back in Tonga and the theological framework put into place by the declaration, We Are A Multicultural Church. Both of these factors have played an ongoing role and, as such, require more explanation. The origin of the Tongan National Conference lies way back in the history of mission; its subsequent evolution is dependent on the call to be a multicultural church – even though the Assembly has passed a further two resolutions that have modified that position.

The ‘special relationship’.
The importance assigned to the Assembly’s 1985 statement cannot be underestimated. It is not the whole story, though. Through its reference to the ‘special relationships’ with the churches in Asia and the Pacific the Basis of Union had also, unintentionally, laid the ground work for what was to come into being. The nineteenth century mission to Tonga and the original nurture of the Wesleyan tradition in those islands had depended upon the overseas work of one of the three constituent denominations that had come into union. The reason why there were Tongan members and churches in the Uniting Church was a consequence of the pre-union work of the Methodist Church.

In terms of church history, the oral telling of the story as well as the formal disciplined study of that relationship is critical for an understanding of the place of the Tongans within the Uniting Church. The evolution of the Tongan National Conference is but one more episode in an unfolding story that goes right back to the arrival of the first Australian-based missionary. For the sake of an understanding of some of the more peculiar dynamics of the Tongan National Conference this story needs to be told for its future role as well as its place in the reasons for the Conference coming into being in the first place. This early history is just as important as the meetings which were called to organize the first gathering of Tongan ministers from around the country and working within the new church.

In the course of time the analogy of a woven mat would be used to describe the relationship between the Tongan churches and the Uniting Church in
Australia. That mat is crafted together through the intertwining of a number of threads or strands. With the benefit of hindsight, the first thread was the legacy of the Methodist mission to Tonga in the nineteenth century. In the pioneer community of Sydney there was a small group of Wesleyan laymen who persuaded the British Methodist Conference to give them ministerial leadership. The first missionary to New South Wales was Samuel Leigh who arrived in 1815 and the second was Walter Lawry who became the pioneer in Tonga. Walter Lawry had written in October 1818 to the Missionary Committee in London about the prospects of Wesleyan Missions extending throughout the South Pacific. These South Pacific Missions were directed from the Wesleyan Church in Sydney and London until the severance of the link with British Wesleyans in 1855.

Lawry landed by ship at Ma’ufanga, Tongatapu on the 16 August 1822. He had left England in December 1817 as chaplain on a convict ship, the Lady Castlereagh. He had worked as a missionary for the London Missionary Society based in Parramatta, New South Wales. His initial appointment to Tonga appeared in the Minutes of the British Wesleyan Conference of 1820, as follows: “New Zealand: Samuel Leigh and another, Friendly Islands: Walter Lawry and one to be sent.” Lawry was replaced by John Thomas in 1826, then followed by Nathaniel Turner and William Cross in 1827.

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162 Ibid
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid., 20
Of these early figures it was John Thomas who had most influence on the beginning of the Methodist Mission in Tonga. He was soon to be joined by the first Australian Methodist to be ordained in Sydney on 25 April 1826 - John Hutchinson. More missionaries followed and established a long association between the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. The association and affiliation of Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga with the Methodist Church of Australasia helped the building of schools, hospitals and more churches in Tonga. These Australian missionaries maintained great influence in the islands’ social and political life.

One example of individual influence was the work of Shirley Baker. He arrived in Tonga in 1860; he was so influential in politics that he actually became Premier of Tonga in 1880 under King Tupou 1. Baker was also responsible for the setting up of a breakaway Methodist Church from links to the Methodist Church in Australasia. He named this new church the Free Church of Tonga: it is still in operation to this day but has no relationship with the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in governance and structure. The effect of this division within the Wesleyan tradition in Tonga continues to be felt in the Tongan diaspora – most particularly, at times of the reception and formation of ministers from the Free Church of Tonga and their placement in churches that

\[165\] Ibid., 33
\[166\] Ibid., 122
are part of the Uniting Church but are more influenced by the Free Wesleyan ecclesiastical tradition.

The legacy of this mission is to be found in worship. It is very specific in two ways. The first has to do with Scripture and its translation into the Tongan language. There are two versions of the whole Bible. The first by Thomas West was published by the Bible Society in 1862. It was followed by Egan Moulton’s translation of the Old Testament in 1880 and the New Testament in 1906. While there have been many versions published in the English language during the twentieth century the Moulton translation is the one still being used by the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. It is also Moulton’s Tongan translation of the Bible that is currently being used by those Tongan-speaking members of the Uniting Church in Australia. There has been no work yet done on what might be the impact of different versions of the Bible being used within the churches that comprise the Tongan National Conference. Is there an intergenerational difference here between an older generation committed to the Moulton translation and a younger generation choosing any one of a number of more contemporary English versions?

Moulton’s legacy is also to be found in what is sung in services. The Tongan Methodist Hymn Book was also arranged mainly by Moulton. It is also used by the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and the Tongan-speaking members of the

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167 Ibid., 90
Uniting Church in Australia. Moulton’s profound influence and legacy was further mediated through his concern for education. All of the ordained ministers who would attend the first national gathering of Tongans in the Uniting Church had been educated in the school he established, Tupou College Boys School.

The history of Tupou College over the past hundred and fifty years has the marks of the work of the missionaries who went from the Methodist Church of Australasia and contributed to the formation of the Tongan theological and ecclesiological understanding. The influence of the missionaries upon the life of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga’s religious education system was fundamental to their understanding of church. What it means to be a Tongan congregation in Australia, where the first missionaries came from – all that had some meaningful attachment for many Tongans in Australia.

The strong association between the Tongan members of the Free Wesleyan Church and the Methodist Church of Australia has continued over many years. During the 1950s and 60s the few Tongans who came to Australia were mainly students. Tongan Government Officials and some of the Tongan Royal family would stop in Sydney for their holidays. But the ones who were here with permanent resident status were married to Australians.

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169 Ibid.

The work of the Methodist Church in Australia with the Aborigines in the Northern Territory kept the link with the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga going. The setting up of Methodist missions at Goulburn Island (1916) and Milingimbi later, Yirrkala (1935), Croker Islands (1941) and Elcho Island (1942) in Arnhem Land and as they grew and became villages in the 1960s, the missionaries realised that the missions should have their own plantations. So the search for agriculturalists began.\(^{171}\) Rev Cecil Gribble visited Tonga in his capacity as General Secretary of the Methodist Church Mission Board and, while in Tonga, Gribble raised the matter with the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. Rev Mose Latu and his wife Vika volunteered to go to Australia in 1965 to begin a plantation at Milingimbi.\(^{172}\) Through the same scheme and working relationship with the Methodist Church in Australia, more Tongans from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga migrated to Australia. Rev Haloti and Soana Faupula went to Yirrkala in 1972, followed by ‘Ilaisia and Fatai Fainga’a in 1979. Hala and Tama’a Tupou came to the same station as mechanics from Tonga. The relationship between the two churches grew and more Tongans migrated to Australia. It should come as no surprise that, given this history of association and common ministry, that Tongan ministers and church members would find in the Uniting Church a potential spiritual home.

\(^{172}\) Ibid
One of the legacies of this history and ‘the special relationship’ it gave rise to would also create one of the ongoing and most troubling dilemmas for the Tongan National Conference. So many of the first generation of members and ministers were advised by the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga on migration to Australia to make their home within the Uniting Church. In the course of time that advice would become more conditional and less certain. The ‘special relationship’ did not rule out the possibility of the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga setting up its own congregations in the new land.

The Tonga Parish was formed as part of Sydney Presbytery to help the settlement of Tongans in Sydney. It was an unusual set up because it comprised of sixteen congregations that had spread through Sydney and across different presbyteries.173 Some were in Sydney Presbytery, some were in Parramatta Nepean and some were in George’s River Presbytery. The Tonga Parish was operating very much like a congregations of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Tonga. The way they worshipped liturgically and the way they understood congregational life were all taken from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. They used the Tongan Bible translated by Moulton for the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and also the Tongan Hymnal of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga for all their worship. Even now, these two resources of the Free Wesleyan Church are the resources used in the Tongan worshipping congregations of the Uniting Church in Australia.

The First Gathering

The special relationship referred to in Paragraph 2 of The Basis of Union and the subsequent declaration that We Are A Multicultural Church provided a foundation upon which the Tongan National Conference would emerge. That this prospect should have been the case would have appeared as inconceivable at the time of both their passage. The latter declaration would, nevertheless, become the catalyst. In the immediate years following the 1985 resolution on multiculturalism so much was to depend upon the initiative of several key figures in the Assembly offices – in particular, Seongja Yoo and the Revd Dr. John Brown. Their focus was initially on the Korean and Tongan congregations.

The actual idea of setting up a national gathering or retreat (later called the Tongan National Conference) for all the Tongan ministers and leaders in the Uniting Church came in February 1987, two years after the Uniting Church declared itself a multicultural church. A letter was sent from Brown, then Secretary of the Commission of National Mission and Evangelism, to Tongan ministers and leaders throughout Australia. The letter stated that the National Commission of National Mission and Evangelism had been preparing several retreats/seminars for ethnic ministers working within the Uniting Church in Australia. Brown mentioned that there had already been a successful and meaningful gathering for the Korean ministers in January 1987 for their own
mutual understanding and co-operation in their migrant ministry. This meeting was the very first such gathering in which all Korean ministers in Australia working within – or somehow related to – the Uniting Church were brought together to share their hopes and vision for the future. Brown wrote:

I am writing to seek your advice about the desirability of holding such a two-to-three-day retreat for the Tongan Ministers working within the Uniting Church. Would you find such a retreat helpful? Would you participate if such a retreat is organised? If such a retreat is held, it may be helpful to organise it for the end of May when the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga will be here….174

This letter had noted that the Korean ministers had met in January 1987 to share their hopes and vision of their working in the Uniting Church. Seongja Yoo, a Korean-born Australian, was the Secretary for Ethnic Affairs within the National Mission and Evangelism (NME). She had initiated the meeting with the Koreans as part of her role. The Koreans had already established their church presence in the Uniting Church well before its formation in 1977. A Report of the Korean Churches to the Synod of New South Wales 2003 noted that the first Korean Congregation to be established in Australia was the Melbourne Korean Church. It had met in the Burwood Presbyterian Church on 8 July, 1973. The

second Korean Congregation was in Sydney at Botany Street, Redfern on the 6 September 1974.\textsuperscript{175}

The Report noted that, when the Uniting Church was formed in 1977, the Sydney Korean Church was Presbyterian. Overwhelmingly, the majority voted to become Uniting Church. There were tensions present in the Korean congregations during that time.\textsuperscript{176} It seems as if those tensions were due to people having different political allegiances back in Korea. Over the next few years these tensions were expressed in the formation of new congregations. The Galilee Church in Sydney and the Hanbit Church in Melbourne were originally formed largely of supporters of human right struggles in Korea. Others, like the Young Nak in Sydney were formed partly by former army officers who were influenced by Young Nak in Seoul. There were tensions between people of many different denominational backgrounds who did not agree with specific aspects of the Basis of Union.

These overtures to the Koreans, first, and then the Tongan ministers, should be seen in the light of Paragraph 2 of the Basis of Union. The Koreans and the Tongans were the biggest migrant groups then. Yoo’s work with the Korean church leaders with their own tensions and issues extended to the Tongan congregations as part of her work for the Assembly. The meeting with the Korean leaders who shared their hopes and visions inspired the Tongan

\textsuperscript{175} ‘The Birth and Early Development of the Korean Churches’, undated, Mitchell NSW State Library. Ref UCA Catalogue U-I-31 Box 7 MCM Reports
\textsuperscript{176} ibid
ministers and leaders to do the same. The simple act of arranging a meeting with the Korean leaders with the aims of sharing their hopes and vision was to open the way for the Uniting Church to embrace cultural diversity and learn how to be a multicultural church.

A further letter was sent by Brown on behalf of the Assembly Commission a month later to the Tongan ministers and leaders of Tongan congregations. This letter was to confirm the first Tongan national gathering of leaders to be held at Ave Maria Retreat Centre at Point Piper in Sydney. It stated that a group in Sydney had got together to draft the program for the 3-day conference from the 1-3 June 1987. The letter also set out the aims and contents of the Conference as follows:

We are aware of some of the pain faced by Tongan people trying to settle in Australia. You leave behind the known culturally and in the Church – and try to relate to a strange new culture and a Church that is related to the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga and yet is significantly different in some of its practices. This Conference is being organised to help the leaders of Tongan communities in Australia to understand and participate in the Uniting Church in Australia. We will talk together about some of the difficulties that Tongan ministers and Church members face in trying to be part of the Uniting Church. There will be worship services, bible studies, lectures and lots of time to share your own experiences. We have
invited the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga to reflect pastorally for us towards the end of the Conference on the issues that have been raised...\textsuperscript{177}

The aims stated for the first Tongan National Gathering expressed the pain and reality of the experiences faced by the Tongans in Australia. The pain of leaving behind the culture of birth and the home church, was part of the struggle to settle in the Uniting Church. There was a mutual feeling of being strangers to a new land and a new church that had reached the Assembly Office at a time when Yoo was beginning a ministry as Secretary of Ethnic Affairs Committee.

The use of the word ‘ethnic’ was common at the time. It was being used to describe any group that was different in language and culture from the dominant language of the Uniting Church which was English and still is. Language has been an important issue for migrants whose second language is English and who, naturally, prefer to use their first language in worship and most conversations.

The first national gathering of Tongans was thus not called the Tongan National Conference. It was an initiative taken by officers of the Uniting Church Assembly. It was not until the second meeting in 1989 that it was referred to as the Tongan National Conference. Twenty-six delegates attended the first

\textsuperscript{177} ‘2nd Letter from John Brown to Tongan Congregations’, 11\textsuperscript{th} March 1987, Mitchell NSW State Library, Ref: UCA National Assembly Catalogue U-1-31 Box 7 MCM Reports.
They included Brown and Yoo with Assembly staff members, four guests who were Rev Dr Sione ‘Amanaki Havea (President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga), Rev Dr Geoffrey Cummins (Secretary of the Board of Education, NSW Synod, and also a former missionary to Tonga, the Rev Brian Lee (Secretary of the Assembly World Mission Committee), and Mrs Veitinia Fotofili (Associate Secretary Board of Mission of NSW Synod). The ordained ministers were Rev Kotoni Fihaki (Collie/Darkin Parish, Western Australia), Rev Taniela Fisiihoi (Ingham Parish, Queensland), Rev Latu Moimoi (Auburn Parish, Sydney), Rev Haloti Faupula (Dee Why Parish Sydney), and Rev Mosese Latu (Tonga Parish Sydney), Rev Siupeli Taliai (High St Road Mount Waverly Parish, Melbourne) and Rev James Latu (Tongan Hyde Park Parish, Kew Melbourne).

Apart from Latu who was one of the first Tongan ministers trained and ordained in the Uniting Church, the other ministers were trained and ordained in the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. They were seconded from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga to work in the Uniting Church in Australia and helped the settlement of Tongans from the home church into the Uniting Church.

Looking back at the membership of this first gathering in 1987, most of the ordained ministers and leaders were shaped by the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga’s theology and ecclesiology. An influential leader at that first meeting was Rev Siupeli Taliai who had been the first Tongan Principal of Tupou College.

178 ‘Minutes of the first Tongan Conference’, 1-3 June 1987 Mitchell NSW State Library, Ref: UCA National Assembly Catalogue U-1-31 Box 8 Tongan Retreat and National Conference
from 1970-79. Previous Principals were all missionaries from Australia. Taliai was brought up under the influence of Australian missionaries to Tonga.

The rest of the thirteen delegates were elders and lay leaders from Auburn Parish, Dee Why Parish and the Tonga Parish in Sydney. They all had their experiences of being church and their understanding of ecclesiology was from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga before they migrated to Australia.

The meeting with the Tongan ministers was organised to coincide with the visit of the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. It was an official visit to the Uniting Church of Rev Dr Sione ‘Amanaki Havea as the leader of one of the partner churches of the Uniting Church.

The issues that presented themselves among the Tongan congregations were not political like they were for the Koreans. The primary matter arose out of their attachments and associations with the home church, the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. Coming to the Uniting Church with a Methodist tradition in Tonga, they needed some orientation and familiarisation. The structure of the church in Tonga is more hierarchical and thus is rather different from the inter-conciliar structure of the Uniting Church. This new Australian denomination had also incorporated elements from the Presbyterian and Congregational traditions as well as the Methodist. The councils of the church are different. The

179 Siupeli Talai & Geoff Cummins Tupou College Sesquicentenary History 1866-2016, (Nuku’alofa, Tupou College Publishing 2016)
Basis of Union was itself a document unlike any to be found in the churches back in Tonga. The placements of ministers in congregations is different as well. The Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga exercises the method of sending ministers to churches by the church Conference, whereas, the Uniting Church exercises the call system for the placing of ministers to different churches.

The relationship of the two churches had already existed through the Partnership Agreement that existed through the work of Uniting International Mission (UIM). The work of the UIM (now called Uniting World) helped in understanding the working relationships with ordained and lay people who migrated for Tonga and found a home in the Uniting Church. This Partnership Agreement was not in writing as such. Rather it was carried through into the Uniting Church from the working relationships between the Methodist Church and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. The Partnership Agreement was re-written and signed at the annual meeting of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga by the Presidents of the two churches.¹⁸⁰ It is an Agreement to work together as ecumenical partner churches in mission.

The first Tongan National Retreat/Gathering elected Rev Siupeli Talai as the Chairperson. He had been seconded from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga to the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria to minister to an English speaking congregation in High St Road, Mt Waverley, Melbourne, Victoria in the early

¹⁸⁰ ‘Partnership Agreement between the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and the Uniting Church in Australia’, Assembly Standing Committee Document July 2002.
1980s. Taliai brought with him his rich experiences of the church in Tonga. In chairing the first Tongan gathering, Taliai offered his positive influence in bringing the Tongan leaders to this gathering to share their journey together. Most of the Tongan leaders who came were either former teachers or former students of Tupou College when Taliai was the Principal.

Brown led the two Bible studies during the Retreat. He took four biblical images of the Church: ‘You shall be my witnesses’; ‘You are the Body of Christ’; The Community of the Spirit’; and ‘A Sign of the Kingdom’, and then asked for the group’s reflections on what might be some of the implications for the life of the congregations. Brown based his Bible study on Isaiah 43. Recognising the difficulties that Tongan people had shared in migrating from Tonga and the struggle in settling into this new country, Brown used the context of Isaiah which told the stories of Jews who had been exiles in a foreign country and their experience of depression and despair. In the midst of this experience was the presence of God who is faithful and guided them as God’s people. The second Bible study session was based on 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 on the theme of the church as the ‘Body of Christ.’ Brown provided biblical images of the Israelites struggles in a foreign land, as well as Paul’s image of the Body of Christ in his teaching to help the Tongan leaders and diaspora in their struggles to be part of the Uniting Church.

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181 Bible Studies I & II, June 1987 Mitchell NSW State Library, Ref: UCA National Assembly Catalogue U-1-31, Box 8 Tongan Retreat and National Conference
Cummins who had worked in Tonga as a missionary led sessions on the structures of the Uniting Church and eldership. Coming from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and rooted in Methodist traditions, the structure of the Uniting Church was new to the Tongans. Eldership was a new concept to them. The setuata (steward) in the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga tradition is the concept that was familiar. The setuata was a lay spiritual leader who helped the ordained minister and in the absence of an ordained minister, the setuata acted on behalf of the minister. Cummins explained how the Uniting Church was formed and how it was structured. The new structure and the different kinds of ministries in the Uniting Church were new knowledge to the people.

The main address and final reflection was given by the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, ‘Amanaki Havea. Havea was the 8th and 10th President of the Free Wesleyan Church since its formation by Queen Salote in 1924. The 3rd Alfred Mackay (1946–56), 4th Ronald Woodgate (1956–61), 5th Howard Secomb (1961–63), 6th George Harris (1963–69) and the 7th President Justin Gooderham (1969–71) were all Australian missionaries from the Methodist Church of Australia.

The worship leaders at the first Tongan Retreat were all ministers who were ordained as ministers of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga with the exception of Latu who was elected as Secretary of the first Tongan National gathering. With the majority of Tongan leaders being trained, ordained and brought up in the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, the struggle to work and live within the life and ethos of the Uniting Church was always going to be a challenge. It also
highlighted the strong relationship and partnership between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and the commitments to work together. Havea expressed appreciations to the Uniting Church for receiving the Tongan members of the Free Wesleyan Church. The formation of the Tonga Parish with the Sydney Presbytery was a sign of the willingness of the two Churches to build bridges and to find ways of addressing the worship needs of the Tongan people. There was acknowledgement that this was the beginning and there was a long way to go in working out what it means it be a multicultural church in light of the declarations made in 1985.

Reflections after the first Tongan National Gathering by Yoo in her report of 12 June 1987 stated that 'The Conference was positively useful and satisfactory...it was a successful meeting to have them all in one place and to provide them with time to talk freely in Tongan about what they have in their minds with the people who are concerned'. It was Crowe’s reporting that changed the name from just a gathering to become the Tongan National Conference. It seemed that the Assembly Report acknowledged the needs of Tongans to gather in community and speak their native language, the language of their hearts. There were suggestions that came up in the evaluation sheets after the Conference for more discussion time and questions to do with a ‘kava party’; to these considerations could be added more time for prayer, and an increase the number of women participants. It was hoped

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that the Conference would be open to any lay person who might want to
attend. There was also a desire to include other Tongans who are of different
denominations and to hold the Tongan National Conference annually. This
feedback reflected the way Tongans understood the church as a communal
gathering. The ‘Kava Party’ for men in the Tongan church setting is a way of
gathering for conversations on topics that are relevant to their church
activities. It is a social gathering of Tongan male leaders. The Tongans saw the
Tongan National Conference as a safe meeting place where they can discuss
and converse in the language of their birth and their heart. The language they
understood well. The issue of language is very important in the worship and
church activities of migrant communities. The declaration of 1985 of the Uniting
Church as a multicultural church did not envisage completely such an
important factor in being a truly multicultural church. Comments from the
evaluation forms reinforced the reasons for the Tongan National Conference
to be held. The fellowship of the Tongan people who are struggling with a new
culture and new church can become a support and reaffirmation that the
Uniting Church is big enough to accommodate their needs.

‘One Body, Many Members’

The first gathering had been held in the wake of the declaration made at the
1985 Assembly that We Are A Multicultural Church. This declaration has
provided the theological background for the way in which the Uniting Church
has subsequently sought to understand what it meant for it to be a culturally
and linguistically diverse church. At the time of its first use the language of being multicultural was common currency within Australia. It had not yet attracted the criticism that it was a ‘motherhood statement’ or that it did not really signify what was required of the church. It became the popular default understanding within the church.

That particular status of the term ‘multicultural’ should not hide the gradual uncertainty surrounding its purpose and accuracy. The subsequent evolution of the Tongan National Conference has taken place against a background of further Assembly-based declarations. These revisions did not inform the setting up of those first national conferences but they have set the frame of reference in which their existence is to be understood.

The first modification was made in 2006. The 11th Assembly endorsed a vision statement under the heading of A Church For All God’s People. Now the language of being cross-cultural, being multi-coloured, and diverse was placed alongside that of being multicultural. This shift in discourse to being cross-cultural was not teased out in a theological manner despite several references to reconciliation permeating this statement. What was probably most significant about A Church For All God’s People was the inclusion of a set of biblical underpinnings of the vision. Those identified were: i). all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God; ii). the welcome of the

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stranger; iii). Jesus crossed cultural boundaries; iv). hospitality as the hallmark of the Kingdom community; and (v) the church that was born at Pentecost was multicultural from the beginning. It was evident that the emphasis in this document fell on a common humanity, hospitality and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Whether these biblical themes were actually sufficient is an open question. In terms of its implicit Christology the weight was on the humanity of Jesus and his ministry. There was no reference at all to the death and resurrection of Christ – hence the work of Christ. Some aims and affirmations were put into place in order to overcome racism and prejudice. It would seem that this particular statement – and its accompanying vision – did not become as widely known as the original decision to become a multicultural church.

The same is true of the third and most recent declaration, *One Body, Many Members* (2012).184 The two previous declarations were presupposed: their rhetoric and hope remained but *One Body, Many Members* sounded a new note of realism. The first gathering of Tongan ministers within the Uniting Church had met in the immediate wake of the declaration of being a multicultural church. It was full of hope as to what might be. With the passage of time it was clear that cultural relationships were more complex. *One Body, Many Members* retained the idealism of Christ’s prayer that they might be one – and

hence the ecumenism which had given rise to the new church and lay behind the special relationship. Its authors felt the need to modify how the language of multiculturalism was now being used and received. Its plausibility had lessened. The church was no longer simply multicultural. The call had become one of seeking to be a ‘true multicultural church’. Now was the time to live cross-culturally for the sake of the multicultural kingdom of God. The theological use of multiculturalism and how it related to ecclesiology was undergoing a change which had no doubt been occasioned by a sense of a failure to realize that initial optimism back on 1985. Now, in place of the biblical underpinnings, were a set of commitments that were designed to give ‘content and shape to the intent’. The ecumenical and multicultural vocation was giving way to set of ethical imperatives and aspirations or ‘commitments’.

One Body, Many Members still regarded the presence of cultural diversity as a gift of God. There remained a confessional and liturgical awareness of a creator and sovereign God who ‘through Jesus Christ binds in covenant faithful people of all races, ethnicities, cultures and languages’. One Body, Many Members welcomed cultural, linguistic, and theological diversity and placed these things within the mission of God. It made use of the language of ‘embrace’. What was new were clauses that emphasized the need to ‘monitor’, the importance of speaking truthfully, the sins of racism and ‘racially just structures’. What these kinds of reference might mean in practice was not specified. It was clear that the 2012 document had left behind the naïve innocence of the original claim that We Are A Multicultural Church.
In a footnote for the first time there was a recognition that this cultural diversity was being lived out ‘under the cross’. There was still no reference to how this understanding of the cross might extend into an understanding of baptism where cultures and gospels ‘die’ and ‘rise’ in relation to one another.

‘Papata pe ka na’e lalanga’

Writing about the setting up of the Tongan National Conference, James Latu made use of a Tongan proverb to describe the Uniting Church as a multicultural church. How do Tongans find themselves in the life of a multicultural church that is largely dominated by the western culture? Latu wrote a chapter in Richmond and Yang’s Crossing Borders – Shaping Faith, Ministry and Identity in Multicultural Australia about the Growth of the Tongan Ministry in the Uniting Church. In Latu’s account of the growth of the Tongan ministry within the Uniting Church, he used a Tongan proverb ‘Papata pe ka na’e lalanga’ meaning ‘even though the weaving is rough, you can see the pattern.’ He was using the metaphor of weaving and claims that the pattern of the weaving, though rough, can be identified as strong links to the Methodist tradition that went to Tonga and now the Tongans are back to minister in numbers in the Uniting Church in Australia. The description of the weaving as being rough is a metaphor of how the Tongans struggle in settling into the

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Uniting Church. But although there were struggles, the pattern shows that the Tongans were quite intentional in bringing with them the Methodist Church tradition and understanding of congregational life that they experienced in Tonga.

Latu was the first leader of the Tongan congregation formed in North Kew, Melbourne in the seventies. He referred to the formation of the Tongan National Conference as ‘an initiative of the Assembly to encourage their voice to be channelled into the decision making processes of the church’. The mat is used in Tonga as a welcoming sign, in homes, in meeting places, in Churches and in community gatherings. When one rolls the mat out, there is invitation to sit on it and have conversations. The metaphor of the mat that Latu mentioned Papata pe ka na’e lalanga means that there is observation of the pattern of the mat when one sits on it. Though the weaving may be rough, the appreciation of the mat been woven is always held high. Mat weaving is always a long and tiresome work. It begins from planting the pandanus tree. Then the one nurtures its growth. The mature leaves are cut and dried before weaving begins. All these are done in community. Another similar Tongan proverb is Fofola e fala kae talanga literally means roll out the mat for conversation. Sisilia Tupou-Thomas referred to this proverb in her article on ‘Telling Tales’. In this article Thomas struggles with being Tongan in Australia coming from an oral culture where story telling is the mode of communication.

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186 Ibid p. 103.
and passing down of traditions. Where there is misunderstanding, the mat is rolled out for conversation. This is a metaphor of the intentional gathering of the community with a particular set agenda for conversation which will create understanding.

The formation of the Tongan National Conference was like the weaving of a Tongan mat. The bringing together of the Tongan people from different parts of Australia into one place is like the weaving of the mat. Once the mat is woven it is ready to be sat on. It is still rough in its initial formation, but the purpose is like the metaphor and symbol of welcoming and being communal. People are gathered to discuss matters that are relevant to the community’s life.

The declaration of the Uniting Church as a multicultural church did not envisage the cultural richness that is behind the many cultural groups that have joined the Uniting Church. There was no strategy set as to how the multicultural church is to find its life and form into the future. There were real struggles in understanding of being church let alone living in a different culture. The struggle of finding a place to worship; the struggle of understanding the English language and singing different hymns; these struggles made the Tongans come to fellowship more and be connected to each other to find comfort. Tongan congregations formed informally. A cluster of Tongan congregations in Sydney was formally recognised as the Tonga Parish. These congregations were really operating under Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga structure and
ecclesiology but under the Presbytery of Sydney in the Synod of New South Wales. This was a very odd arrangement because there were clusters of congregations spread throughout Sydney and into other presbyteries. There were other Tongan congregations who had already joined with palangi congregations and form parishes with two congregations. Some were happy to join English congregations and became full members of local congregations worshipping in English but have their own Tongan worship service in the afternoon. These are examples of how different the kinds of patterns and formation of Tongan congregations in the Uniting Church were. These anomalies and related issues created the need to gather and share in the Conference. There was a need for the Tongan National Conference to continue to help the Uniting Church in dealing with issues of a multicultural and cross cultural nature. The Uniting Church had no process in place at this time, or strategy to deal with the diversity of issues brought by the Tongans from their home church in Tonga.

What should not be forgotten is that the initiative behind the first gathering and the naming of the Tongan National Conference lay with the Assembly office of the Uniting Church.
Chapter 5:
What is the Tongan National Conference?

The Tongan National Conference came into being in a church that takes pride in describing itself as multicultural, inter-conciliar and committed to consensus decision-making. Those are some of the distinguishing marks of the Uniting Church in Australia alongside its often professed, commitment to social justice. Coming into being in 1987 the Tongan National Conference has become the largest regular gathering of members of the Uniting Church at any one time with the exception of a handful of megachurches. It represents a significant constituency, but its purpose and role are far from clear.

Those concerns to do with purpose and role are also matters of meaning and value. They mask a deep-seated interest in how the aspirational language of the Uniting Church plays itself out in practice. Should national conferences like the Tongan National Conference expect to possess some sort of officially designated and accountable function in a denomination that highly regards its meetings, cultural diversity and seemingly democratic governance?

This kind of question is not easy to address. There have been no official reports commissioned by the Assembly on the status of national conferences, the only references to their existence are to be found in the reports made by national directors of multicultural ministry. That role no longer exists. It is time for a strategic review of the role and status of these conferences. It is long overdue.
Not one of the national conferences report to meetings of any Synod or to any one of the Presbyteries. The same is true for the Assembly. Only those congregations that organize members to attend such national conferences have a working knowledge of what happens in these extended gatherings. Their deliberations do not feature in faculty meetings of theological faculties.

From the perspective of Thompson’s spiral of progressive reflection, there is work to be done. The thick description has included an account of one particular conference – that was the 2016 conference dedicated to the theme of Hearts on Fire. It also included an account of the historical origins of the Tongan National Conference. In so doing this historical work disclosed the hopes of the Tongan ministers while revealing the responsibility for the setting up of the conferences. It lay with Assembly staff who were able to initiate such new steps. The thick description raises as a consequence what in practice is the Tongan national Conference. In order to address that question, there is need to make some connections between origins and the 2016 conference selected effectively to be an exemplary case study.

These three steps beg the following questions: Can the meaning and function be traced back to their origins? Is the form they have subsequently assumed consistent with what was originally intended when they were first proposed? With the passage of time have they outgrown their original purpose? That particular line of thought needs to be explored from within the life of the Tongan community (in this case) as well as from the perspective of the
‘multicultural’ Uniting Church. By way of comparison this experience of possessing a limited status in the life of the receiving church can be seen in the light of the experience of other migrant communities and minorities in comparable denominations overseas. In order to address these questions there is more work to be done on the telling of the story of the conference - and, to do so from the perspective of an overarching question, ‘what then is the conference?’

The Tongan National Conference started in 1987 with the gathering of ministers and leaders of the Tongan congregations who had been told that the Methodist Church in Tonga can be found in the Uniting Church in Australia. The gathering was intended to be a sounding place where the Tongans could raise their concerns and share issues to do with working in the new church. It was conducted in English. The Tongans came to realise that the Tongan language was very much part of their identity and so sharing in the Tongan language had to be provided by the home church. They sang the Tongan hymns and read the Tongan Bible. These brought meaning to worship and prayer life. The conference was thus a place of fellowship. Tongans of all age groups met and enjoyed the weekend. Both Tongan and English languages were used in worship. The conference was also meant to meet formally and discuss matters of concern to congregations and find a way to channel these concerns to the Assembly. The Tongan members of the Uniting Church have come to look forward to this annual event.
This use of the word ‘event’ is probably rather accurate in its description of what actually happens. Being an event that is regular and expected from one year to another attracts its own form of planning and organisation. It fastens attention on this particular weekend when ‘the event’ happens without necessarily posing or addressing questions to do with ‘what next’ – what else might this gathering do and how can it function within the wider life of the Uniting Church.

The Tongan National Conference is an event which happens annually over the Queen Birthday weekend in June. It is an event with a history. Since 2011 it has met at the Merroo Christian Convention Centre in Kurrajong, New South Wales. It had moved to the Merroo Christian Convention Centre from the Marrickville Community Centre in 2009 to Newington College, Stanmore in 2010 after having met in Marrickville since 1991.\textsuperscript{188} The reasons for the moves were several. The venue had become too small for the growth of the Tongan National Conference; the community centre had also become unsafe for children and young people because of the open accessibility to the public; the vitality of the intergenerational nature of the conference which was comprised of all age groups.

This change of venue from Marrickville to Merroo was also a great cultural shift for the Tongan people because the congregations around the Sydney area

\textsuperscript{188} Minutes of the Tongan National Conference 1991, 2009, 2010
were used to catering for the whole weekend. Feasting and sharing meal
*(Fakaate)* is a major factor in why Tongans come to the conference. The
members of the local congregations felt the very act of catering was part of
their stewardship to God. The consequence which flowed from this belief was
that they did not attend the other programs, fellowship events and worship:
they were having to spend too much time in their involvement in the
preparations of the meals. The preparation and eating of food – of hospitality
- is an essential part of the Tongan cultural activities: it is a very important
feature in their church life. Feasting is seen as part of the ecclesiological
activities in the Tongan congregational life. Around the table upon which is set
the feast speeches are shared by leaders that become a learning field for the
listeners who understand the Tongan language. Now that the Conference has
been held over the last four years at Merroo Christian Convention Centre, it is
a fully catered venue which means that people can attend the Conference
programs instead of cooking and catering for the meals and missing out on
the Conference programs. As an event, then, those responsible for its
organisation and planning have made a decision: food and hospitality remain
important, but the Conference has begun that emphasize more it is an event
arranged around programs. Its internal purpose and function have been
refined.

The meeting of the Tongan National Conference is an opportunity for the
Tongan-born members of the Uniting Church to get together annually and
have fellowship in a cross-cultural way. Most of the parents were born in Tonga.
The younger second and third generations were born in Australia. However, these second and third generations value learning about their Tongan heritage. That is why the Tongan National Conference is now run in two languages (English and Tongan) and the programs are run in both languages as well. There has been a suggestion to separate the adult conference from the second-generation programs and perhaps hold them on a different date and venue. The responses and feedback from the second-generation team leaders and next generation members insisted on their desire to share and learn from the first-generation adults as well.

Once again, a decision was made about the shape of the annual gathering as an event. The decision to be inter-generational was consistent with the importance of family and extended family in Tongan society. It represented an emphasis on this event being concerned with a sense of belonging. It was as such, though well aware that the act of migration represents rupture. Those who have been born in Australia are raised and educated in a much more pluralist and complex society than had been the case for those being raised in Tonga. The Tonga National Conference thus became a theological event as much as one to do with worship, hospitality and belonging. What it means to be follower of Christ is informed by culture and the way in which these different understand the relationship between gospel and culture is not the same.
The Tongan National Conference is the peak gathering of Tongan-Australians of all ages who are members of the Uniting Church in Australia. It does not matter whether they belong to a Tongan congregation or to an Anglo-Celtic/Tongan congregation or Anglo Celtic congregations but have some Tongan heritage. They are all welcome to attend. In between conferences there are two meetings in October and February around different states of Australia which are designed to encourage the involvements of Tongan-Australians nationally in the life, worship and mission of the Uniting Church.

In 2014, the conference attendance reached the 1000 mark for the first time at the new venue at Kurrajong, New South Wales. People of all ages came from the Synods of Queensland, Victoria/Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and New South Wales/ACT. The number of those attending included those who stayed on site throughout the whole weekend and those who commuted from the Sydney area. The guests to the conference were the President of the UCA, the Assembly National Directors of Uniting World and Multicultural Cross Cultural Ministry, the President of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and sometimes theologians and educators from the United Theological College in Parramatta.

Because of the range and diversity of conference attendees, there are two programs that run parallel during most parts of the weekend. One caters for the adults and seniors and is run mostly in the Tongan language. It deals with the issues of educating the older Tongans who came from the Free Wesleyan
Church of Tonga tradition and have found home in the Uniting Church. The *Basis of Union* and some parts of the Constitution of the Uniting Church have been translated into Tongan in order to provide this learning to happen. Other activities are discussions amongst the members which deal with the differences in the way Tongan congregations work within the Uniting Church around Australia. Some congregations are worshipping in both English and Tongan. Some only have Tongan members and worship only in the Tongan language.

The nature of this program is such that the annual gathering becomes the primary event where the relationship with the Uniting Church is considered. It is ecumenical and educational. Its ecumenical nature flows from the special relationship and the desire to honour Havea’s call for Tongans in Australia to join the Uniting Church on account of its contributing Methodist heritage. The annual gathering is an ecumenical event: it is a gathering which is seeking to develop further the Uniting Church’s own commitment to an ongoing ecumenism and sense of uniting. For the sake of that purpose there is need for some education because the older generation have been nurtured in a different polity and ecclesiology. Whether the Uniting Church in general realize the ecumenical significance of these national gatherings is doubtful.

The other program runs in English and caters for the young people and Sunday school ages. It is run by the Next Generation Team which is a feature of the Tongan National Conference. The Next Generation Team represents a desire to pass on the baton from the older generation to the younger. Some of the
issues they discuss and engage with at the conference are more particular to them; for example, there are discussions surrounding a hyphenated cross cultural identity, youth violence and why a lot of Pacific Island (and Tongan) youth are in prisons; there are issues to do with the relocation from Tonga to Australia in sociological, economic, ecclesiological and theological understanding.

In 2015, the attendance at the Tongan National Conference held from 5th-8th June was 1,200. The numbers are increasing and, of course, that begs the question as to why. The main issue discussed at this conference which is of importance to the life of the Uniting Church as a whole was a discussion paper on same gender marriage. This controversial and potentially divisive paper led the conference to make one response back to the Assembly as did other national conferences. The proposals which accompanied the discussion paper were then discussed at the Assembly meeting held in Perth in August of the same year. There were two basic options before the church: the first was deemed to be the more traditional and saw marriage as being a rite between a man and a woman; the more inclusive option allowed for marriage between to two persons regardless of gender but in a committed relationship. The ethos and the rhetoric of the Uniting Church is one of inclusion and the reconciling of difference; it is at the same time grounded in the Reformed traditions of the Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist Churches into which then sit the cultural expectations surrounding marriage and whether same gender relationships are able to be discussed in public anyway.
The presentation of this issue into the life of the Tongan National Conference once again alters the nature of the event. The relevant working group on same gender marriage was inviting the Assembly to receive the opinion of the national conferences on a divisive issue. The conference was becoming an event that was educative in one sense: it opened up a discussion within the community on a matter that would not normally get such an airing in Tongan culture, let alone the church. The annual gathering was also becoming an event which might serve as a safety valve for the forthcoming Assembly. It could be said that the opinions of minority cultures had been sought and received. The other side to this coin is that it opened up the possibility of the annual gathering become an event which expressed dissent and protest due to the initiatives taken by the Assembly. What is clear is that the Assembly through its actions and requests was opening up a discussion within the Tongan community which would not otherwise have happened. It was doing so through the Tongan National Conference, even though the annual gathering is not a council of the church. It could be argued, nevertheless, that the annual gathering was functioning in this specific matter almost as if it were. The Tongan National Conference decided that the Christian and biblical understanding of marriage is between a man and a woman and that its views are consistent with the church tradition and the Tongan culture.

Becoming and practising being a national conference within a previously established and constituted denomination naturally lends itself to a double
vision or hyphenated existence. Its ecclesial agenda is not simply set by the internal cultural needs of the Tongan diasporic community. Those areas of interest are likely to fasten upon matters to do with generational difference as well as how best to maintain relationships with the homeland or sending church. Being a part of a culturally diverse church that is organized around a dominant culture means that any one of the diasporic communities also needs to engage with issues that were not necessarily a part of their national conversation. Being part of a church like the Uniting Church means that Tongan congregations that align themselves with the Tongan National Conference must engage with issues, debates and discussion papers that come from the whole denomination. Sometimes an issue can be highly divisive the most obvious instance of such is the contested debates surrounding same gender relationships, leadership and marriage.

It can be seen from the above that the purpose and function of the Tongan National Conference evolves and is refined through time. There are decisions that are made with regards program, planning, focus interests and how the gathering responds to issues raised by the Assembly of the Uniting Church and sometimes by the workings of the Free Wesleyan Church in Australia. These acts of refining do not of themselves seek to address head-on the implicit question of what is the Tongan National Conference and what its function and status. The way in which the Assembly generated the conference in the first place, its officers participate and how it seeks opinion on controversial matters likewise does not lead to the much-needed discussion on status and role. Ting’s
response made at the 2016 gathering that these questions are complicated (and cannot be discussed or pursued) is a symptom of the failure to address this ambiguous state of play. The fact of the matter is that these small, haphazard acts of refining and adjusting leaves the Tongan National Conference putting its energy into an event, the annual gathering, which is inclined to come and go just as a weekend passes into ensuing weeks. The issues remain latent, beneath the surface - there, but not addressed.

It is arguably the case that one of the reasons why the annual gathering never extends itself beyond the status of an event is the failure to work through and adopt an appropriate and supportive theology. The growing awareness and interest in an intertextual Oceanic hermeneutic of Scripture and other forms of contextual theology become little more than academic exercises in the process of the formation of ministers or the pursuit of postgraduate degrees. They do not make their way into the life of the Tongan National Conference. There has been no sustained program of a diasporic and cross-cultural theology initiated by the Conference, despite the occasional external address. This lack is a profound weakness. It means that the Conference cannot make claims on behalf of the Tongan culture which is grounded in a viable ecclesiology that challenges the received traditions and practise of the Uniting Church; it lacks a Christology which provides an effective theological link between gospel and culture.
From the perspective of Thompson’s progressive theological reflection there is a clear weakness. This method deals with issues, events, power blocs, unfolding narratives and histories – and it seeks to be theological. To date there has been no theological reflection on the Tongan National Conference. How to proceed with that task requires some decisions to be made. The first is that most of the contextual theology done by the Pasifikans whom Palu critiques has happened back in the island homelands. It has not sought to respond, as a rule, to life in a diaspora. In order then to make a theological reflection, the first step is to consider those contextual theologies which have some affinity with life lived in diaspora – and the place of residence is usually Australia.

Now at one level those interested in a theological reading of the Tongan National Conference should not ignore the work of Vaipulu. Its description and immediate relevancy is bound up with the Tongan homeland rather than with those who have migrated to Australia or being born here. The theological training received in this country – apart from what was available in Sydney for a period of time – has often ignored the experimental work being done in Pacific theologies. And yet such a response is to ignore the theological issues that so often lie beneath the surface of the practical life of the Tongan communities within the Uniting Church. Their cultural worldview (its *anga faka-Tonga*) – and how they receive and practice the gospel – is not that of the dominant Western majority. Within a liminal, in-between space, its ministers and lay members wrestle anew with what is the gospel – how is it to be understood and be put into practice – in a much-changed context? That was a key
question permeating one of the sessions at the 2018 conference. This wrestling takes place over and against the dialectic identified by Vaipulu and the insistent claims made on behalf of a Christian social ethics within the Uniting Church that flows from its *Statement to the Nation* made at its inauguration in 1977.\(^\text{189}\)

The claim now being made that the Tongan National Conference exemplifies a form of contextual theology is rather unusual in some respects. Its meetings address very different concerns from those which motivated Coe. There is little self-conscious awareness of pursuing a theology that somehow serves as an organizing framework of belief in the manner of Niebuhr. What might need to be addressed in terms of a contextual theology often lies at an implicit level. How the Tongan National Conference differs from what often unfolds in a contextual theology also lies in the institutional-like nature of the event.

The evolution of the Tongan National Conference has coincided with the rise of a contextual theology in various forms. It matters little whether the Conference has actually privileged in an explicit manner any one of these missional, theological or biblical practices. The definition of what is the Tongan National Conference and how it might fit into the purpose of the Uniting Church in Australia ecclesiology is far from clear, then, and has certainly not been addressed. In terms of an ecclesiology there has been no attempt to

construct an understanding of the being and work of the Tongan National Conference through the conventional routes of images, metaphors, marks, models, ministry, sacraments and the relationship of the church to mission and the kingdom of God.

It can be helpful in these circumstances to take a sideways look at Matagi Vilitama’s thesis on a ‘liquid’ Niuean ecclesiology expressed through the metaphor of a faka fetuiaga. Vilitama was very self-conscious with regards the task (Ko e Fekau) before him. Now was the ‘time to construct an ecclesiology for the Niuean church in diaspora’\(^{190}\). The importance of this task lay in the numbers of islanders who had migrated as well as the role that the church had played for several generations in the life of the fourteen home villages of this Polynesian island to the east of Tonga. Vilitama took for granted that the Christian faith and Niuean culture ‘belong together’. The dilemma that migration to Australia had brought about was a disruption to the intergenerational transmission of culture as well as a breakdown in how the church relates to community life. The majority of Niueans living in Australia live in Sydney: they no longer live in small villages. They are spread out in a relatively detached way across a global cosmopolitan city. The way in which gospel and culture as well as different generations relate to one another is now more fluid, flexible, and liquid.\(^{191}\)

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\(^{191}\) Ibid 19-21
The idea of liquidity naturally appeals to a Pacific peoples. Some years ago Faitala Talapusi and Sevati Tuwere argued the case for a renaming of their theology as Oceanic rather than Pacific: they did so while referring to the moana nui – the great ocean – as ‘the liquid continent’. This description conveyed immensity, size, and allowed a focus to fall on the sea and its seawater peoples rather than the continental masses of the Pacific Rim which rendered them small. In a somewhat similar vein Winston Halapua made use of ocean-based missionary in the service of his writing on an island perspective of theological. The hospitality of God was envisaged through the metaphor of the waves of God’s embrace.192 Vaiipulu referred to the ebb and flow of island thinking in his use of the term a ‘tidalectic hermeneutic’.193 For Vilitama this referral to liquidity was also indebted to the work of Pete Ward on The Liquid Church194 and Zygmunt Bauman’s use of life now being liquid to describe the sociology of late post-modernism.195

For the sake of a theological reading of the Tongan National Conference Vilitama’s reading of liquidity and being a faka’fetuiaga is of help at several points. The language of the fetuiaga is contrasted with the more usual ekalesia for a description of the church. The ekalesia has come to realise a more stable understanding of the church as an institution and the way in which it mediates

192 Winston Halapua. Waves of God’s Embrace: Sacred Perspectives from the Oceans (31-Jul-2008)
193 Vaiipulu,
and puts form upon culture. The way of the fetuiaga is looser: it signifies a gathering, a coming together which happens to be. It allows for the ebb and flow, the coming and going of lives scattered across a large city subject to more diverse influences. It retains a sense of attraction but its way of being is more flexible.

Is the Tongan National Conference seeking to be the equivalent of an ekalesia or a faka’fetuiaga? Is it playing the role of an ekalesia with regards to the Uniting Church in Australia and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in its respective relationships to each one of those two denominations? Is it doing so while, at the same time, its own internal life is more akin to Vilitama’s faka’fetuiaga? Is the Conference more of an annual gathering that has not yet – and maybe never will – converted its own internal life into structures that suggest a more formal institution?

In order to provide a focus for his reading of the diasporic church Vilitama turned to two distinctive island cultural and liturgical habits. The first has to do with hospitality and the sharing of food. Vilitama emphasizes the cultural tradition of the earth oven – the umu – and how it is modified in a new land. For Vilitama the umu is never simply a banquet, a meal, but an example of hospitality and communal sharing. Its theological capacity is reflected in his description of Christ of the umu. The act of hospitality is not merely cultural: it is also Christological and represents the welcome, inclusivity and hospitality of the Christ who shared meals with others and for whom the kingdom of God is
like a heavenly feast / umu. The umu is indeed the vaka (the canoe) of the gospel.

For Vilitama the faka’fetuiaga embraces worship, the umu and song. In this instance the liquidity allows for a porous line to be observed between cultural performance and songs of worship / hymns. The reason for that lack of clear distinction is so that cultural taonga –treasures – are not lost on a second and subsequent generations. How might hymn singing and newly composed songs capture something of the nostalgia, something of the longing for the life left behind on the island? How might they be mediators of culture while at the same time opening up fresh insight on life lived in diaspora around the umu of Christ?

This type of theological work is yet to be done on the Tongan National Conference. It currently escapes having a depth of theological purpose and an ecclesiological position. There is no engagement with the likes of Vilitama and Vaipulu. What is possible in the interim is more of an eyewitness’ description of what happens. The theological connections are waiting to be made: they lie at the level of the implicit waiting for someone / some group to weave a mat around what just tends to happen. In order to advance the reflection beyond what is current there is then an imperative to make such a description.
To the debates that often attract the most time and energy in the Uniting Church members of the Tongan National Conference also bring their cultural history, their reception of the gospel – and, according to Vaipulu – the possibility of a gospel that is reduced and is ‘miss-placed’. That claim of Vaipulu is worth keeping in mind. It is naming an issue that needs to be addressed in the Tongan reception of the gospel. At the heart of Vaipulu’s argument is the claim that the way in which the first missionaries collaborated with the Tongan king and nobility led to a heightened sense of transcendence, the vertical, and hierarchical nature of the gospel. Somehow the humanity – and the horizontal nature - of Jesus and his ministry to those on the edges and margins of a culture were ignored. Vaipulu believes that this legacy has never been rectified. Its significance for the theological life of the Tongan National Conference is, first of all, an internal recognition of how those who migrate are inclined to live on the edges and margins of the new society. It may also speak into the sense of the Tongan diapora feeling that it has been left on the margins and edges of the Uniting Church in Australia and it deserves be treated differently for Christ’s sake.
Chapter 6
Fofola e fala kae talanga

Rolling Out the Mat: Some Difficult Conversations

The Tongan National Conference is now a well-established event in the life of the Uniting Church as well as its Tongan membership. It has consolidated its role as a cultural forum and a site for discussions on matters pertaining to the Tongan presence and participation in the life and witness of the host denomination. The mere holding of a conference like this one on an annual basis is a demonstration of the Tongan commitment to the claims the Uniting Church has made of being a church comprising a cultural and linguistic diversity. Since its inception it has set out to reflect on a number of pivotal matters concerning the Tongan identity and its place within the Uniting Church. It has become a significant event.

The growth in the numbers attending every year is increasing and is a sure sign that the Conference is meeting a cultural need. Its meetings provide opportunities to worship, to have fellowship and to learn and share stories. It provides an event where Tongans across synods can meet and identify themselves with one another.\textsuperscript{196} The Tongan National Conference has, in fact, become one of the largest bodies of people to gather at any one time in one venue in the whole of the Uniting Church. It does so across generations.
It is time to turn again to Thompson’s model of a progressive theological reflection. The presenting problem has been identified. The distinction between being a participant and a critical observer has been made and justified. The thick description has provided a specific instance of what happens in the annual gathering while explaining how the Tongan National Conference came into being. It has also put forward the idea that, in its current form, the Tongan National Conference should be seen as an event: it is not council of the interconciliar Uniting Church. Nor should it be linked in terms of invitations, hospitality, and its bridging function with the Free Wesleyan Methodist Church be interpreted as being some form of outreach of that church.

The practice of a progressive theological reflection is to propose a theological or biblical response. In terms of a method the standard way of performing such a response has been subject to a contextual theology. That is why the work of Coe and the Vaipulu and Vilitama are particularly helpful. They provide theological foils.

One way of exploring what has happened in the life of the Tongan National Conference in ensuing years is to appropriate a contextual metaphor. The most apt is the custom of rolling out the mat, *(Fofola e fala kae talanga)*.

The work here of Havea and Vaka’uta with regards the mat and the way of *talanoa* is assumed. Tupou-Thomas has established the link between an
Oceanic hermeneutic and the diasporic practice of rolling out the mat. The case for using the metaphor in the context of the formal proceedings of the Uniting Church Australia was confirmed at the meeting of the 15th Assembly held in Melbourne 2018. On that occasion James Bhagwan and Seforosa Carroll laid out a mat at the beginning of the four Bible studies they led. Bhagwan was representing the Fiji Methodist Church and Carroll Uniting World. These Bible studies were held on successive days from Tuesday through to Friday. The theme of the studies was the same as the theme of the Assembly which was “Abundant Grace, Hope Overflowing.”

The occasion was, of course, a biblical study in the setting of the Assembly. In terms of a hermeneutic the act of weaving was removed from its original situation in life within customary life in the islands. It was also at a remove from the kind of biblical and theological sharing that Havea and Vaka’uta presupposed in their conferences. It was a new setting in which Carroll, initially, and Bhagwan were putting the mat to use. There is the obvious need to link this cultural practice to theological reflection and ecclesial practice. Carroll read the metaphor of weaving the mat in association with the theme of hope to be found in Paul’s letter to the Romans. This thread was interpreted as one of the strands that compels and inspires actions towards a future that is already but not yet.

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197 Sef Carroll and James Bhagwan,’Bible Studies at the 2018 Assembly’, Minutes of the 15th Assembly 2018
What was of particular interest in this use of the mat was the way in which Bhagwan and Carroll laid out a mat at the beginning of each of the studies and then both sat on it. No Bible study at any Assembly had ever done this before. Carroll explained why the mat was being used. This rolling out of the mat now has currency and meaning not restricted to Pacific Island churches but to the Uniting Church and its worship activities. In performing this act the Assembly was honouring one of the expectations of the 1985 declaration *We Are A Multicultural Church*. Over three decades before the Assembly had declared its intention to recognize the gifts that other cultures might bring into the life of the Uniting Church and its worship through their own cultural practices.

Carroll set out the Bible study in a cultural ‘mat-orientated way’. She explained that the Bible studies would explore four texts through the process of *talanoa* (story-telling), hospitality (guest/host reversal), and weaving (engagement, participation, creating new spaces). The texts selected were 1 Samuel 1 (the voice of Hannah), Ezekiel 37 (the resurrection of the dry bones), Luke 7 (the woman who bathes Jesus’ feet with gratitude) and Romans 5 (Paul’s explication of hope). This combination of texts and themes was symbolised through and held together by the unfolding of or the rolling out of the mat.

Carroll took time in explaining that in Pacific cultures, rolling out the mat is an invitation to share and engage in deep and compassionate listening and story-telling (*talanoa*). The rolling out of the mat signifies a number of intentions:
giving and making space (hospitality) for the other to tell their stories (talanoa). This comes from a deeply held understanding that all stories have value and, therefore, all voices should be heard. From a perspective of faith rolling out the mat is to ask how is God’s continuing grace and hope at work in us? And, furthermore, how may this work in us find practical expression in the world in new, creative, imaginative life sustaining ways?\textsuperscript{198}

The presence and use of the mat in the Assembly should not be taken for granted. In spite of Carroll’s explanation of its purpose, the great majority of the Assembly members would not have understood the fine points about the customary use that surrounds the rolling out of the mat in a Tongan culture. From the perspective of this thesis the importance of this use of the mat and the process of talanoa cannot be underestimated. That the Assembly should undergo this process was permission-giving to minority cultures: it was making a claim that biblical and theological claims could be made to the Uniting Church through a cultural method. For the Tongan National Conference it was sending a signal. Sitting on the mat – both in practice and in a metaphor – was a way in which to conduct a theological enquiry and conduct business which had secured the tacit approval, at least, of the Assembly itself.

Of the four studies the one most significant for the role and status of the Tongan National Conference was the fourth. Carroll drew upon the text of Romans 5:1-\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{198} Carroll, Sef. (2018) Presentation at 15\textsuperscript{th} Assembly of Uniting Church Bible Studies.
In this final study, the Pauline passage is itself concerned with being justified by faith. It is doubtful whether Carroll was aware of how this text had first been used by Gordon Dicker more than thirty years before to justify the church’s claim to a multicultural existence in Christ. The text itself speaks of how peace with God is to be found in Christ Jesus. Through being justified by faith those who belong to Christ have gained access by faith into God’s grace. It is the love of God that enables those who suffer to ‘glory’ in their sufferings. There is a recognition that suffering produces a range of spiritual virtues – most notably, perseverance, character, and hope. Paul does not here list the full range of fruits of the Spirit that he does elsewhere. The balance of the text establishes a theological connection between the death of Christ, the cross, and the theme of reconciliation. The Pauline emphasis is, of course, on reconciliation with God through Christ Jesus; it is a theme that pervades The Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia where it becomes bound to the reconciliation of the whole of creation. From the perspective of claims to being a multicultural church and a ‘church for all God’s people’ the theme of reconciliation is both apt and privileged.

In terms of Carroll’s Bible Studies the reading lent itself to the idea of ‘weaving hope’. The analogy of weaving lent itself to this theme. It presupposes the bringing together of diverse strands into a whole. For Carroll the mat is a symbol of a talanoa; it is also a reminder that a talanoa is never complete – in much the same way as a mat is incomplete even in its completeness. The mat in this
ongoing island context is, effectively, a symbol of a continuing process of opening, inviting, reweaving and extending. As stories are shared, exchanged and heard, the mat is extended, frayed strands removed, new strands added and, the mat is rewoven to include new insights and learning.

Weaving is a mode of continuity with the past; it is meaning-making in the present; there is a hopeful anticipation that the weaving will never stop, and that it will carry talanoa and hospitality into the future. Weaving and talanoa becomes that which “honours the past, brings the past to the present and enables creative change in moving to the future”.199

Implicit within Carroll’s Bible study was an ecclesiology for a culturally and linguistically diverse church. It lent itself to a consideration of a church that is open to being re-woven for a changing composition. It did so in a way that resonated with The Basis of Union with its ideas of being a church for a pilgrim people on the way that was grounded in the Reformation witness of justification in Christ. This Bible study showed what insights might arise from cultures that were not the dominant majority in the denominations that had made up the Uniting Church prior to its declaration of being a multicultural church and a church for all God’s people.

199 Carroll, Sef (2018) Presentation at 15th Assembly of Uniting Church Bible Studies.
There is some merit in thinking of the subsequent Tongan National Conferences as a semi-institutional form of *talanoa* where a mat is being rolled out. That mat is being rolled out in order to welcome, demonstrate hospitality, engage in worship and share stories and now it acquires a theological purpose. Its most obvious benefit and attraction lies in its cultural grounding.

Whatever the future holds for the Tongan National Conference it must engage these matters in a theological way but a way which is contextually intelligible and safe. It is not always easy for those from a minority culture to speak out their beliefs and their aspirations in faith in an environment where there is a lack of familiarity with the language and procedures being used. The rolling out of the mat at the Tongan National Conference gatherings over the years has given opportunities for those attending to share, reflect theologically and find purpose in working within the Uniting Church.

It is at this point that a second aspect of this metaphor emerges. The cultural process and protocol is established whereby critical issues can be discussed. Being in the Uniting Church has raised matters for its Tongan members which would not have been discussed in churches back in Tonga.

The particular issues to be discussed on this theological mat have arisen at regular intervals over the life of the Tongan National Conference. For the sake of the discussion in this thesis, there is a need to establish some formal order. That need should not compromise the general feel of how conversation in the
mat happens with a certain degree of freedom. The conversation follows on from what the last speaker has said.

Now there is not usually a set agenda for the talk that happens around the mat. The discussions are not like the deliberative and decision-making sessions of the Uniting Church. The list of topics to be discussed in the conversation are not accompanied by reports of working groups and key office bearers in the Assembly, Synod or a Presbytery. There is no printed *A Manual of Meetings*; there is no show of blue, orange or yellow cards to test the gathering as to how it ‘feels’ about a proposal or a resolution. The practice of meeting is different. The matters of concern that inform the annual *talanoa* have surfaced over the course of time: they represent those issues where Tongans have taken seriously their membership of the Uniting Church and what the Church has said about its relationship to linguistic and cultural minorities. If the Tongan congregations and their ministers had remained with the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, then they would not have been talking about these matters around the mat; their *talanoa* would be of an altogether different nature.

The rolling out of the mat began with the first gathering in 1987 and since then the mat has expanded. The purpose of that first meeting was to help the Tongans settled in the Uniting Church. The mat that the Tongan National Conference provided is – and has been - an opportunity to share the stories of those who attend, their journeying and their experiences of this different church.
All those gathered around this theological mat at the Tongan National Conference are committed to the Uniting Church. Their numbers include male and female, first and second generations, ministers (faifekau) and lay people, some are lay preachers (tangata pe fefine malanga). They are more familiar with the manner of discussion that happens around a mat than they are of the fine points that are demonstrated by the formalized consensus method of decision making in the Uniting Church. The intention of the talanoa around the mat is to find a common mind, but that common mind is not the result of formal processes. There is no talk of consensus. There is a cultural practice which respects the voice of elders. No one is excluded. There is no need for a particular person to be voted on to the talanoa by some other representative body. What emerges on the mat during the talanoa quite clearly is the voice of the community. There is a presumed safety established around the mat that shows concern for the welfare and well-being of others.

The metaphor of rolling out the mat can describe the purpose and process of the meetings of the Tongan National Conference. The meetings were held in a big auditorium with people sitting on chairs facing the stage where the meeting was conducted. The agenda items provided the purpose of the meeting. There were times that the big meeting breaks up into small discussion groups for the purpose of participation and to cater for the different age groups. There were different kind of meeting places. Some were for worship. For some it was for Bible study and activities. For the Tongan men, it was for
their kava drinking gathering where they share their struggles and joys. The men literally sit on mats on the floor. Now it is time to roll out the mat in different ways and reflect on this history in a theological manner.

There are several themes that have tended to attract more attention than others over time. The way in which he Conference deals with each one of these issues sheds some light on the enduring question of its authority, its status and purpose. The three in particular that most commonly feature have to do with the relationship between the Uniting Church and the Free Wesleyan Church, the support to be given to the second and subsequent generations living in diaspora and how to manage the debate over sexual orientation.

The various agendas over the years have thus identified several key areas where there has been controversy as well as a desire to clarify and strengthen the lines of being with the Uniting Church. The mere presence of the Tongan churches – let alone the national conference – lend themselves to an inquiry into what the church’s claims to be ‘multicultural’, a church for all God’s people mean in practice.

The relationship between the sending and receiving denominations is no longer the same as it was in 1987. With the passage of time so many Tongan ministers have now been formed and educated within the Uniting Church rather than back in Sia’atoutai Theological College in Tonga. The original intention behind the declaration of We Are A Multicultural Church whereby it
was anticipated that theological education and ministry formation might occur overseas as well as in Australia has not materialized. In terms of structure the problem has been compounded as was evident in the discussions surrounding Ahio’s visit to the 2016 Gathering. In the intervening years there has been the establishment of a branch of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Australia. What might this initiative mean for the ecumenical nature of the Uniting Church within its own life as well as its ecumenical relationship with the church back in Tonga? In a way which could not have been foreseen back in 1987 the matter of reception of ministers into the Uniting Church from those emigrating from Tonga has required a response. The other side to that coin is the standing of Australian educated and based Tongan ministers in the church back in Tonga. None of these problems were on the horizon back in 1987.

Siupeli Talai had been the General Secretary of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga during the time of ‘Amanaki Havea being the President, 1971-1977. It was explained to the Tongans who had migrated to Australia that the Methodist Church in this country was now housed in the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977.200 They were encouraged to stay in the Uniting Church for that reason. Writing in Richmond and Yang’s anthology on Crossing Borders, James Latu confirmed this understanding.201 Latu recalled how when Tongan people first began migrating to Australia they were encouraged by the church leaders back in Tonga to link with the Methodist Church, and later the Uniting

200 Taliai, S conversation Mt Waverley, Victoria 2018
201 Richmond, H. & Yang, M.D. (2006) Crossing Borders UCA Assembly and NSW Board of Mission
Church with whom they have been close mission ties over a long period of time. There was no thought of congregations of the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga responsible to the home church in the islands being established.

There appears to have been no written agreement to this effect. It was assumed that the Uniting Church would embrace diasporic communities with whom it had been linked through the histories of the three denominations which had come into union. The church back in Tonga was part of the ecumenical history and came under the ‘special relationship’ identified in The Basis of Union. That there should have been seen to be a need for the establishment of alternative Tongan congregations within the Wesleyan tradition raises a number of questions. It does so especially since the establishment of what is known as the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga Vahefonua in Australia did not come about until 2004. The word vahefonua means ‘region’: its use is not peculiar to Australia, it is used within Tonga itself as well as with reference to the Tongan diaspora elsewhere overseas.

The possibility of this turn of events lay in the newly acquired autonomy of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. Its move away from the General Conference of The Methodist Church of Australia came when the Uniting Church on Australia was established. This was a significant decision on the part of the Tongan Conference to gain this freedom from the Australian Conference and
thus live up to its name of Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga.\textsuperscript{202} The Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga members who came to Australia after 1977 still regarded the Uniting Church as the Methodist in Australia until the establishment of the Vahefonua in Australia.

The decision to establish a vahefonua – a region or district – came about well after the declaration \textit{We Are A Multicultural Church} and the establishment of the Tongan National Conference. An agreement between the two ecumenical partners – the Uniting Church and the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga – was made in Neiafu, Vava’u on 10 March 2004.\textsuperscript{203} This agreement was established upon the basis of Paragraph 6 which set out the intention to foster a relationship of ‘deep care … to people originally from one church now living in the country of the other church’. It was specified that this care was to be mutual and how it took place was to unfold within a way that was agreed to by the two churches. The agreement acknowledged that there had arisen a number of congregations which were relating to both denominations and were seeking to clarify their relationship back to the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga. There had been frequent requests for such. At its annual meeting in 2001 the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga had agreed to set up a trial district that would comprise all congregations of the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga now resident in Australia. That decision was put on hold for two years while

\textsuperscript{202} http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/about/member-churches/australia-and-pacific/name/tonga-free-wesleyan-church/ (accessed 10 November 2018)

\textsuperscript{203} An Agreement Between the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and the Uniting Church in Australia Concerning the Recognition of a District of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Australia
there was further consultation with the Uniting Church. The burden of this consultation process was to ensure good quality pastoral and spiritual care and to establish ‘harmonious and cooperative relations’ between Tongan members of the Uniting Church and those whose congregations were responsible back to the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga. The agreement arrived at set out three principles. The first was that the new district should seek out ‘open and co-operative relations’ with the Uniting Church; secondly, that neither the Free Wesleyan district in Australia and the Tongan congregations remaining in the Uniting Church would not seek to attract members from the other church; and, thirdly, that the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga and the Uniting Church in Australia would seek to strengthen the relationships between the district, the vahefonua and the Uniting Church in general. The ecumenical relationship was to be sustained through a practice of sending observers to the meetings of the others. The vahefonua of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga was invited to send observers to the presbyteries in which their congregations found themselves as well as ‘other relevant bodies’ like the Tongan National Conference. Those who belonged to the Uniting Church were invited to attend corresponding meetings of the vahefonua. The two churches agreed to ‘provide assistance’ in order to ‘facilitate the ministry of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga’ in its ministry and mission in Australia. It was hoped that there would be meetings and possibly retreats involving Tongan ministers from both the vahefonua and the Uniting Church.
One of the critical issues lying behind and within these negotiations was concerned with the status and practice of ministry. Those supporting the vahefonua looked back to Tonga for ministers trained at Sia’atoutai Theological College. The reasons are not hard to find. It was reckoned that ministers trained back in Tonga would have a better understanding of the intersection of culture and gospel; they would also provide a more obvious line of continuity with the established heritage and practice of the Methodist tradition. In the midst of migration here was a formal point of constancy and stability. These congregations were also keen to have ministers fluent in the Tongan language and who would lead services of worship in that language. It was less clear what might happen with this kind of matters within the Uniting Church: it was a new church and the Methodist tradition was being aligned with other traditions. The Tongan culture was becoming one culture among man minority cultures and the dominant culture was western and English-speaking.

How to manage these differences within the life of the Uniting Church would inevitably fall upon the reception of ministers from other churches and the use of property. Both matters were not peculiar to the Tongan diaspora. They affected all those congregations the membership of which was made up by those who belonged to the churches throughout the Asia-Pacific region who were in a ‘special relationship’ with the Uniting Church and its previous denominations.
The Minister’s Reception Committee of the Assembly in its Report to the fourth Assembly in 1985 brought resolutions in response to requests from ministers of other churches seeking to become Ministers of the Uniting Church. The Tongan Ministers who were present at the first meeting of the Tongan National Conference were all Ministers from the Free Wesleyan Church who were either seconded from Tonga to work in the Uniting Church, on study visa or were visiting their families in Australia. The critical issue was expertise in English. There was little awareness of how a ‘multicultural church’ might also celebrate its linguistic diversity and function as plurilingual. The underlying expectation was that the ministry and business of the church was to be done in English. In some ways, of course, that position should not come as too much of a surprise. The originating denominations had come to birth in the United Kingdom; the dominant majority culture was Anglo-Celtic. These historical reasons should not close down too quickly the possibility of any alternative. The declaration We Are A Multicultural Church had recognized the importance of language in terms of worship, congregational life and participation in the wider councils of the church. The decisions that were then made with regards to the reception and formation for ministry largely ignored this awareness. The default position was for the responsibility to be understood and able to understand was most likely to fall on those whose first language was not English.

One example of this practice is innocent and intelligible enough. One of the resolutions brought to the 1985 Assembly proposed that the Committee for the Reception of Ministers should add to its guidelines a statement which
effectively limited the opportunities for placement for a minister with only a limited facility in English. The scenario concerned a minister who had been invited to minister to an ethnic congregation because of fluency in the congregations’ communal language which is other than English. The recommendation ran that such minister could only then be received into the Uniting Church on the understanding that the Uniting Church cannot accept responsibility for the minister’s settlement or remuneration if subsequently an appropriate ethnic congregation is not available. In such cases, presbyteries were encouraged (without saying how and without funding) to assist the minister with English studies and relationships requiring English. There was no corresponding awareness that maybe those whose only language was English might learn another language for the sake of their practice of ministry. There was no hint of how a ‘multicultural ministry’ might mean that a Tongan minister, for instance, might also become the minister of a congregation whose first language was neither English nor Tongan.

This theme to do with the reception of ministers was to the fore again in the first national consultation on cross-cultural ministry held in 1990. Some of the Tongan Ministers who were present at the first meeting of the Tongan National Conference were involved in this consultation. The consultation involved different areas like the reception and settlement of ministers. It also addressed the visa requirements and the growth of overstayers in the church membership.

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204 Assembly Standing Committee Minutes 1985 Report of Minister’s Reception Committee (85.6)
The 7th Assembly in 1994 brought resolutions relating to the ‘Reception of Ministers from Partner Churches’ who came to minister in the Uniting Church. The resolutions were related to the standard of theological education of these ministers and the standard of knowledge of the English language as well as knowledge of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Now this interest in the formation and ecumenical capacity of faifekau (ministers) should come as no surprise. In the process of coming into union the Uniting Church had needed to balance the legacy and gifts of three separate denominations – the Methodist, Congregational and Presbyterian. In this case there had been significant conversations over a long period of time. The Basis of Union and Regulations concerning ministry were, in effect a compromise among the three traditions. The Tongan faifekau (minister) came from one of those three traditions and not all three: nor did they always speak English which had been the sole language in which the polity to do with ministry had been worked out. There was no similar process set in place for ministers from other partner churches who were seeking to practice their ministry in another language in a diasporic community and congregation.

The policies to do with such ministry were designed to maintain the coherence and integrity of the emerging ecclesiology of the Uniting Church. They were designed to support the foundational agreements and self-understanding of this new entity to be found in The Basis of Union. From the perspective of the Tongan congregations the Uniting Church was not the Free Wesleyan Church.
of Tonga. It might make arrangements with the Tongan Free Wesleyan Church, but it was not the same. Its identity and mission were designed for the particularity of Australia.

Since its inception the Tongan National Conference has been committed to balancing the interests of its faifekau and congregations with those of this new church. In its meetings over the years and through the rolling out of the mat, the TNC recognised the growing needs of ordained ministers to serve not only in the Tongan congregations but also in the wider church. The 8th Assembly in 1997 received reports on National Mission and Evangelism with resolutions relating to theological education.

There was to be a particular standard required of ministers who serve in the Uniting Church. This awareness helped the Tongan National Conference in encouraging a number of young adults to consider different pathways into their vocations. The Period of Discernment was introduced as a process of the Uniting Church was talked about and shared by leaders and educators.

Over recent years the Tongan National Conference has helped young adults going through their formation years into ordained ministry. The encouragements of the intergenerational fellowship and activities that happened at the annual national conferences contributed to the discernments of younger Tongan moving into ministry. That number have included Charissa Suli, Salesi Faupula, Ikani Vaitohi, Fa Matangi, Mata Havea,
Semisi Tauli’i and Fa’uhiva Lutui. All of these were growing up around the mat that is the Tongan National Conference. They have been formed and educated within the Uniting Church rather than in and through the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga. Through their formation and theological education they have not needed to be ‘received’ from a ‘partner church’. In some ways they belong to both traditions – the Tongan and the Uniting Church but with a difference from the first generation who brought into being the national conference. They have not been formed in and through Sia’atoutai College. In due course there needs to be some research work done into their ministries and how they may have differed from those who oversaw the first couple of decades of the Tongan diaspora within the life of the Uniting Church.

By 2017 there were more than sixty Tongan ordained ministers in the Uniting Church in Australia. At the theological colleges in the Synods of NSW/ACT, Victoria/Tasmania and Queensland there are Tongan second-generation young people who are doing Periods of Discernment and studying theology as possible candidates for some form of ministry in the Uniting Church. One benefit of the Tongan National Conference has been its provision of a network for conversation and information sharing – hence a mat for a talanoa of a different kind.

The focus on education has led to two important initiatives. The first is not directly tied to the life of the Tongan National Conference, though it provides a significant gift and challenge. There have been a number of Tongan students
and faifekau who have done theological research work. They have done so through theses and dissertations through the oversight of theological colleges, mainly through United Theological College in Sydney. Whether that work has been sufficiently aired within the annual meeting of the Tonga National Conference is a moot point. It seems to be assumed rather than actively discussed and seen as contributing to the ongoing work and initiative of the Tongan National Conference. Once again there is further research work to be done here on this topic.

The second initiative is of a different order. The ‘Ohofononga project has arisen out of the life of the Tongan National Conference and it serves is directed towards the ministry beyond the annual gathering. The ‘Ohofononga is the Tongan daily Bible reading project with commentaries prepared by the Tongan ministers of the Uniting Church. It has been modelled on the Uniting Church publication of daily readings called With Love to the World based on the Common Lectionary Readings of each year. These readings in the form of the ‘Ohofononga began in 2009. The program is currently managed by the Revd. Alimoni Taumoepeau, a Tongan Minister of the Uniting Church in Strathfield, Taumoepeau is also currently the Secretary of the Tongan National Conference.

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Taumoepeau has organized the rosters for different ministers to prepare the theological and biblical commentaries on a quarterly basis. He has also organized the printing and the distribution of this resource to all the Tongan congregations represented in the conference. This resource can also be uploaded on the website of the Tongan National Conference.206

This on-line presence can be seen as yet another improvisation on the inter-related themes of 
talanoa and rolling out the mat. This particular expression of such can be viewed in the light of the meaning and etymology of the word ‘Ohofononga. It refers to food for the journey. Its origins lie in how the Tongan people travelled a great deal by boat between the islands; those journeys can take a day or two. This is the practice from where the origins of the word. It is a familiar practice and cultural symbol. Now in a spiritual way, it is food for journey of faith in a new land made up of large cities and a dry hinterland. It is also a metaphor which is consistent with the Uniting Church’s self-understanding of being a pilgrim people on the way to the promised end.

The daily readings have been supplied by the Tongan National Conference in the Tongan language are practical aids. They help the Tongan members of the Uniting Church in their spiritual journey each day. They also assist with the preparations of lay preachers in their weekly devotion and leadership in worship. Before the ‘Ohofononga came into being the Tongans were using for

206 https://www.tongannationalconference.com/blank-1
their daily reading and devotion materials imported from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. While they were helpful, the materials were written by Tongan Ministers in Tonga for the context and use of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga. The benefit of having the ‘Ohofononga is that it comes out of the theological work and preparation of Tongan ministers who were trained in Uniting Church theological colleges and who are now working in either congregations or agencies of the Uniting Church. It makes available a diversity of understandings and interpretations of Scripture arising out of particular Australian and diasporic contexts.

Whether agencies of the Uniting Church are aware of the ‘Ohofononga is doubtful. It is an initiative that could be of benefit to other national diasporic communities. It benefits the devotional life of theological colleges and presbyteries. The content of the ‘Ohofononga is another one of those topics that deserves a thesis in its own right. What kinds of method and biblical understanding are emerging in diaspora which may, in some way, differ from the former ‘home church' back in Tonga?

The matter of ministry can be seen as part of Gary Bouma has identified as ‘the settlement’ of religion in a new land. Bouma is a Melbourne-based sociologist of religion who has taken a great interest in the proliferations of religions other than the Christian in Australia as well as the increasing level of cultural diversity within the previously established denominations. Bouma has described this ongoing presence of religious and spirituality in an otherwise secular Australia
as ‘the new normal’.\textsuperscript{207} It is part of his thesis concerning religion and migration that new faiths and diasporic experiences of the Christian faith must necessarily go through a process of settlement. What is involved here is a combination of finding leaders, gathering a community, developing financial support and securing property and hence a place for worship.

In the case of the Tongan diaspora the issue of property has been more complex than it has been for the other migrant-ethnic congregations. The dilemma over sharing property is common enough. It was first raised as an issue at the 1990 consultation on cross-cultural ministry. It has been a subject for discussion at the ongoing talanoa at subsequent meetings of the Tongan National Conference. The problem was well framed by Seongja Yoo in her report from the national consultation to the 6\textsuperscript{th} Assembly meeting in 1990. Yoo identified how there were still migrant congregations who were regarded as a “tenant type”.\textsuperscript{208} The property owners were mainly from the dominant culture, that is the Anglo-Celtic. When migrant congregations joined the Uniting Church, they joined into an existing Anglo Celtic Congregation. It has worked better for some and not for others. Where it worked better, it was usually because the Anglo-Celtic congregation has declined in membership and they needed support from the migrant congregation. The ‘Guidelines on Property Sharing in a Multicultural Church’ was approved in 1992 and then revised in 2003.

\textsuperscript{207} Gary Bouma \textit{Australian Soul} (Bookbuilders China, 2006)
\textsuperscript{208} https://assembly.uca.org.au/mcm/resources/assembly-resolutions-and-statements 1990 National Consultation on Cross Cultural Ministry
It was this revision which constructs the difference between the Tongan National Conference and other such conferences. The purpose of this revision was to do with the change in the Uniting Church Constitution to do away with the notion of a parish and put in its place congregation. Under the previous understanding a parish could include several congregations but now that system would no longer exist. The consequences for Tongan members of the church were profound. The Tongan congregations had been in parishes within which they served as particular congregations.

The matter was far from straightforward. A large part of the Tongan National Conference was made up of the Tongan Parish which was formed prior to the first meeting of the Tongan National Conference. It comprised of twenty-four congregations throughout the Synod of NSW/ACT and operated as a parish across the boundaries many presbyteries - although it was part of the Sydney Presbytery. This arrangement was problematic.

At present the Tonga Parish still uses this name and they still operate as one big cluster of sixteen congregations through the Synod of NSW/ACT. But they are now more in line with the ethos and regulations of the Uniting Church. Their minister Valamotu Palu who was seconded from the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, is well acquainted with the Uniting Church and very active in the Sydney Presbytery. The Tonga Parish is working with Sydney Presbytery in a good relationship while seeking to deal with their property issues of some
Tongan congregations still renting and regarded as tenants rather than treated as full members of the Uniting Church.

The Tonga Parish has now become very active in the Tongan National Conference. The pressure brought to bear upon the parish, nevertheless, was one of the reasons why some of the congregations within the Tonga Parish broke away to form the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga Australian branch (Vahefonua Aositelelia) in 2003. They formed clusters of congregations each of which claimed that property ownership was very important to them as congregations. This way of thinking led to the construction of their large church property in Glendinning in 2009. A few years later it went bankrupt in 2012 and the property had to be sold. The comparison can be made with the example of how the Tongan congregation led by Latu worked well with the Anglo-Celtic congregation. Latu used the metaphor of weaving a mat to describe three structural setups to describe what happens when Tongan congregations were found in the Uniting Church. The first is when the Tongan congregation is monocultural and there is no need to work with a dominant Anglo-Celtic culture. Highgate Hill Uniting Church in Brisbane is an example of such as Petersham Uniting Church in Sydney. The second model is where the Tongan congregation joins together with the English-speaking Anglo-Celtic congregation and share the property while operating under one church council. There are many examples of this model including the Canterbury

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208 Minutes Assembly Standing Committee March 2003
210 Letter from the Administrators Stephen Parbery and Mark Robinson 12 April 2012
Uniting Church in Melbourne and the Mascot Uniting Church in Sydney. The third model is the Tonga Parish which had had many splits in its congregations.212

The 2003 Guidelines helped in encouraging the Tongan congregations who are sharing properties with the Anglo Celtic congregations to write up a formal agreement with the congregations who are using the properties. These Guidelines assign a right of usage and expect an appropriate sharing of the cost of maintenance of the properties and a taking into account all ministry needs. The working out of this agreement should recognize the equality of the congregations as congregations of the Uniting Church sharing as brothers and sisters in the mission of Christ in the Church.

This matter to do with property is another aspect of the desire to belong and the search for identity. It has to do with access to sacred space and is not what might be simply called a housing issue. In terms of a theology of property the biblical and theological theme of hospitality has often been employed – at least that is so in the reports and resolutions. Whether congregations and church committees have always understood the relevant issues in a theological manner is more difficult to determine. So often the negotiation has surrounded costs and ensuring buildings are kept clean and used, in effect, in a way that is consistent with how Anglo-Celtic congregations use property. For

the Tongan churches – like other diasporic churches – the property can be used for weekly meals together which help build up the life of that community. The Assembly Standing Committee in November 2010 approved the National Property Policy for the Uniting Church in Australia.\textsuperscript{213} It stated that this policy takes the Uniting Church further on its determination to live out its life and faith in a covenantal relationship with the First Peoples through the UAICC, and as a culturally and linguistically diverse Christian community in multicultural and multifaith Australia. In the Uniting Church, property is understood as a resource for the ministry and mission of the whole people of God. This means that the ways in which we receive and share the resources God has given us will reflect the Gospel values of justice, equality, hospitality and partnership. The experience of the migrant communities in the Uniting Church have not been in line with this aspiration of the Church in its property policy.

The life and witness of the Tongan National Conference has been carried out on the basis that it is a good thing for this diasporic and intergenerational community to be a part of the Uniting Church in Australia. It is a conference which respects and privileges its own culture of sending but leaves open the prospect of engaging with other cultures. There is ample scope here for the need to respond to particular issues that are new and upon which Tongan culture has largely been silent.

The way in which these various matters come to the surface is sometimes indirect. They are played out in a number of contributing issues that make their way on to the agenda of successive conferences. The discussion may be, for instance, on second generation matters. But lying behind this concern is a much deep-seated matter. What is the place of this generation with reference to Tongan cultures? What is its place with reference to the Uniting Church as whole? How are their concerns be addressed properly within the whole polity of the Church?

Now and then the issues have been much more controversial and the issue that looms large is to do with same sex relationship and the same gender marriage. The debates over this matter tests both the role and status or the lack thereof of the Tongan National Conference. With the current preparation to the 15th Assembly which is to be held in Melbourne Victoria on the 8th – 15th July 2018, there is a report from the Assembly Standing Committee with recommendations to be discussed at the Assembly meeting about the acceptance of same gender marriage by the Uniting Church. This will mean a new definition of the traditional meaning of marriage between a man and a woman, to marriage between two people to accommodate same gender marriage. The summary report including the recommendations was translated into the Tongan language by myself in my capacity as the then chairperson of the Tongan National Conference. The request came from key officers within

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214 Report on Same Gender Marriage to 15th Assembly 2018.
the national Assembly. This critical work of translation was also done in Korean, Chinese, Indonesian and Fijian. The intention was for the summary to be distributed to these migrant communities. The full report of sixty-four pages examined biblical arguments in support of both the traditional arguments to do with marriage as well as outlining the case for a more liberal and inclusive option to taken by the church.

Whether this policy was the best one is an open question. The failure to translate the full document and the lack of any specific program or study to help congregations (which might be non-English speaking) negotiate a way through the complexity of seemingly intractable positions left the Tongan National Conference in a vulnerable position. The Assembly duly arrived at a position which allowed for a two kinds of marriage statement, for individual ministers to make up their own minds as to whether they would officiate at a same gender marriage and church councils could exercise their right whether or not to let their property be used.

Within the polity of the Uniting Church this kind of decision makes sense. The very nature of the church is to be ‘uniting’, ‘reconciling’, concerned for the dignity of each person made in the image of God. It is a polity that presupposes diversity and difference of opinion and relies upon an inter-conciliar process of discerning. The Basis of Union expects the need of

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215 Summary Report of the Same Gender Marriage Paper Assembly 2018 Tongan Translation

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interpretation of Scripture, an openness to new knowledge and the employment of various methods of biblical criticism.

The dilemma for the Tongan congregations is that the matter of same gender relationships is customarily not talked about in the church. The tendency is to weave together this silence with a reading of the Bible which, for many, is less exposed to critical methods. Those texts which seem to condemn same gender relationships are then privileged along with a received understanding of sin and salvation that has come through the Methodist heritage of missionaries and the church in the homeland. The dilemma is further compounded because of the ease of turning to the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga and making the case for a more conservative position. The reputation of the Uniting Church and leaders of the Tongan National Conference can then be called into question.

Once again there is a need for further research work to be done on how the Uniting Church and its diverse cultural and linguistic communities have handled this issue in general.

This particular expression of the same gender debate did not take place in a vacuum. For some years the Uniting Church has been thinking through its response to same gender relationships and issues surrounding same gender ministers and leadership. It has been a long debate. The whole subject area of homosexuality and the church has been a controversial topic within the life
of the Tongan National Conference for all of that time. Its importance to the
life of the church and the conference was such that James Latu wrote his thesis
for the Master of Ministry on the topic of ‘Tongan Christian Attitudes towards
Homosexuality’. Latu argued that amongst the migrant-ethnic groups within
the Uniting Church those who most strongly resist acceptance of
homosexuality are the Tongans.\textsuperscript{216} Latu identified that the attitude to
homosexuality of Tongans who migrated to Australia is very much influenced
by the fact that homosexuality is illegal in Tongan law. All Tongan Christian
denominations in Tonga, according to Latu, reject homosexuality.\textsuperscript{217}
Furthermore, the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga declared in its annual
Conference in 1998 that homosexuality would never be allowed within the life
of the Methodist Church.\textsuperscript{218}

The conversation of the Tongans in this topic is shaped by these understanding
and attitudes. In 1998 the Tongan National Conference affirmed their stand on
this issue by stating that homosexual practice is contrary to the teaching of the
Scripture which has been affirmed by the church historically; that those who
advocate through promotion and practice any homosexual lifestyle or
behavior contrary to the teaching of the Scripture will be deemed unfit for
Church leadership; and that self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to
be accepted as candidates into ordained ministry or appointed to any

\textsuperscript{216} Latu, J.E. (2001) Melbourne College of Divinity Thesis
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid p.35
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid
positions of leadership. In Australia though, the second generation Tongan Australians have grown up in a different cross-cultural context. They have experienced the differences from what the Tongan first generation parents have experienced.

These are the kinds of conversation that happened in the rolling out of the mat. Admittedly this particular topic for conversation is difficult to have because of the Tongan cultural taboos and respect between brothers and sisters and between parents and children. As a general practice in the Tongan household, brothers and sisters cannot discuss sex topics together or even watch a love story movie together in the same room. It is difficult and often impossible for parents to talk openly with their children about homosexuality and same gender marriage.

The debate and decision-making over same gender marriage came about through the Uniting Church needing to discern its position once the Australian Government changed the law at the close of 2017. Over the course of time – and, in response mainly to these matters to do with sexuality – a conservative network opposed to changes to a traditional understanding had emerged across each one of the synods. The Assembly of Confessing Congregations gathered together those of same mind and established a strong lobby group.

\[219^\text{Minutes of TNC 1998.}\]
By the time of the debates over same gender marriage its president was a Tongan minister from North Queensland, the Revd. Dr. Hedley Fihaki.

It is not surprising that Fihaki should then seek to persuade the Tongan National Conference to adopt a position in opposition to the possibility of a more inclusive decision being made by the Assembly. In the past Fihaki had sought to influence the opinion of the annual gathering. Now, in his capacity as President of the Assembly Confessing Congregations of the Uniting Church, he wrote requesting the Executive of the Tongan National Conference to write, in turn, to the Assembly.220 As a result of this initiative two groups of Tongan ministers met in Melbourne and in Sydney to listen to each other and to discuss (in a manner of rolling out the mat) the same gender marriage coming to the Assembly. Alimoni Taumoepeau invited Tongan ministers in the Sydney area for conversation the 9th May 2018.221 Lauleti Tu’inauvai invited Tongan ministers in the Melbourne area for conversation on the same topic on Sunday 20th May 2018.222 The Tongan ministers were concerned that the conversations and the paper presented to the Assembly had not engaged the Tongan community in discussions about the effects of redefinition of the marriage liturgy to include same gender couples. It has been a struggle shared by most of the cultural and linguistic diverse (CALD) communities of the Uniting Church. The Moderator of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania convened a day meeting on 8th May 2018 of all CALD communities to hear the struggles that these

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220 Fihaki’s Letter June 2018  
221 Taumoepeau phone conversation.  
222 Tu’inauvai letter of Invitation
communities are having in addressing the issue of same gender marriage. The Australian Law was changed in 2017 to include same gender marriage in the definition of marriage.\(^{223}\) This is the reality in the context of the Australian society and conversations on this topic will continue in the rolling out of the mat.

The Tongan National Conference Executive had written to the Assembly Standing Committee twice in June 2012 and in April 2015 expressing its position as affirmed by the Uniting Church Assembly in 1997 that marriage is between a man and a woman.\(^{224}\) The 2018 conference held came in the wake of the Assembly decision allowing for two positions to be held at one and the same time. Fihaki did not attend.

This theme of rolling out the mat and engaging in talanoa is an apt vehicle for understanding the life and business of the Tongan National Conference. It allows for key issues to be discussed over periods of time. It allows for representation of ages and gender. It enables an ongoing connection with the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga whose President attends. It provides a bridge to the work of key officers within the life of the Assembly. It does not resolve the question of what is the authority and status of the Tongan National Conference within the life of the Uniting Church in Australia? It does not do that.

\(^{223}\) Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017  

\(^{224}\) TNC Letters to the Assembly Standing Committee, 21 June 2012 & 23 April 2015
even though the Assembly expects it to debate controversial matters I much the same way it expects presbyteries ad congregations to do so.
Chapter 7

By what authority?

National Conferences and the call to live cross-culturally

It is evident that the Tongan National Conference is fulfilling a function. The evidence for such a claim lies in its numerical increase and the vitality of its programs. The 2017 annual gathering testifies to the way in which it has been able to hold together *talanoa*, feasting and hospitality in the widest manner possible. It is equally clear that the Tongan National Conference has been able to provide a forum and a sense of belonging and identity to the diaspora scattered across every state and territory in the country. The executive has sought to guide conversations around the mat on matters of controversy – like that to do with same gender relationships – which are not easy topics for the Tongan culture. Through its establishment of particular offices – especially that of the chairperson – the Tongan National Conference has been able to address the image of Tongan young people in the national media. In a rather incomplete way, the annual gathering has established a regular bridge or connection between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Free Wesleyan Church in Tonga and its *vahefonua* in Australia.

There is much to celebrate. There is, nevertheless, an awkward issue remaining. What is – or should be – the status of the Tongan National Conference within the Uniting Church? What authority does it possess? These kinds of question immediately tie in with a reading of how and why national conferences for a
number of migrant ethnic communities function and how they are viewed by the Uniting Church as a whole through resolutions and guidelines adopted by the national Assembly and its Standing Committee. The responses to this type of question also lends itself to a critical enquiry into how well has the church, as a whole, sought to honour its declaration made in 1985 that We Are A Multicultural Church and subsequent visionary statements, One Church: For All God’s People and One Body, Many Members. Within the limits and possibilities of the interconciliar polity of the Uniting Church, what does it, in fact, mean to live life and faith cross-culturally?

For the present purpose the overarching question concerns the status and role of the Tongan National Conference within the Uniting Church. The question of status and role are not exactly the same. It is possible for the Tongan National Conference to fulfill a role of fellowship and support but without having any formally defined status. It is indeed even possible for the Uniting Church to encourage such role and see their worth and value but still not assign any properly defined status. In matters of status there are varieties of options. There might be, for instance, a formal status conferred upon Tongan National Conference where there is a general disposition of welcome. There might also be a more semi-formal status where the Conference is recognized within a range of national conferences that make occasional reports to Reference Committees of the Assembly, so long as they continue to exist. One further alternative to this is the current emerging practice. There are no more National Directors). Since 2018 there are four national consultants who work as a team.
The team is establishing a model of ‘circles’ and advocates instead of the multicultural unit that the national conferences used to report to. The national conferences now report through the team to the Assembly. It is arguably the case that while this practice will recognize the role of the Tongan National Conference, it is actually weakening the status of the Conference. In a conciliar church what is happening is that the point of contact with the Assembly is moving from a representative committee to a handful of consultants who have multiple other responsibilities. There is also a desire it seems for a much stronger model to recognize the status of the conference.

A comparison can be made with the Assembly of Confession Congregations. On 12 July 2006, immediately after the 11th Assembly, a joint summit of Evangelical Members within the Uniting Church and the Reforming Alliance within the Uniting Church was held at the Queensland University. Over 150 people from around Australia attended this meeting held at King’s College to discuss the Uniting Church in Australia’s failure to uphold the faith of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. This body operates within the Uniting Church in Australia but with no formal recognition as a council of the church. In many ways they meet and operate as a body in itself although there have been requests in the past for them to be recognised as a council. That request has been denied.

\(^{225}\) http://www.confessingcongregations.com/assembly/about/history/
Another comparison can be made with the Korean Presbytery in Sydney which was recognized as a council of the Uniting Church. The inauguration of the Synod’s Korean Presbytery on December 11, 2011 was, in the words of the Moderator then, the Rev. Dr Brian Brown, “an extremely important occasion in the life of the Uniting Church”. In this event of the inauguration Sang Jin Lee spoke of the new presbytery and the rest of the Uniting Church overcoming cultural and language differences and learning from one another so that the church could be united. Ki Soo Jang recalled the history of Korean churches in Sydney and said that the first Korean congregation in the Uniting Church began in Sydney in 1974 under the oversight of the Rev. John Brown. Korean churches and leaders had struggled for many years to participate in English-speaking presbyteries and relied on the Council of Korean Churches and a Synod-wide Korean Advisory Committee to provide connection with the Uniting Church and with each other.

In due course alternate Korean regulations were approved by the Assembly in 1999 and 2007 to integrate Uniting Church polity with Korean culture and church tradition. Presbyteries delegated their responsibilities for those Korean congregations — except for the responsibility for selection of candidates for specified ministries and ordinations — to the Korean Commission through the Synod.

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227 Ibid
The comparisons between the Assembly of Confessing Congregations and the Korean Presbytery have shown the struggles that members of the Uniting Church have in orienting to the present structure. At least the Korean Presbytery has a status and it has played the role of providing the space for conversation and discussions to happen in the language they understand. The Tongan National Conference was and is going through the struggle with its role and status in the Uniting Church.

In order to address more directly these questions of authority and status there are a number of steps to negotiate. These steps include the situating of the Tongan National Conference within the broader sweep of emerging national conferences for other ethnicities as well as an examination of how the Assembly itself has sought to respond to its own declarations of claiming to be a reconciling church of many cultures and languages. What guidelines has it put into place? Have they been acted upon? Are they realistic about how well such guidelines might be put into effect in other councils of this interconciliar church? The polity relies so much upon resolutions being of an advisory nature. What kind of office-bearing is required for such work – and is it adequate for the task in terms of fitness for purpose (rather than the personal competency of individuals?)

In the course of time the number of national conferences has increased to twelve. The most recently formed has been the Middle East conference. The other ten alongside the Tongan are Fijian, Niuean, Korean, Filipino, Chinese,
Indonesian, Samoan, Vietnamese, South Sudanese and the Tamil. Of these twelve the Tongan and the Korean stand out as the most different in their aspirations and organization. That level of difference can be seen through a selective comparison with the others. For that comparative work to be best understood it should be set alongside the ‘Guidelines’ put into place for national conferences and a description of the role of the National Director for Multicultural/Cross-cultural Ministry. These guidelines and this particular Assembly-based office are the most obvious responses made by the national church to the declaration of We Are A Multicultural Church.

The need for guidelines is, of course, a sign of both uncertainty and hope. In the first instance it reveals a lack of clarity as to what the Uniting Church expects of such conferences as well as their memberships own confusion of purpose. The idea of establishing guidelines carries with a risk of seeking to homogenize difference between the various cultures; it also could be seen as an attempt to integrate or assimilate if care is not sufficiently taken to preserve and respect cultural difference. In terms of hope the request for guidelines can convey a desire for a route to be found that might enable each of these conferences to play a role in furthering the claim to be a culturally and linguistically diverse church and thus build upon the ideals espoused in Assembly decisions.

The case for making guidelines depended in the past upon the office of a National Director for Multicultural/Cross-cultural Ministry. For the case to be
submitted and put into practice required a particular type of office-bearer who would command respect in the Assembly itself, the trust of the individual minority cultures and a willingness for advocacy. This is the kind of office that requires more than the capacity for hospitality and diplomacy – though these qualities are important. For the task before the conferences – and the church the large – the National Director must be astute in how the polity of the Uniting Church works as well as having a comprehensive theology of what holds together a church made up not simply of ‘many members’ (as said by the 2012 statement), but many cultures who are ‘one’ in Christ. How is that aspiration to be expressed in a plausible and theologically accurate ecclesiology? In terms of the ongoing life of the Uniting Church so much also depends upon the commitment to the ongoing funding of such an office or variation of such.

Through its declaration in 1985 Assembly had seen the potential of enriching the life of the Uniting Church by migrant communities. The advocacy work of Yoo (later Yoo-Crowe) in a position set aside for this task was critical. Following the declaration Yoo was Secretary for Ethnic Affairs within the National Mission and Evangelism Commission from 1986 -1990. Her designated role was to liaise with the growing presence of migrant and ethnic congregations and individual members whose first language was not English. With the support of Rev Dr John Brown who was the Secretary of the National Mission and Evangelism Commission the conversations about the ministry of congregations who worship in languages other than English gathered momentum. In 2000 Yoo-
Crowe and Colville Crowe edited the book *You and I – Our Stories* which explained how multicultural ministry had further evolved since 1985.\textsuperscript{228}

The role itself grew and changed over the next fifteen years. From 1991 to 1997 she was the Secretary of Committee on Ethnic Diversity with the National Mission and Evangelism unit. In 1997-1998 the title was altered to being one of National Secretary of Committee on Multicultural Ministry. Yoo-Crowe became the first Assembly National Director for Multicultural Ministry in 1999 and retired in 2000. Two National Directors followed, Rev Dr Helen Richmond and Rev Dr Tony Floyd. The title description was altered again, and the Revd. Dr. Apwee Ting became the National Director of Multicultural Cross Cultural Ministry. The position ceased to exist in June 2017 after two years and an alternative structure was set up in the life of the Assembly in 2018. Whether this change in structure is sufficiently sensitive to the aspirations of these diverse communities and the Tongan National Conference, in particular, is an open question that will be dealt with later.

It is evident that this important Assembly position has never been held by someone who is from the Pacific. Yoo-Cowe’s foundational energy and advocacy was subsequently matched by Richmond’s attention to cross cultural liturgical and biblical support for the multi/cross cultural claims of the wider church. Floyd was especially gifted in his knowledge of the polity of the

\textsuperscript{228} Seongja Yoo Crowe & Colville Crowe *You and I, Our Stories* Assembly Publication. 2000
church and the capacity to draft requests and proposals. Ting brought his gift of community building and experience in cross cultural ministry.

In her capacity as the National Director Richmond strengthened the work of the Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee considerably through some necessary structural initiatives. In March 2004 Richmond submitted to the Assembly Standing Committee mandates for four discrete working groups. The Reference Committee would no longer simply be advisory to the National Director and these working groups would be independent of the individual national conferences. The four specified were the Uniting National Conference Working Group (to be based in Melbourne), the Intentional Multicultural Ministry Working Group (to be based in Sydney), the Second Generation Youth and Young Adults (to be based in Brisbane); and the Cross-Cultural Theology and Education (to be based in Sydney).

These working groups were focusing on each of the four developing and growing parts of the multicultural and cross-cultural ministry. The National Conference working group was based in Melbourne because, at that time, five of the chairs of national conferences resided there. This working group convened a once a year meeting of all chairs in order to enhance the roles of National Conferences in the Uniting Church through conversation and the sharing of issues and ideas as to how the respective conferences might further support the mission, witness, worship and ministry of the Uniting Church. In setting itself this working group was effectively taking seriously the provisions in
the declaration that We Are A Multicultural Church which expected the migrant-ethnic churches to be a ‘gift’ in this respect to the wider church.

The second generation working group was given the daunting task of negotiating generational difference and responding to the issues of identity common to diasporic life. From the Tongan perspective the television series to do with Jonah was an eloquent witness to how easily youth might struggle in a new land. The obvious purpose of this working group was also designed to nurture future leaders who were formed within the ethos of the Uniting Church rather than simply being extensions of the homeland churches.

The cross cultural theological and education working group was an acknowledgement of the work which was being done at that time at United Theological College in North Parramatta. The College had developed subjects as well as orientations on the practice of cross-cultural ministry, theology and racism. There had been a number of students who proceeded to postgraduate research in these fields and anthologies like Faith in a Hyphen and journal called Cross+Culture had been set in motion.

The Tongan ministers in the Uniting Church have engaged in higher education and postgraduate studies. Jione Havea had been a lecturer at United Theological College in Parramatta and Charles Sturt University and has edited
and written articles and books.\textsuperscript{229} Hedley Fihaki graduated with his doctorate thesis on 'Mission of the Church; maintaining the catholicity of the gospel in the Church engagement with the world' \textsuperscript{230} 2008 through Charles Sturt University. Katalina Tahaafe-Williams graduated with her PhD with the topic, ‘A Multicultural Church? Multicultural Ministry as a Tool for Building the Multicultural Church’.\textsuperscript{231}

Now the work of each one of these working groups would warrant its own research. That work has not yet been done. What can be said is that Richmond’s initiative built upon the pioneering energy and work of Yoo-Crowe. It paved the way for Floyd’s work where he sought to assist the reference committee manage controversial issues to do with same gender relationships as well as frame responses to Assembly working groups in a manner that would respect the plurality of the cultures making up this ‘multicultural’ church. The tendency so often was to look for an homogenized response as if the various cultures – whether they be Pacific, Asian, Middle Eastern or African – all thought the same on any given issue. Floyd was especially astute in the framing of submissions and paid close attention to finding the right words for the occasion.

In determining the role and status of the migrant-ethnic communities within the church the personality, gifts and vision of the National Director was critical. It

\textsuperscript{229} https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/persons/jione-havea
\textsuperscript{230} https://www.confessingschooloffaith.com/hedley-fihakai
\textsuperscript{231} Tahaafe-Williams, K Thesis 2012 University of Birmingham
was so because of the lines of reporting and accountability to the Assembly and its Standing Committee. According to the Constitution it is the Assembly that determines the patterns of ministry and the regulations of the church. It has been the Assembly which has passed all the resolutions to do with multicultural, cross cultural ministry and tied that vocation to an emerging ecclesiology. The responsibilities of the National Director has thus been crucial but it should be seen alongside the advisory work of a National Reference Committee for Multicultural Cross Cultural Ministry.

Until the recent abolition of the role all the national conferences reported to the National Director and the National Reference Committee. It is true that guidelines approved in March 2004 allowed for the possibility of national conferences conveying decisions and recommendations directly to councils and agencies of the church; they also specified that national conferences may bring recommendations to the Assembly Standing Committee or the meeting of the full Assembly. This concession on the part of the Assembly enhanced the role of the chair of this reference committee and privileged the way in which a chair and National Director might work together. There has never been a Tongan chair of the reference committee, despite this national conference being the largest of them all.

The importance of this neglect should not be underestimated. The vision of the chair is liable to be concerned with the whole and how individual conferences and migrant-ethnic cultures work together. It is less likely to emphasize the rights
and aspirations of one particular community at the potential expense of others. It is no accident that in more recent times under the chairpersonship of the Revd. Dr. Amelia Koh-Butler that the language of being intercultural was increasingly used in the work of this committee.

This shift in rhetoric away from being multicultural and seeking to live cross-culturally is not surprising. The Uniting Church possesses a strong sense of social justice, reconciliation, and responsibility. The process of being intercultural is sociological rather than theological. It is liable to fasten upon what ‘we’ can do and address horizontal lines of relationship. That is the general tendency of the Uniting Church’s use of terms to do with justice, reconciliation and responsibility as well. The underlying momentum is towards a theological immanence of being the church: what it means to be the church becomes ‘flattened’ into how ‘we’ relate to one another.

Whether this tendency is satisfactory is doubtful. The otherness or transcendence of faith – the vertical dimension – and how identity is formed in Christ can be easily overlooked. That is less possible when the organizing metaphor is one of being cross-culture because the cross presents theological terminology that directs attention to the Christ event and baptism. The potential problem for the Tongan National Conference – and those who call for some further recognition of authority, role and status – is that being intercultural plays down the particularity of individual communities. It does so without explicit reference to the transcendent dimension of faith. It means that
the work of the National Director, the reference committee, and the annual conferences cannot present a strongly theological case to the wider church and have the driver of that case grounded in an appeal to Christ. The tendency of the intercultural language is that it is so often established on an argument based on a desire for a postcolonial critique of the dominant centres of power in the church. That is both necessary and understandable – but is it enough?

It is an awkward dilemma. Ever since the time of Richmond as National Director the work of the Asian American writer Eric Law has often been cited in order to justify positions. Writing in his *The Bush is Burning but Not Consumed* Law argued that “[w]e need to respect the need for all cultural groups to have their own mono-cultural environment in which they can do the work of building up their self-esteem and community identity.” For Law a multicultural community is not a melting pot but a dynamic process in which the various cultural groups maintain their identities while engaging in cross-cultural conversation and constructive dialogue. Such community groupings may sometimes be considered ‘bad or not politically correct’, especially if the overarching communion has been working hard to create inclusive communities. From the perspective of the Tongan National Conference the benefit of Law’s position lies in his advice that there are times when particular communities should separate themselves into the ‘comfort of their own cultural boundaries.’ This

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act of separation should not be seen as a threat. It allows members of that community to speak more freely and express themselves better. It is important to realise that ‘times apart’ are not designed to create and maintain an ethnic divide, but to give people the opportunity to share in the safety of their affinity groups, creating a stronger sense of self-understanding and group identity.

Law is arguing for an intracultural rather than the intercultural dialogue. The difference is important. Law is more a sociological writer of mission than a theologian. For that reason his intracultural approach can be seen as an important part of the overall process of furthering intercultural relations and multicultural vision. The underlying assumption here is that members of one ethnicity are able to overcome their fears and more fully enter into relationship with others when they feel secure in their own identity. Such intracultural dialogue can enhance rather than detract from cross-cultural sharing. When different groups of people come together for cross-cultural sharing and intercultural dialogue it is more likely that there will be genuine dialogue and more in depth sharing. What is left unaddressed in Law’s thinking is theological foundation and purpose in Christology and ecclesiology for such sharing.

The importance of this connection being made between guidelines and the National Director is easily made clear. In August 1999 the National Director, the Revd. Helen Richmond, presented a submission on ‘Guidelines for Biennial National Conferences of Migrant-Ethnic Communities of the Uniting Church in Australia’. It was submitted to the Assembly Standing Committee as part of the
National Director’s Report to the Assembly. These ‘Guidelines’ recognised the growth in number of the national conferences in general. At that time, there were the Tongan, Indonesian, Samoan, Fijian Tamil National Conferences and the Korean Council of Churches. The report defined these biennial national conferences as the national gathering of migrant-ethnic community within the Uniting Church. They were to be held every two years unless a particular community decides upon a different frequency. The particular conference is to be a national representative body of each migrant-ethnic community. It is a consultative body for the Uniting Church as a whole. Each conference would be conducted in its own community language.

Richmond’s document described the aims of the Biennial National Conference in the following terms. The conference was

- to establish a national network between congregations of the same culture
- to establish a fellowship between members of the Uniting Church from all around Australia speaking the same language
- to establish solidarity within their community
- to seek mutual co-operation in solving difficult issues arising in the life of their congregation
- to share common problems, joys and prayers
- to increase understanding about the multicultural Uniting Church and to make a distinctive contribution to its life
• to allow their voice to be heard. Any recommendations made will go to the Committee on Multicultural Ministry which will act on their behalf.

It is evident again that these ‘Guidelines’ operate along a horizontal line. The language of being intercultural is not used but the tendency is there hidden beneath the wording of mutuality and commonality.

These ‘Guidelines’ were updated in 2003. The Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee set up a task group to review the role of the national conferences. In 2004 this task group which was made up of four members from the ethnic communities led by Richmond put out a survey to collect information about national conferences. The review found that there were many benefits of having such conferences in the life of the Uniting Church.

It was recognized that the national conferences help build a sense of community and foster a sense of belonging to the wider church. Those surveyed value the opportunity to share what is happening in the different congregations and giving space to reflect on what is going well and what problems need to be overcome. In this way communities are reflecting on and evaluating ministry needs and mission opportunities. Time spent in worship, Bible study and fellowship over meals were also deemed to be important. They appreciated the fellowship and support they receive and the opportunities for learning. Most of the national conferences have an educational component. They assist new migrant congregations and new ministers coming to work in
the Uniting Church to adapt to and understand the Uniting Church ethos and processes. It was further acknowledged that national conferences establish a national network of solidarity, support and fellowship between congregations of the Uniting Church speaking the same language. They provide an avenue to develop leadership, local preachers, young people, and are increasingly providing candidates for ministry.

The survey also revealed some obstacles. The survey found concern expressed at the lack of funding for the national conferences with the cost of travelling proving to be one of the major complaints. At the time of the survey in 2003, each national conference biennially made requests of the Assembly Multicultural Ministry up to $2000 towards meeting the costs of holding their gathering. Communities themselves show great commitment by raising additional funds, however, the financial burden is the reason the Samoan National Conference has decided they can only afford to meet once every three years.

Of specific significance was the desire the national conferences expressed that presbyteries would consult with them and see them as potential partners in offering pastoral care. This hope was raised in relation to those situations where there is communication breakdown, fragmentation or conflict occurring in congregations. In so doing the review was merely repeating what the original declaration We Are A Multicultural Church simply assumed what would happen. The review affirmed the potential role national conferences
could have working with other councils of the church in a supportive and collaborative way.

This survey and the associated guidelines do not set out to take the place of other councils; they want to work with those councils. They want the wider church to recognise the national conferences as significant national networks. The desire to be given more recognition in Uniting Church structures was later given voice by Ting: “It seems to most of us that the National Conference is mainly for sharing and gathering not having an authority in decision making, and not well known by other bodies in the Uniting Church.” This concern lies behind the sentiment expressed in the ‘Guidelines for Migrant-ethnic Churches in Relation to Homeland Churches’ passed by the Assembly Standing Committee in November 2000:

[w]hen any Council or Agency of the UCA (e.g. Synods, UIM) has official discussions with an overseas Church about matters which affect a migrant-ethnic community in the UCA from the same country as that Church, the Council or Agency must consult the migrant-ethnic community or the Reference Committee on Multicultural Ministry.

The report that was finally submitted to the Assembly Standing Committee in July 2004 came in the immediate wake of a resolution made by the Tongan

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233 Apwee Ting comments on survey.
234 Assembly Standing Committee Minutes November 2000.
National Conference meeting in June 2004, it asked for a voice in the decision-making processes of the Uniting Church, requesting the Assembly to “recognise the Tongan National Conference and the other Ethnic Conferences as an important part of the UCA”. This resolution broke new ground. It was the first time that the Tongan National Conference had carried its debate beyond its own confines and been explicit over its concerns. It would anticipate a proposal made by Hedley Fihaki and Lu Senituli at the 2015 conference. The reason for their proposal lay with their continuing dissatisfaction with the more liberal and inclusive positions adopted by the Uniting Church with regards to same gender relationships and leadership, ministry and eventually marriage. Coming from a more conservative understanding Fihaki and Senituli proposed that the Tongan National Conference should explore the possibility of becoming a council of the Uniting Church. Seen in the most positive light such a proposal assumed a desire to remain within the Uniting Church (rather than imitating the way of the vahefonua). The more precise nature of the request was to ask the Executive Committee to begin that process and bring a report with recommendations back to the 2017 national conference for consideration. The proposal failed to secure the necessary support, but its rationale is of interest insofar as it recalled the basis upon which the national conferences were established and to whom they were accountable.

235 Assembly Standing Committee Minutes July 2004
236 Minutes of Tonga National Conference 2015 4.1 – Proposal from Fihaki and Senituli
The strength of feeling behind this position first espoused in June 2004 should be set alongside the report on national conferences submitted the following month. The background to this enquiry into role and place presupposed that

immigrant congregations are important for immigrant communities. They spiritually, emotionally and socially, provide a secure base of support, and enable members to remain connected to their cultural heritage while at the same time find their way into Australian life. The 1985 Assembly recognized the reality of being a Church that included members from many different ethnic backgrounds and declared itself a ‘multicultural church’. The Uniting Church recognised the need for migrant communities to have opportunities to meet together for worship, sharing, and discussion in their first language. In 1987, the Tongan community was the first to hold a ‘National Conference’ and since then other communities have followed.\(^\text{237}\)

It further laid out that

developing National Conferences has been a key initiative of Assembly Multicultural Ministry. National Conferences provide a place where congregations of the same culture within the UCA (and sometimes reaching beyond the Uniting Church) can come together for

\(^{237}\text{Minutes of the 1st Tongan National Gathering June 1987.}\)
consultation and sharing, cultural celebration and reflection. Each community decides the frequency for their meeting which may be annual, biennial or triennial. Each congregation contributes towards the costs of sending its representatives to meetings of the Conference. National Conferences elect a Chairperson and Secretary and other office bearers as needed to organise the meetings and follow up issues between meetings. Conferences are accountable to the National Director and the Assembly Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee (MMRC). In 2004 the following communities have formed or are in the process of forming National Conferences: Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Indonesian, Tamil, Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese. Some communities are quite small, for example the Vietnamese community (3 congregations) and the Chinese National Conference (five congregations). Others are very large such as the Tongan community that 40 congregations. Some National Conferences are a gathering of key leaders to consult together, others are great cultural and community occasions broadly attended by members of the community, with significant time given to cultural celebration. It is important to remember that the energy, enthusiasm and vibrancy of such celebrations of culture and history are a reminder of the empowerment that comes from maintaining and passing on what is life giving and enriching from peoples' faith and cultural heritage.238

238 National Director of Assembly Multicultural Ministry Report to Assembly Standing Committee 2004.
The lines of accountability assigned to the National Director and the reference committee should also be situated alongside the strategy adopted to increase the representation of minority cultures in the triennial national Assembly. That step was taken at the 2003 Assembly. It agreed to an increase of membership of Assembly of people from non-Anglo cultural and linguistic backgrounds from six to twelve and requested the Standing Committee to find the most appropriate means of implementing this desire. It was reckoned that

[h]aving the National Conferences involved in nominating people to the Assembly is one way the Assembly can increase the number of members from non-English speaking backgrounds as well as recognise the place of the National Conferences in the life of our Uniting Church.239

It was proposed that the national conferences be invited to submit nominations (a male and a female) to the National Director for the Multicultural Ministry and Reference Committee. Twelve nominations would be brought to the Assembly Standing Committee in order for that committee to reflect on the balance between lay and ordained, women and men, and youth representation. Of the twelve nominations at least six would come from the national conferences themselves. The suggested nominations for example could be: National Director, Chairperson MM Committee, six nominations

239 Ibid
from the national conferences, two nominations from working group on - Second Generation Youth and Young Adults, and one nomination each from the working groups on Intentional Multicultural Ministry and Cross-cultural Theology and Education.

The accompanying recommendations made the strongest case possible for the Assembly to create space for these new voices. The Assembly Standing Committee was advised that it

1. Recognize the important place of National Conferences within the life of the Uniting Church as national networks that bring together representatives of congregations of the same culture (and sometimes reaching beyond the Uniting Church) for consultation and sharing;

2. Request the General Secretary convey information about the National Conferences to Presbyteries, Synods, and the Assembly, encouraging them to consult with National Conferences, particularly when they are making decisions that may significantly impact these communities;

3. Request the General Secretary write to National Conferences conveying the decision of the ASC and affirming their place in the life of the Uniting Church;

4. Request the Assembly Multicultural Ministry, when bringing 12 nominations to the ASC, to ensure there are at least six nominations that come from National Conferences and that overall there is a balance
between lay and ordained, women and men, and youth representation.

These policy overtures taken by Richmond were part and parcel of a systemic attempt to ensure and enhance the role of cultural and linguistic diversity within the Uniting Church. They were accompanied by a series of biblical foundations and a call to live cross culturally. It was the most co-ordinated campaign in the life and witness of the church. Richmond organized a series of biblical themes around which she then placed appropriate texts. It was what has been called a mosaic strategy in the use of biblical texts.240

The first theme had to do with all human beings being created by God in the image and likeness of God! (Genesis 1: 26-27, 10:32, Psalm 24:1). All human beings share a fundamental unity. We are connected to one another; we are part of the wholeness and goodness of God’s creation. We are all made in the image of God. Despite our sinfulness, God’s covenantal promise is with all of creation, all people and all generations (Gen 9:9--12). The story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11) reminds us of the danger of monocultural arrogance and affirms cultural and linguistic differences as part of God’s plan for humanity. From one ancestor God made all the nations (Acts 17: 26). These are scriptures that are part of our human identity as God’s people. They demand our attention to look again at the ways we organise our polity and our regulations.

The second theme drew upon both Testaments to show the scriptural basis for welcoming strangers and people who are different from us. (Genesis 18: 1–8, Exodus 22: 21, 23:9; Leviticus 19: 33; Deuteronomy 10: 19 and 24: 17–18). Israel was required to exercise justice and compassion to strangers. In the Biblical stories there are many examples of God coming in the form of a stranger. In Genesis 18: 1–8 Abraham offered hospitality to the three strangers who turned out to be God’s messengers. Strangers enhance rather than diminish the life of communities. (Luke 24: 13–35, Acts 10: 34, Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13: 2).

The third theme has to do with being on a journey. This theme speaks strongly to Tongans when they move to Australia. The journey of the Israelites sounds a chord deep within them. In Gen 12: 12, Abraham and Sarah heard God’s call to leave their country and venture in faith into the unknown. Our cross-cultural ministry is heir to this tradition. We are called to go where God sends us and be a blessing to the nations. The biblical tradition is full of people who go on crossing journeys for example, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Exodus, Naomi and Ruth, Daniel, Jonah, Esther, Jeremiah. Those exiled in Babylon were told to plant gardens, build houses and seek the welfare of the city they were in (Jeremiah 29: 4–8). At times with faith and at times with despair, God’s people are called to move into new situations. They discover God’s will for them in a new land. As they struggle with issues of identity, they come to a deeper understanding of who they are as God’s people and who is the God who sustains them. In Jesus ministry the crossing of boundaries was often intentional in his being faithful to his sense of call. Jesus conversed with a Samaritan
woman acknowledged the faith of a Syrian–Phoenician woman, praised a Roman centurion and a Samaritan leper, ate with outcasts, crossed over ‘to the other side’ and reached out with compassion to those who were marginalised by his religious community. He shows us that love rather than fear needs to determine relationships (John 4:7–10; Mark 7: 26, 29; Mat 8: 10; Luke 17: 16, Luke 10: 37, Mark 3: 5–6; Luke 13: 13–14; Matt 9: 29, 32, Matt 15: 28, Mark 4: 35, Luke 10: 25–37).

The fourth of Richmond’s themes is hospitality. It is the hallmark of the kingdom community in Jesus’ ministry. Jesus challenged religious leaders to invite to their table the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. (Luke 14:1, 7–14, Matt 25). His parable of the great banquet offered a picture of the generous hospitality of God reaching out to invite those who had been excluded. In the Kingdom, “People will come from north, south, east and west and feast together” (Luke 13: 9). Paul told the church in Rome to “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you”. (Rom 15:7).

The fifth theme looked back to the day of Pentecost and how it demonstrates that the church was made up of many cultures from the very beginning. When the Spirit came, each was able to hear the good news in their own native language (Acts 2: 8). The unity they discovered was not uniformity. The first council in Jerusalem, after hearing of the story of Cornelius and Peter, came to recognise that God calls people of all races, languages and cultures. By the power of the Spirit, Jews and Gentiles now belong to the body of Christ.
Baptised believers share an equality in Christ (Ephesians 2:19, Galatians 3:28). Christ transcends all differences and the Christian community is a new creation in Jesus Christ. Old divisions are broken down and a new unity is created (1 Corinthians 15, Ephesians 2: 11–19). Gentile Christians are told they are equal members in God's family “You are no longer strangers and sojourners but fellow citizens and saints with members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2: 19). The vision of the heavenly banquet includes people from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev 7: 9). The ‘Promised End’ is indeed multicultural. Rev 7:12 offers a vision of an innumerable multitude of every nation, tribe, race and language each praising God in their own language. The rainbow mix of people we have within the Uniting Church today can be seen as a foretaste of life in the heavenly kingdom and a reminder that ... ‘my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples’ (Isaiah 56: 6–8, Jeremiah 29). These scriptures contain a mixture of themes and individual texts interwoven together to form a kind of “mosaic”. It is like a mat woven to give the image of a truly multicultural and cross-cultural church.

How well this biblical vision set on five foundations is known within the Uniting Church is doubtful. It is arguably the case that is not even very familiar to ongoing working groups and national conference. It could of course be strengthened. With the benefit of hindsight there is no reference to how each of us, irrespective of culture, dies with Christ and is raised into a new identity with Him through baptism. The work of the cross-cultural theology and education working group has been neglected. It sought to establish the life
and being – the coming together of these diverse cultures – in and through a nuanced reading of the cross of Christ and baptism. Had it been taken up seriously, would it have released a Christ-centred understanding of what it means to be a church made up of many cultures? Would a theology of the cross (in the Pauline sense of also including the resurrection and ascension) stimulated the wider church to be more adventurous in its calling to be such a church?

It is against this kind of background that the case for the clarification of status and role of the Tongan National Conference should be seen. The surveys, reports and guidelines – along with the declarations passed by the Assembly and the biblical foundations – provide a necessary framework for understanding. The strength of feeling in some quarters of the Tongan National Conference evident in the resolution of June 2004 can be set within this framework while being compared with the other conferences.

The practice of holding of national conferences in the Uniting Church began not as national conferences as they are called now. They emerged out of gatherings of leaders from the individual culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities which are members of the Uniting Church. The intention was to gather together to support each other in their journeys and struggles in a different country with a different church culture from the cultures they came from. The declaration by the Uniting Church fourth National Assembly meeting in 1985 that the Uniting is a multicultural church brought recognition of the
diverse membership of the church. Still dominantly western culture with English as the main language in the Uniting Church but the declaration had recognised the many diverse cultural communities that are worshipping in the Uniting Church and their needs to be involved fully in worship, life and witness of the Church in the language of their birth and upbringing.

The Tongan National Conference, then, does not stand on its own. It is one of number of such conferences. It was the first to be established and recognized. It is clear from minutes of this first meeting of this gathering that the purpose of the Conference was to help the leaders (ministers and elders) of the Tongan congregations in Australia to understand and participate in the life of the Uniting Church. Its purpose was specified as being one of seeking to take into account some of the difficulties that Tongan ministers and church members face in trying to relate to a strange new culture and a church which has particular relationship to the homeland church back in Tonga. There was at this stage no question of its authority, status and place within the Uniting Church. The expectation was that it meet bi-annually: the practice of an annual gathering began in 2001. With the same encouragement and support given by the Assembly through the National Mission and Evangelism Unit, other language-based gatherings and conferences also began.

The first Indonesian Retreat or Conference met on 13-15 1988 in Sydney and met again for the second time on 12-14 November 1992 in Melbourne Victoria. Those who attended were Uniting Church leaders who were serving within
Indonesian congregations. Those leaders included all ordained ministers, pastors, lay leaders, members of church council in the Indonesian congregations or faith communities. If it is was perceived to be necessary, the local committee was advised that it might also invite the leaders from a home church but with a proviso. The home church needed to a partner church with the Uniting Church in Australia. The Indonesian National Conference set a practice of moving from one synod to another and meeting every two years. The chair and secretary of Indonesian National Conference are elected for one term and from the synod where the next Indonesian National Conference will be held. In 2015, for example, the Indonesian National Conference was held in Melbourne and elected the Rev Cipto from Western Australia to be its chair. That means that 2017 national conference was in Perth.

The Indonesian National Conference seeks to follow the Assembly ‘Guidelines for National Conferences’ and focus more on the first 5 aims. It is basically concerned with fellowship, relationship, friendship, the support of other congregations or faith communities which do not have a minister in placement.

The first Fijian Leaders Conference met 16-18 October 1989 in Sydney and again on 13-15 May 1993. The Fijian National Conference meets every two years for four days, Thursday to Sunday. It used to meet in January but now changed to June/July as many members are on holiday/away in January. Those invited to attend are members of all Fijian congregations and fellowships
in the Uniting Church, all Fijian ministers in the Uniting Church regardless of placement, and all ministers of other cultures in a placement where there is a Fijian congregation/fellowship or a strong Fijian presence, the National Director of Multicultural/Cross Cultural Ministry and invited guests. Sometimes members of National Reference Committee appear out of interest.

In the beginning the Fijian National Conference used to meet in Sydney. Nowadays it moves around the different synods. The number attending is still relatively small which makes that possible. The primary aim of the Fijian National Conference is for the purpose of making connections with each other and hear what is happening in other congregations. A strong part of the programme is learning more about the Uniting Church. Spirituality is addressed in the Bible studies and early morning worship. The question of ‘Who we are as a Multicultural Church?’ is addressed by the Assembly National Director of Multicultural / Cross Cultural Ministry. Lately, with break-away groups wanting to form a Methodist Church of Fiji in Australia, the Conference has had to address the partnership between Uniting Church in Australia and the Methodist Church of Fiji. At the end of the meeting is usually a community activity focusing on a theme with a choir competition, a dance competition or a fun-night. The meeting usually ends on the Sunday after a church service and a lovo (underground oven) lunch.

The Samoan National Conference began in 1990 and continues to meet every three years. It meets on the third weekend in October in Sydney. The ordained
and lay leaders meet annually between the meetings of the full conference. This meeting alternates between Melbourne and Brisbane. The triennial conference is hosted by the congregation/faith communities in New South Wales. The conference representatives and congregations/faith communities from outside Sydney and New South Wales make financial contribution to assist with catering and overhead costs of the Conference. All ordained (and partners) and lay (and partners) and youth and young adult leaders and representatives elected by their congregations and faith communities.

The aims of the Samoan National Conference are:

- to plant and build up Samoan congregations in the life of the UCA;
- to offer hospitality and a spiritual home to Samoans or anyone who wishes to be in the UCA under the Samoan National Conference;
- to offer and share with the UCA the gifts and graces that God has given to the Samoan people for the building up of the Body of Christ in the UCA;
- to advocate and build the bridge between Samoans in the UCA and the Samoans who belong to the church in Samoa. This continues to be a challenge.

The first Tamil National Conference began in 1999. This National Conference is not active anymore due to lack of leaders and support and the meeting is very irregular because of lack of motivation from its members.
The Chinese National Conference normally meets every 1.5 to two years. Its meetings alternate between Queensland, Sydney, and Melbourne. Its aims are:

- to understand and communicate between Chinese congregations;
- to explore possibilities of mutual support/consensus;
- to explore ministry opportunities and sharing experience;
- to discuss any particular ministry issues and also to have fellowship and bonding.

In the last ten years, there have been formations of the Vietnamese, Filipino Niuean, South Sudanese and the Middle Eastern National Conferences. The Korean Churches in Australia have a longer history that is different from the other migrant communities in the Uniting Church. The first Korean Congregation to be established in Australia was the Melbourne Korean Church on 8 July 1973. The second was the Sydney Korean Church. The name of The Korean National Conference was changed in 2011 from the Council of Korean Church of the Uniting Church in Australia. The members of the Council of Korean Churches were the members (ministers and congregation members) of the Korean congregations in the UCA only. But in 2011 it was approved by the Assembly Standing Committee after the Council of Korean Churches determined to change the name, and also to expand membership to include all Korean ministers (regardless of their placement in the UCA) and Korean lay members (regardless of their congregation) as long as they are members of the Uniting Church. The Korean National Conference has a
national gathering in every two years in place, All Korean ministers (regardless of their placements in the UCA) have a retreat in every year in addition.

Now the emergence of these national conferences should be seen alongside one other alternative. That option is represented by the way in which some Tongan congregations elected to form the vahefonua of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Australia. In a similar vein has been the practice of some migrant communities forming their own denominations in Australia. There is sadness and a sense of regret that the Uniting Church has not managed to provide a home for all of those coming from partner and sister churches who have migrated to Australia. Their number includes the Samoan Methodist Church in Australia, the Chinese Methodist Church in Australia and the Korean Presbyterian Church Australia. These churches reflect a trend whereby some communities wish to establish their own ethnic and denominational allegiances and church structures in Australia and organize their life in ways that are familiar and over which they feel a sense of control and ownership. The Uniting Church cannot force these members of partner and sister churches to join the Uniting Church but through the national conferences, the Uniting Church provides a secure place for belonging where there is understanding of and affirmation of cultural heritage. People are able to participate freely, and have gifts and skills recognized and utilized, even if their English is limited. These national conferences are passing on faith and culture to their young people and are involved in intergenerational sharing in a way rarely seen within the Uniting Church.
Chapter 8
Conclusion

It is arguably the case that the focus of the work of the multi/cross cultural agencies of a culturally and linguistically diverse church has been inclined to hold these communities together under one umbrella. There are occasional exceptions. The Koreans have managed to secure some alternate regulations for the sake of their ministry and ecclesial organization as well as a presbytery. Those exceptions are unusual.

Whether this history has served the original intention behind the 1985 declaration of We Are A Multicultural Church well is open to debate. The so-called migrant-ethnic communities now form a large part of the Uniting Church. Are they well represented? Do its members hold sufficient key positions given the proportion of their numbers?

For a long time now there has been a concern for what is the status, role and place of the national conference. The Tongan National Conference is the largest and the most organized. It has need to carve out its existence over the competing identity and attraction of the vahefonua. It has needed to speak out in public to address the media caricature of its young people. It has developed its own resources on occasions, most notably the Tongan Bible study that is the equivalent of With Love to the World. Its most articulate members now look beyond the satisfaction other conferences enjoy with
regards fellowship, sharing and hospitality. Fihaki and Senituli are not alone in asking whether now is the time to consider becoming a formal council of the church as the Koreans have done.

To become a council of the Uniting Church would mean that the Tongan National Conference would be able to participate fully in the life and ‘government of the Church’ as stated in Paragraph 15 of *The Basis of Union*. Here it reads that “[t]he Uniting Church is governed by a series of interrelated councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and the world”.

To become a council would naturally take time and require much consultation with the wider church as a whole. The first step would be to ask simply that we begin the ‘process of investigation’ into such a possibility, to see whether or not, it is a viable option for the Tongan congregations within the Uniting Church.

To become a council alters the nature of the *talanoa* around the mat. It does so in a variety of ways. The most notable has to do with who is sitting at the mat. Seeking to become a council presupposes an invitation to be present and having a right to talk to others – in the first instance, those who hold office and shape the policy of the Uniting Church as a whole, and also the other cultures whose national conferences are not so large and strong.
The talanoa with the existing polity is a daunting conversation. Outside of the Tongan National Conference there has been little momentum for any fundamental change to the interconciliar polity of the Uniting Church. The occasional proposal to do away with one council – usually the synods on the grounds of the church being over governed – tend to be rather isolated gestures. The power for such change would lie with an Assembly decision and its business has so often been shaped in recent years by debates over same gender issues.

There has been change on the matter of recognition of culture within the past decade, however. The revised Preamble of the Constitution of the Assembly of the Uniting Church at the 12th Assembly meeting (2009) has implications for all. The revision proposed the indigenous people to be the First People; the settlers and migrants who came later, whether English or Tongan are all Second Peoples. The 13th Assembly in 2012 adopted this revision.

The first reference to indigenous peoples had been in the 1985 declaration, We Are A Multicultural Church. Paragraph 5 had stated that it was essential to provide for full participation of Aboriginal and ethnic people, women and men in the decision-making processes of the councils of the church. It declared that these groups have equitable rights in the use of properties and access to the resources of the church. In paragraph 6 the ethnic and Aboriginal

242 Preamble to the UCA Constitution Uniting Church Website (accessed 25 March 2019)
congregations were seen, for the first time, as a sign of the diversity of the cultures of the members of the Uniting Church. It was in 1985 that that Aboriginal and Torres Islander members of the Uniting Church formed the (UAICC) Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.243

Through this revision to the preamble the Tongan diaspora and its national conference now need to work out what it means for them to be a second people. Is it able to covenant with the First People? Is that a priority and what might it mean?

The first clause of the 2006 statement, A Church For All God’s People had acknowledged that God had been present in this land “since time immemorial.”244 It acknowledged the unique place of Indigenous peoples in God’s creative plan for the land now called Australia. It looks towards a time when the faith and spirituality of Indigenous people can truly shape who we are as a church.

This new recognition brought new challenges to both the Anglo Celtic and the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. The multicultural church has now two identities within it. The First People and the Second Peoples are now identified. The Uniting Church in Australia is committed to a covenanting relationship with the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian

243 Preamble to the UCA Constitution No.8 Uniting Church Website. (Accessed 25 March 2019).
Congress (UAICC) which fosters just, inclusive and equal relationships. The conversations and discussions before the approval of the Preamble highlighted the understanding that migrants have of the struggles of the First People in Australia. A lot of the migrants had come from countries which were influenced and colonized by the British Empire. It was easy for them to understand what the issues and the struggles of the First People because they came from lands that have been dispossessed by the similar dominant culture. In the discussion, it reminded the migrants of what it was like before the missionaries brought the Christian story and the Good News of Jesus Christ to their own land. It gave opportunities for the CALD communities to re-visit the meaning of ‘Spirit’ as it is described in the Preamble. The reality that the Spirit was here in Australia with the First People even before the missionaries came to Australia, is the same reality that CALD communities, who are now recognized as Second Peoples, are going through.

The Preamble has been long overdue. It also has highlighted for the CALD communities some extra theological reflections. One is the fact the CALD communities and the Anglo-Celtic are now in one identity as Second Peoples. The issues that the CALD communities were struggling with in the past years before the revised preamble to the Constitution in 2012 will now have an extra commitment – that is, the commitment to covenanting with the First Peoples.

In order to discern the status and way ahead for the Tongan National Conference the first step is to consider the revision to the Preamble and its
implications. At face value the Preamble is an act of recognition and an act of penitence masking an act of lament. Its primary focus is on the relationship of the settler Anglo-Celtic culture and church to the indigenous peoples of this country. From a Tongan perspective there are two specific matters arising from this revised Preamble. The first has to do with the Tongan recognition of the indigenous peoples of the land and their relationship to such. The second follows on from the first. In terms of the revised Preamble Tongans are deemed to be Second Peoples. They are not described as a subsequent ‘wave’ of migrants seeking residency and citizenship in a new home. They are not placed into an inferior position with regards those other second peoples who came first to this land. Being deemed to be a second people places the Tongan migration to Australia on the same ecclesial level as the dominant white Anglo-Celtic majority and its social imaginary. The new Preamble to the Constitution has given a new lens to look back over the many resolutions and commitments that were passed by the Assembly over the years, as it struggled to come to terms with the declaration in 1985 of itself as a multicultural church.

The language of being a Second People is not commonly used among members of the Tongan National Conference. The revised Preamble to the Constitution has never been formally discussed at any of its meetings. However, the Tongans, nevertheless, have stories of encounters and experiences between the Tongans and Aboriginal peoples. There have been stories of Tongan people who had ministered to the Indigenous people over the years. The 2016 Tongan National Conference Executive envisaged a closer
working relationship with the First People. An invitation was offered to the Chairperson of Congress New South Wales to come and open the Tongan National Conference 2017 with welcome to country. Unfortunately, she was unable to attend at the last minute. The President of the Uniting Church Stuart McMillan represented her. The conversation on rolling out the mat as a metaphor for the meeting of the Tongan National Conference on the land of the First People is yet to be progressed. The conference has been aware of it as we pay respect to the elders past and present in our acknowledgement of the traditional owners of this land.

The revision to the Preamble shows that the Constitution can be changed. It can be revised on cultural grounds. This revision represented a change where one of the cultural groupings – the indigenous and First People of Australia – who were first named and alongside ‘multicultural’ communities back in 1985 have secured a fresh status and role in the self-understanding of the Uniting Church. This is a big step and a necessary one. Whether the momentum that carried this revision can be extended to any of the other cultural groupings is the question. The revision to the Preamble was largely driven by the dominant Anglo-Celtic membership of the church which had become increasingly uneasy over its past history of relationship, neglect and sometimes abuse of the First People. The same sentiment and history are not shared with cultures like that of the Tongans.
Nor has there been any desire so far to set up an equivalent body like the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Congress (UAICC). There has been no attempt to follow the pathway of partner churches overseas – especially in Aotearoa-New Zealand – where synods dedicated to Pacific and Asian communities have been established. It is indeed probably safe to say that the dominant culture is largely unaware of the concerns of cultures other than the indigenous. That is a state of play that does not look promising for a Tongan claim for a greater clarity of role and influence. There is, of course, here a profound irony that needs to be confronted. The initiative which led to the setting up of national conferences came, in the first place, from Assembly staff. Does that fact in and of itself suggest that the Assembly has some responsibility for being proactive in reviewing the status and authority of the national conferences?

From the perspective of the Tongan National Conference there has been some movement in understanding what happens within the polity of overseas churches. It is no longer simply a case of looking back to the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga for a sense of permission, continuity and difference, and aspects of ecclesial identity.

This kind of conversation has extended across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand. Some of our ministers in the Tongan National Conference were invited to Fakatoukatea Conference hosted by the Methodist Church of New Zealand in
November 2017. It was an initiative by the Tongan ministers in the Methodist Church of New Zealand to gather with ministers from the Tongan National Conference in New Zealand to discuss theological issues including the matters to do with indigenous people in both countries. It also covered how the Church addressed the same gender marriage and sexuality in the Christian Church. The three ministers from the Tongan National Conference who went brought good feedback. There was a second Fakatoukatea conference already held in Auckland again in 13th–14th November 2018 hosted by the Tongan leaders of the Methodist Church in New Zealand. It is held on 13th–14th November 2018. This gathering of Fakatoukatea is gathering momentum.

The extension of the talanoa conversation beyond the Tongan National Conference to New Zealand and to the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga has proven that the contributions of Tongans trained in the Uniting Church in Australia are shared beyond the conference mat. The Fakatoukatea Conference has an interest in the relationship between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Free Wesleyan Church; an interest which they share in common with the Methodist Church of New Zealand.

This scenario of benign unawareness on the part of the dominant majority makes for an uneasy reading of The Basis of Union and the declaration that We Are A Multicultural Church. J. Davis McCaughey was one of the high-profile

leaders of the Uniting Church at the time of union. His commentary on some paragraphs of The Basis of Union can be read alongside those of that equally foundational document of 1985. Paragraph 1 of the declaration captures the spirit of Paragraph 1 of The Basis of Union where it described the Uniting Church is a union of three denominations, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. These former denominations found connections to their similar partner churches in Asia and the Pacific, and so when migrants come to Australia from these partner churches, they often sought to associate themselves with the Uniting Church. The main connection that migrant communities who come to Australia are looking for is their need to worship.

McCaughey observed that what we have in common is worship. What is true of individuals can also be true of churches. Separated Christians families know that they belong to the great family of God which was brought into being through Christ. They are filled with wonder, with gratitude; but they also realise that they have hidden this fact from themselves, from each other and from the world. So, in worship, individuals and churches realise the need to be obedient to God’s will and so these separated communities, Churches look for renewal of their life together in the one Christ, in the one Church. McCaughey insists that “the life of that Church will be marked by common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all mankind.”

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247 McCaughey, Davis Commentary on the Basis of Union Assembly Publication 1980. 7.
248 Ibid., 8.
Paragraph 2 of the declaration notes how the formation of the Uniting Church is committed to ecumenism. That is what is to be found in Paragraph 2 of The Basis of Union; the Uniting Church lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. She recognises that she is related to other Churches in ways which give expression, however partially to that unity in faith and mission....She believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries, and to this end she commits herself to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific. She declares her desire to enter more deeply into the faith and mission of the Church in Australia, by working together and seeking Union with other Churches.

McCaughey in his commentary on this Paragraph 2 emphasizes the way in which the Uniting Church recognized the world-wide character of the traditions from which it came from. The World Methodist Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches of Asia are two umbrella churches from where the partner churches come from. The national conferences are made up of some members who came from these partner churches in Asia and the Pacific. If this is so, how is the ecumenical nature of the Uniting Church to be conceived? Was it only intended to apply to the first steps in union – or is this union ongoing, as indeed, the name Uniting so strongly implies?

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249 Ibid., 12.
There is unfinished work to be done in the Uniting Church around matters of interest to do with the CALD churches now deemed also to be Second Peoples. The risk is that such a designation simply absorbs the Tongans, Koreans, the Niueans, the Samoans and all the others into the existence and purpose of the dominant majority.

This desire for greater clarity of role and purpose comes with an abiding esteem and a desire to be a part of the Uniting Church. It is recognized that there have been steps taken to weave the diasporic communities into the life of the church as a whole. There have been twenty items of ‘multicultural’-related policy passed by the National Assembly. Those resolutions have had to do with the sharing of property, the reception of ministers, relationships with the home churches, guidelines for national conferences and an increased presence in membership of the triennial assembly. There have been initiatives taken where resources have been translated into languages other than English, though this practice has been haphazard and does not happen right across the board of the diverse cultures. The chairs and the national conferences have been consulted on controversial matters facing the church. Whether that advice and voice has actually been heard and then influenced subsequent decision-making and policy is more open to question. That this should be the case is perhaps one reason why the call for the Tongan National Conference to become a council of the church is sometimes made.
There have been attempts made to engage with racism. The reference committee brought resolutions to the 2003 Assembly naming racism as a sin because it destroys the very source of humanity – that all people are created by God, in the image and likeness of God. It stated that racial superiority, a failure to understand other cultures and exclusiveness must not have a place in the life of the Uniting Church. Racism workshops ran across various Synods helped to draw the awareness of the Uniting Church members to the some of the issues in our journey towards a truly culturally diverse church.

There has been some progress. The call to become a council should not be seen as a desire to separate any one culture from the others or the church at large. It is not an attempt to create some sort of vahefonua but now within the Uniting Church. The Tongan National Conference is deeply committed to the Uniting Church; it would wish that all Tongan Methodist or Wesleyan Churches in Australia were part of the Uniting Church and seeking to be nurtured within its distinctive ethos. What this call to be a council signifies is a deeper desire to be involved in the decision-making processes of the wider church and giving a more visible authority and standing to national conferences. In the present polity of the church there is little awareness within congregations and presbyteries (and indeed synods) of the work of national conferences. There is more to their work than sharing, hospitality, feasting and worship.

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With the growth of the numbers of Tongan ministers trained in Australia and working in either congregations or agencies of the Uniting Church, the Tongan National Conference provides the mat for theological conversations about the place of Tongans as second peoples. It gives an extra challenge to the Anglo-Celtic dominant culture because now it is in the mix as Second Peoples. While the journey towards becoming a truly culturally diverse church continues. The *talanoa* conversations within the Tongan National Conference are internal as well. If, at any stage, the conference becomes a council of the church – or part of a yet to be conceived Pacific synod responsible to the Assembly – then, there would need to be much greater organization than is currently in place. It is one thing to organize an annual conference and related programs; it is another altogether to be a council with the necessary office bearers and processes. The idea is currently in the conversation around the mat, but more intentional thought is still necessary. There is also work to be done, which expresses more clearly the theological self-understanding of the Tongan diaspora and its national conference so that the reasons for seeking to live cross-culturally in this way are deeper and bind peoples together.

The *talanoa* has begun. The mat has been rolled out.


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Yoo-Crowe, Seongja, ed. The Vision of a Multicultural Church. South Sydney: Multicultural Ministry, National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia. 1998.
APPENDICES:
Appendix 1 National Conferences and their Place in the UCA – (ASC July 2004).


Appendix 3 Partnership Agreement between the Uniting Church in Australia and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga.

Appendix 4 Covenant of Mutual Spiritual Pastoral Care for the members of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Australia.

Appendix 5 Agreement between the Uniting Church and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga concerning the Recognition of the District in Australia.
APPENDIX 1

NATIONAL CONFERENCES

Their place and status in the life of the UCA

July 2004

Background
Migrant congregations are important for immigrant communities. They spiritually, emotionally and socially, provide a secure base of support, and enable members to remain connected to their cultural heritage while at the same time find their way into Australian life. The 1985 Assembly recognized the reality of being a Church that included members from many different ethnic backgrounds and declared itself a ‘multicultural church’. The Uniting Church recognised the need for migrant communities to have opportunities to meet together for worship, sharing, and discussion in their first language. In 1987, the Tongan community was the first to hold a ‘National Conference’ and since then other communities have followed.

National Conferences

Developing National Conferences has been a key initiative of Assembly Multicultural Ministry. National Conferences provide a place where congregations of the same culture within the UCA (and sometimes reaching beyond the Uniting Church) can come together for consultation and sharing, cultural celebration and reflection. Each community decides the frequency for their meeting which may be annual, biennial or triennial. Each congregation contributes towards the costs of sending its representatives to meetings of the Conference. National Conferences elect a Chairperson and Secretary and other office bearers as needed to organise the meetings and follow up issues between meetings. Conferences are accountable to the National Director and the Assembly Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee (MMRC). In 2004 the following communities have formed or are in the process of forming National Conferences: Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, Indonesian, Tamil, Korean, Chinese and Vietnamese. Some communities are quite small, for example the Vietnamese community (3 congregations) and the Chinese National Conference (five congregations). Others are very large such as the Tongan community that 40 congregations. Some National Conferences are a gathering of key leaders to consult together, others are great cultural and community occasions broadly attended by members of the community, with significant time given to cultural celebration. It is important to remember that the energy, enthusiasm and vibrancy of such celebrations of culture and history are a reminder of the empowerment that
comes from maintaining and passing on what is life giving and enriching from peoples’ faith and cultural heritage.

In 2003, Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee set up a task group to review the role of the National Conferences. A survey was used to collect information. The review found that there were many benefits of having National Conferences in the life of the UCA. The National Conferences help build a sense of community and foster a sense of belonging to the UCA. People value the opportunity to share what is happening in the different congregations, giving space to reflect on what is going well and what problems need to be overcome. In this way communities are reflecting on and evaluating ministry needs and mission opportunities. Time spent in worship and bible study is also important. People appreciate the fellowship and support they receive and the opportunities for learning. Most of the National Conferences have an educational component. At the recent Tongan National Conference a morning was spent looking at the newly translated Basis of Union and entering into study groups. National Conferences assist new migrant congregations and new ministers coming to work in the Uniting Church to adapt to and understand the UCA ethos and processes. National Conferences establish a national network of solidarity, support and fellowship between congregations of the Uniting Church speaking the same language. They provide an avenue to develop leadership, local preachers, young people, and increasingly are providing candidates for ministry.

Assembly Multicultural Ministry revised the Guidelines on National Conferences in March 2004. In the Guidelines accountability of the National Conferences through reporting to the National Director and Assembly Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee, continues however the National Conferences may convey decisions and recommendation directly to councils and agencies of the church and may
bring recommendations to the ASC or the Assembly. Another initiative is the new Working Group, *Uniting National Conferences* which provides a forum for people representing different National Conferences, with the aim of enhancing, promoting, articulating and encouraging the ministry of the different communities in the life of the Uniting Church and helping develop Uniting Church processes, policy and polity that is responsive to the needs of their communities. National Conferences are seeking for ways they can help make a distinctive contribution to the life of the Uniting Church and enable the voice of different communities to be heard.

**Some obstacles**

1. The survey found concern expressed at the lack of funding for the National Conferences with the cost of travelling proving to be one of the obstacles. At the present time each National Conference biennially requests from Assembly Multicultural Ministry up to $2000 towards meeting the costs of holding their National Conference meeting. Communities themselves show great commitment by raising additional funds however the financial burden is the reason the Samoan National Conference has decided they can only afford to meet once every three years.

2. National Conferences are expressing the hope that Presbyteries would consult with them and see them as potential partners in offering pastoral care, particularly in situations where there is communication break down, fragmentation or conflict occurring in congregations. The review affirmed the potential role National Conferences could have working with other Councils of the church in a supportive and collaborative way. The National Conferences do not take the place of other Councils, but want to work with those Councils. They want the wider church to recognise the National Conferences as significant national networks.

3. The desire to be given more recognition in Uniting Church structures is expressed in this quote from Rev Apwee Ting, Chair of the Indonesian National Conference. “It seems to most of us that the National Conference is mainly for sharing and gathering not having an authority in decision making, and not well known by other bodies in the Uniting Church.” National Conferences are wanting the wider church to consult with them on issues that have a major impact on their community. This concern lies behind the sentiment expressed in the ‘Guidelines for Migrant-ethnic churches in relation to Homeland...
churches’ passed by the ASC in November 2000. “When any Council
or Agency of the UCA (e.g. Synods, UIM) has official discussions with an
overseas Church about matters which affect a migrant-ethnic
community in the UCA from the same country as that Church, the
Council or Agency must consult the migrant-ethnic community or the
Reference Committee on Multicultural Ministry.” There is some concern
that decision making process do not always reflect this commitment.
The Tongan National Conference meeting in June 2004, passed a
resolution requesting that National Conferences be given a voice in
the decision making processes of the Uniting Church and requested
the Assembly “recognise the Tongan National Conference and the
other Ethnic Conferences as an important part of the UCA”. Assembly
Multicultural Ministry sees the National Conferences as very important
but there is a need to assist the rest of the Church to understand and
value the National Conferences.

Some reflections
Asian American theologian, Eric Law in The Bush Was Blazing but not Consumed
(Chalice Press, 1996) writes: “We need to respect the need for all cultural groups to
have their own monocultural environment in which they can do the work of building
up their self esteem and community identity.” For Law, multicultural community is not
a melting pot but a dynamic process in which the various cultural groups maintain
their identities while engaging in cross-cultural conversation and constructive
dialogue. Such community groupings may sometimes be considered ‘bad or not
politically correct’, especially if we have worked hard to create inclusive
communities. Law suggests we should not feel threatened or see as negative the
times a community separates to share within the ‘comfort of their own cultural
boundaries.’ Giving people space to share in this way means that people are often
able to speak more freely and express themselves better. It is important to realise
that ‘times apart’ are not to create and maintain an ethnic divide, but to give
people the opportunity to share in the safety of their affinity groups, creating a
stronger sense of self understanding and group identity. This **intracultural dialogue**
can be an important part of the overall process of furthering intercultural relations
and multicultural vision, says Law. People are able to more fully enter into
relationship with others when they feel secure in their own identity. **Intracultural
dialogue** can enhance rather than detract from cross-cultural sharing. When
different groups of people come together for cross-cultural sharing and **intercultural
dialogue** it is more likely that there will be genuine dialogue and more in depth
sharing.

It is possible to see the development of National Conferences in the life of the
Uniting Church as an important step of enabling **intracultural dialogue** which
enhances the multicultural nature of our church and which leads, not to a
separation, but an affirmation of identity and deeper engagement and sense of
belonging to the Uniting Church.

In the last few decades, the Australian Christian landscape has seen the
emergence of some migrant communities forming their own denominations in
Australia. There is sadness and a sense of regret that the Uniting Church has not managed to provide a home for all of those coming from partner and sister churches who have migrated to Australia. The Samoan Methodist Church in Australia, the Chinese Methodist Church in Australia; the Korean Presbyterian church and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Australia reflect a trend whereby some communities wish to establish their own ethnic and denominational allegiances and church structures in Australia and organize their life in ways that are familiar and over which they feel a sense of control and ownership. The Uniting Church cannot force these members of partner and sister churches to join the Uniting Church but through the National Conferences, the UCA provides a secure place for belonging where there is understanding of and affirmation of cultural heritage. People are able to participate freely, and have gifts and skills recognized and utilized, even if their English is limited. National Conferences are passing on faith and culture to their young people and are involved in intergenerational sharing in a way rarely seen within the Uniting Church.

**03.10.03 Assembly Membership in a Culturally Diverse Church**

The 2003 Assembly agreed to an increase of membership of Assembly of people from non-Anglo cultural and linguistic backgrounds from 6 to 12 and requested the Standing Committee to find the most appropriate means of implementing this desire.

“Having the National Conferences involved in nominating people to the Assembly is one way the Assembly can increase the number of members from non-English speaking backgrounds as well as recognize the place of the National Conferences in the life of our Uniting Church.”

(Extract from the Rationale provided to the Assembly when Proposal 66 was being presented)

It is suggested that National Conferences be invited to submit nominations (a male and a female) to the National Director for Multicultural Ministry and Reference Committee. 12 nominations will be brought to the Assembly Standing Committee that reflect a balance between lay and ordained, women and men, and youth representation. Of the 12 nominations at least six nominations would come from National Conferences. The suggested nominations for example could be:

- National Director
- Chairperson MM Committee
- 6 nominations from National Conferences
- 2 nominations from Working Group--Second Generation Youth and Young Adults
- 1 nomination from the Working Group - Intentional Multicultural Ministry
1 nomination from Working Group -Cross-cultural Theology and Education

Whilst it is very important to recognise National Conferences it is also important that people offering leadership who come from smaller communities that do not have National Conferences, can be included. Having nominations from Working Groups is a way to ensure there are young people and key people from these significant committees.

**Recommendations:**
That the ASC

5. Recognize the important place of National Conferences within the life of the Uniting Church as national networks that bring together representatives of congregations of the same culture (and sometimes reaching beyond the Uniting Church) for consultation and sharing

6. Request the General Secretary convey information about the National Conferences to Presbyteries, Synods, and the Assembly, encouraging them to consult with National Conferences, particularly when they are making decisions that may significantly impact these communities

7. Requests the General Secretary write to National Conferences conveying the decision of the ASC and affirming their place in the life of the Uniting Church

8. Requests Assembly Multicultural Ministry, when bringing 12 nominations to the ASC, to ensure there is at least six nominations that come from National Conferences and that overall there is a balance between lay and ordained, women and men, and youth representation.
1. Introduction
The Uniting Church, as an ethnically diverse and multicultural community has recognised the need for migrant communities that are part of its life, to have opportunities to meet together for sharing and reflection and for discussion in their first language.

In 1987 the first national conference was held. Since the formation of the Tongan National Conference other communities have formed national conferences. In 2004 the following communities have formed or are in the process of forming National Conferences:
- Tongan
- Samoan
- Fijian
- Indonesian
- Tamil
- Korean
- Chinese
- Vietnamese

Some communities are quite small (2-3 congregations) and others are large. The possibility of developing national conferences for smaller and emerging communities is being explored.

2. Definition of ‘National Conferences’

- National Conferences bring together representatives of congregations of the same culture within the UCA (and sometimes reaching beyond the Uniting Church) for consultation and sharing
- National Conferences are representative bodies for each community
- National Conferences can act as a consultative body in the UCA.

3. Aims
- To establish a national network of solidarity, support and fellowship between congregations of the Uniting Church of the same culture, speaking the same language
- To share common problems, joys and concerns and offer mutual cooperation in solving difficult issues arising in the life of their congregations
- To increase a sense of belonging and understanding about the multicultural Uniting Church
- To review ministry and mission needs of their community and communicate concerns or issues to the appropriate councils of the church.
- To enable the voice of their community to be heard and to help their community make a distinctive contribution to the life of the Uniting Church.
- To assist other councils of the church in matters relating to congregations from their community.
• To give attention to the needs of the first and second generation. Some National Conferences organize parallel youth programs.
• To forward recommendations to the Assembly Standing Committee as appropriate in consultation with the Assembly Multicultural Ministry National Director and Chairperson.
• To be part of the Working Group, Uniting National Conferences to help develop Uniting Church processes, policy and polity that is responsive to the needs of our communities.
• The Conference provides nominations to the National Director for the triennial meetings of the Assembly. The Assembly Standing Committee appoints twelve people from nominations brought to it by the Assembly Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee through the National Director.

3. **Frequency of Meetings of the National Conference**
Each community decides the frequency for their meeting. For example, it may be annual, biennial or triennial.

4. **Funding of Meetings of National Conferences**
Each congregation contributes towards the costs of the sending its representatives to meetings of the Conference. Each Conference can apply through the National Director to receive some financial contribution towards the meetings of the Conference.

5. **Formation of a Working Committee or Executive**
• It is recommended that the National Conference of each community elect a Chairperson, one or two Secretaries (Minutes to be provided in language and in English) and other office bearers to organise the meetings of the Conference in consultation with the National Director and follow up issues between meetings of the Conference.

6. **Accountability**
• National Conferences were initiated through Assembly Multicultural Ministry and each Conference is accountable to the National Director and the Assembly Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee (MMRC). The minutes of each conference comes to the National Director and a report is provided to the MMRC.
• Once in three years, each Conference is invited to submit two nominations (a male and a female) for membership on the Working Group, Uniting National Conferences. The Working Group regularly hears updates from each national conference and conveys key issues to the MMRC.

7. **Membership of the Meetings of each National Conference**
• The National Director for Multicultural Ministry is a member of each Conference and may attend Working Committee/executive meetings of the Conference.
• As a decision-making body the National Conference will have representatives from each congregation.
• The size of each national conference may alter depending on the community and its needs. For example there may be a National Conference that has the ministers and two people nominated from each congregation. Other conferences may choose to have a larger number of voting representatives. In such cases it is suggested that there be:
  • Six representatives for the first 50 confirmed members; Two representatives for every 50 confirmed members or part thereof after the first 50 confirmed members up to 500 confirmed members; One extra representative for every 50 confirmed members if membership is over 500. (e.g.: A congregation of 170 confirmed members will send 12 representatives.) At least one third of the congregation’s representatives should be women.
• Conferences are encouraged to nominate women and men and to have younger generation representatives.
• Ministers serving congregations are members of the Conference. English speaking ministers who have a leadership and pastoral oversight role within their community are invited. Retired ministers may be included by decision of the conference. Conferences may choose to invite ministers of their cultural background who may be serving in English speaking or other placements.

8. Guests and Observers at meetings of the Conference
• The Working Committee/Executive of each Conference will decide people to be invited to the Conference. Normally, the President of the UCA, the Chairperson and members of the Reference Committee on Multicultural Ministry, the Associate General Secretary, the General Secretary, staff member(s) of multicultural ministry of the Synods and Presbyteries, staff members of the UIM, and other appropriate local church leaders are invited for particular sessions.
• If the President or Office bearers of ‘Home churches’ are invited, the President of the UCA will send an invitation letter on behalf of the Conference.
• Each Conference is responsible to decide whether to invite members of the same cultural background who are not members of the UCA. (Such participants shall normally have the right to speak when invited to do so by the chairperson, but not to vote except as determined by the Conference.)

9. Procedure for taking forward recommendations from each Conference
• In consultation with the National Director and Chairperson of the MMRC recommendations may be sent to the Assembly Standing Committee or to the Assembly.
• Any decisions or recommendations of the Conference conveyed to councils or agencies of the church are to be copied to the National Director.
• Recommendations and key decisions are reported to the Multicultural Ministry Reference Committee and the Working Group, *Uniting National Conferences.*

Updated February 2004                  Multicultural Ministry
PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT BETWEEN
THE FREE WESLEYAN CHURCH OF TONGA
AND THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

God is one and it is the desire of God that all may be one. A relationship of mutual partnership is an expression of this desire for oneness. It is our commitment to work together in God’s Mission in the World.

We acknowledge the special relationship between people of the Methodist tradition. A key part of this tradition is the understanding that Methodist circuits (congregations) in one country are in connexion (are connected together) through a Conference and other appropriate organizational means. Internationally the Conferences in individual countries are in connexion through the World Methodist Council and other organisational means. As a consequence of this understanding we believe that:

- The Methodist Church in Tonga is now found in the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, and
- That the Methodist Church in Australia is now found in the Uniting Church in Australia (previously the Methodist Church of Australasia).

We celebrate and give thanks for the long relationship between the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga and the Uniting Church in Australia. We have worked together in God’s mission in both our countries and in many parts of the Pacific. It is our intention to continue to work in partnership in God’s Mission as the Spirit of God leads us. At this time due to the increasing complexities of life and relationship we feel it is helpful for us to express our understanding of our continuing relationship in writing.

We confess the past failures in our relationship. Through misunderstanding, insensitivity, and human self-interest we have hurt each other. We claim the forgiveness of God made available to us in Jesus Christ. May our hearts and minds be renewed so that we may express the fullness of God’s love in our relationship.

For us a critical part of our relationship will be the deep care that we provide to people originally from one church now living in the country of the other church. We acknowledge that this care will be expressed mutually. Each church will express this care in a way that strengthens the church in the country in which the people now live. We understand that this will involve truly working together with transparent sharing and respect for each other.

Where past actions have led to practices and patterns of organisation that may not be in accordance with the ideals expressed in this agreement, both churches will see these as temporary. They will seek to work together so that over time the intention of this agreement is moved towards and achieved.
The two churches have worked on a statement of key principles that will assist in implementing the vision and understanding of this agreement. The key principles at the time of signing the Agreement are:

- **Respect for each.** Both churches will respect the theological emphases, polity, processes of organisation and the oversight (discipline) of the other church.

- **Appointment (placement) of staff.** The appointment (placement) of staff will only occur with the mutual agreement of both churches and be done in a way that is consistent with the normal appointment (placement) processes of the church in which a person is to be appointed (placed).

- **Pastoral and other contact between the two churches in regard to personnel**
  Each church will relate to the people that they make available to the other church in way that is in accordance with the constitution and regulations of the church in which they are serving. Such relationships will seek to strengthen the partnership relationship and in no way have a detrimental effect on the church in which the person is serving.

- **Working in Partnership**
  Both churches will commit themselves to work together in a way that expresses mutual partnership in mission.

- **Care for and relationships with people originally from the other Church**
  The churches will relate to people now participating in the life of the other church in a way that will strengthen, not weaken their involvement.

- **Openness to addressing situations where existing arrangements may not be in accordance with the ideals expressed in the Agreement**
  Where arrangements have already occurred that are contrary to the key principles and general understanding of the partnership relationship then both churches will work together so that over time the ideal may be achieved.

- **Financial Support**
  There should be transparency and accountability for all financial resources provided by one church to the other.
Wherever possible there should be a sharing by both churches in funding particular projects as a means of expressing partnership together.

This statement of key principles may be reviewed and modified in the light of experience and changing circumstances. This agreement seeks to express the enduring and deep relationship between our two churches. We will, beyond the words of this agreement, seek to continue to express a relationship of deep communion based on trust, sensitive respect and understanding. We know that the way will not always be clear sailing but we will seek to sail together. We will be able to continue our journey together because all that we do is done in the presence of our Almighty and ever present God. We open ourselves to God to sustain and guide us on the way. We pray that the wind of God’s Holy Spirit will fill our sails and the energy of the Spirit will fuel our motors as we travel the waters of the new millennium, participants in God’s mission.
The intention of this covenant is to express a covenantal agreement between the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWCT) for the FWCT working through the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Australia to provide for the spiritual and pastoral care of members of FWCT in Australia congregations. It is to be seen as an important expression of the partnership between the two churches.

1. NAME
The FWCT congregations in Australia will be known as the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga in Australia. It is noted that these congregations may operate under separate incorporated bodies. However, organizationally in terms of relations with the FWCT and the UCA they will be seen as one organization.

2. SEPARATE IDENTITY
The UCA recognizes the separate organizational identity of the FWCT in Australia. This recognition of separate identity includes:

(a) The congregations will use FWCT orders of service, hymnbooks, and educational and other resources.
(b) The congregations will use the regulations of the FWCT to order their life. The regulations will be varied by the FWCT through mutual agreement with the FWCT in Australia to make them appropriate for the Australian situation.
(c) The UCA will seek the secondment of ministers from the FWCT as requested by the FWCT Annual meeting. The appointment of these ministers will be made on the same basis as the appointment for other ministers of the FWCT Conference bearing in mind their regulations in regard to overseas appointments.
(d) There will be an annual meeting of the FWCT in Australia. The President of the FWCT (or his representative) and the National Director of UCA Uniting International Mission (or their representative) will chair this meeting. It is expected that all FWCT congregations in Australia that relate with the FWCT will participate in this meeting, be responsible to this meeting, and communicate with the FWCT Conference through this meeting.
3. RELATIONSHIP OF OVERSIGHT AND CARE BETWEEN THE FWCT AND THE FWCT IN AUSTRALIA
   (a) The FWCT will provide general spiritual and pastoral oversight for the FWCT in Australia. This will include:
      (i) That ministers appointed by the FWCT and those in church leadership positions authorized by the FWCT will be under the discipline of the FWCT.
      (ii) The authorization of people to church leadership positions that are normally authorized by the FWCT Conference, Standing Committee or President.
      (iii) The provision of materials, personnel, and other resources that are requested by the FWCT in Australia that are able to be provided by the FWCT.
      (iv) The FWCT in Australia will make such financial contributions to the general funds of the FWCT as are mutually agreed.

4. RELATIONSHIP OF FWCT IN AUSTRALIA WITH THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA
   (a) The FWCT in Australia will seek to have harmonious and cooperative relationships with the UCA, especially Tongan congregations of the UCA.
   (b) The Uniting Church in Australia will provide assistance as it is able to assist the ministry and mission of the FWCT in Australia. The ideal will be where possible to provide support similar to Uniting Church congregations.
   (c) Congregations of the FWCT will participate in the TNC of the UCA in a way suggested by the UCA.
   (d) The FWCT in Australia will make its request for secondment of ministers, the authorization of church leaders and other specific requests for assistance to the FWCT through UCA/UIM. This is a formal channel of communication and UIM will not alter requests that are being made.

5. SHARING BETWEEN UCA/UIM AND THE FWCT ABOUT THE LIFE, MINISTRY, AND MISSION OF THE FWCT IN AUSTRALIA
   (a) The FWCT will provide a report in English each year to UCA/UIM concerning the life, ministry and mission of the FWCT in Australia. This report will include:
      (i) Specific support provided.
      (ii) Appointments of ministers and the authorization of church leaders.
(iii) Any decisions regarding members of FWCT in Australia congregations that have been accepted as candidates for ministry training.
(iv) The amount of financial contributions made by the FWCT in Australia to the general funds of the FWCT. Where appropriate mention may be made of other contributions towards to the general activities and programs of the FWCT.
(v) Particular issues, concerns, opportunities faced by the FWCT in Australia, especially those where the UCA may be able to assist or there are benefits in promoting mutual ministry with UCA Tongan congregations.
(vi) That the President of the FWCT (or his representative) be invited to participate in the annual meeting of the TNC.

6. HANDLING OF CONCERNS ABOUT THE MINISTRY AND LIFE OF THE FWCT IN AUSTRALIA

If any Council of the UCA has concerns about the life or ministry of the FWCT in Australia (including the action or behaviour of ministers) they should raise their concerns with UIM. UIM after consulting with the FWCT in Australia will then raise these matters with the FWCT. In such a case the leaders of both churches will commit themselves to work together to achieve a satisfactory resolution of the concerns.

7. CONCERNS THE FWCT IN AUSTRALIA MAY HAVE ABOUT THE ACTIVITIES OR ACTIONS OF THE UCA

If the FWCT in Australia has concerns about the activities or actions of the UCA, including Tongan congregations of the UCA it should in the first instance raise these with UIM. If they are not satisfactorily resolved then they should refer them to the FWCT who will then consult with UIM. In such a case UIM, the FWCT, the Councils of the Uniting Church and the FWCT in Australia will commit themselves to work together to achieve a satisfactory resolution.

8. REVIEW OF THIS COVENANT

This covenant should be seen as a living document. By mutual agreement between the UCA and the FWCT this covenant can be altered. A review of this covenant will be undertaken after five years, at the same time as the review of the partnership agreement. This review will bear in mind the long-term aim of developing closer links and relationships between the UCA and the FWCT in Australia.
(APPENDIX 5)

AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE FREE WESLEYAN CHURCH OF TONGA AND THE UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA CONCERNING THE RECOGNITION OF A DISTRICT OF THE FREE WESLEYAN CHURCH OF TONGA IN AUSTRALIA

This agreement expresses the intention of paragraph 6 of the proposed Partnership Agreement between the two churches which says:

“For us a critical part of our relationship will be the deep care that we provide to people originally from one church now living in the country of the other church. We acknowledge that this care will be expressed mutually and in ways recognised and/or agreed between the two churches.”

1. Mutual Recognitions

The Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (FWCT) and the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) recognise that:

(h) The UCA is providing for the spiritual and pastoral care of Tongan people through congregations related in various ways to councils of the Uniting Church in Australia. In this agreement where reference is made to the UCA it includes Tongan congregations and bodies of the UCA.

(i) The number of Tongan people worshipping in congregations of the FWCT in Australia has steadily grown. These congregations operate legally under two different incorporated bodies.

(j) The members of the FWCT in Australia have sought to be related to the FWCT in Tonga for many years.

(k) In response to repeated requests to clarify their relationship with Tonga the 2001 FWCT Conference agreed to establish a trial “District” in Australia. This “District” in Australia was to include all Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga congregations in Australia.

(l) The FWCT Conference has delayed the confirmation of the “District” at its 2002 and 2003 meetings to allow further consultations to occur with the UCA.

(m) Extensive consultations and discussions have occurred since 2001 concerning the proposed “District” including leaders of the FWCT and the UCA, Tongan members of the UCA, and members of FWCT congregations in Australia.

(n) That the prime concerns of both the FWCT and the UCA are for:

(i) The provision of good quality spiritual and pastoral care for Tongan people originally from the FWCT.
(ii) Harmonious and cooperative relations between Tongan people in UCA and FWCT in Australia congregations.

2. Agreement and Understandings

The FWCT and the UCA mutually agree to the recognition by the FWCT Conference of the District of the FWCT in Australia as a means of providing for the spiritual and pastoral care of Tongan people worshipping in FWCT in Australia congregations.

This agreement is made with the following understandings:

(h) That the District will seek to have cooperative and open relations with the UCA (including its Tongan congregations and bodies).

(i) That the UCA (including its Tongan congregations or bodies) and the FWCT in Australia District will not seek to attract members from the other.

(j) That the FWCT and the UCA will continue to work to strengthen relationships between the FWCT in Australia District and the UCA.

(k) It is understood that the FWCT will be responsible for the oversight of the FWCT District in Australia.

(l) That consideration will be given by the UCA to inviting observers from the FWCT in Australia District to attend meetings of UCA Presbytery and Synod in which FWCT congregations are situated and other relevant bodies of the UCA such as the Tongan National Conference.

(m) That consideration be given by the FWCT to inviting observers from the UCA to attend meetings of the FWCT in Australia District.

(n) The UCA and FWCT will seek to provide assistance, as they are able to facilitate the ministry and mission of the FWCT in Australia District.

(o) That the FWCT and the UCA explore the possibility of meetings (or retreats) involving Tongan ministers from the UCA and the FWCT in Australia District.

4. Concerns and Issues

If issues or concerns arise concerning the activities of the FWCT District in Australia or the UCA (including its Tongan congregations and bodies) then the following process will be followed:

(c) If the FWCT has concerns or issues about how the UCA is relating to the FWCT District in Australia or has a special request, then the FWCT in Tonga will raise the matters with the designated officer of the UCA responsible for international relationships with the FWCT.

(d) If the UCA has issues or concerns about the activities of the FWCT District in Australia or has special requests the designated officer of the UCA will raise these matters with the responsible officer or body within the FWCT in Tonga.

March 10, 2004