Report of the Assembly delegation to Port Augusta

20 – 22 November 2006

To obtain additional copies of this report contact Jenny Bertalan at the Assembly Secretariat:

PO Box A2266 Sydney South NSW 1235
Telephone: (02) 8267 4202
Facsimile: (02) 8267 4222
Email: jennyb@nat.uca.org.au
The Purpose of the visit

The President of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) convened this delegation in response to a request that was brought by the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC/Congress) to the 11th Assembly of the Uniting Church, held in Brisbane in July 2006.

As the Aboriginal arm of the Uniting Church, Congress delivers many ministries on behalf of the UCA as well as providing guidance and direction to the rest of the church in relation to Aboriginal issues. The Congress and the wider part of the UCA are in a covenant together that requires of us that we stand in support of one another and co-operate together to speak to issues of reconciliation and justice, particularly as they affect Aboriginal people.

In response to this covenant relationship the 11th Assembly, at the initiative of Congress, resolved: 06.19.01 Lake View Transient Accommodation
to request the President:

  a) to lead a delegation to Port Augusta to view and investigate the appalling living conditions of Aboriginal people at the Lake View Transient Accommodation site, as a matter of urgency; and
  b) in consultation with the National Executive of the UAICC, to take appropriate action.

The delegation comprised Rev. Gregor Henderson (President), Rev. Terence Corkin (Assembly General Secretary), Mr Vince Ross (National Chairperson of the UAICC), Rev. Graham Vawser (Moderator of the Synod of South Australia), Rev. Ken Sumner (Chairperson of Congress, South Australia). The team was accompanied by Mr Gavin Melvin (Assembly Communications Manager), Mr Ian Dempster (SA Congress Resource Officer) and Mr Peter Russell (Covenanting Officer for the SA Synod).

The visitation and what we heard

Orientation

The delegation convened in Adelaide on the morning of Monday, November 20 and was briefed by Rev Bernie Clarke, a person with knowledge of the Port Augusta Area.

The delegation travelled to Port Augusta on Monday afternoon and shared the evening meal with the local Congress congregation in Port Augusta. After the meal members of the Congress community in Port Augusta shared with the delegation their pain and distress that their people were provided with only the wiltjas (tents) at the Lakeview Transitional Accommodation Centre. They considered that this facility was inadequate and that it would not be deemed an acceptable solution for other Australian citizens. It was clear that the distress of this community was real and current.

Davenport Community

On Tuesday the delegation met with Alwyn McKenzie and Malcolm McKenzie (representatives of the Davenport Aboriginal Community) and Sharon Platt of the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, in Davenport, which is located on the edge of Port Augusta.

The representatives of the Davenport Community expressed support for the Lakeview Centre as a necessary and positive step to assist people that had very practical needs. They considered that the provision of safe accommodation with good food at an economical price was very beneficial to people in need of short term accommodation. They considered that the wiltjas, while acceptable to some Aboriginal people, were not satisfactory in the long term and they pointed out that more comfortable
and permanent structures were already being constructed. They acknowledged that not all Aboriginal people in town agreed with their action and expressed regret that people with concerns did not come directly to them.

The Davenport representatives expressed significant concern that the Federal Government had made the decision to remove funding for the local Aboriginal council on only three months notice. They are alarmed at the loss of a significant number of services and personal support and development programs that will take place because the infrastructure surrounding the Davenport Community will disappear with the local municipal funding. The lack of consultation was expressly condemned at the same time as an openness to change as required was expressed.

In addition to the lack of consultation the view was expressed that the removal of municipal funding for Aboriginal community councils also results in a serious reduction in the capacity of Aboriginal people to find a voice. Without groups such as Davenport, Aboriginal people are unable to organise and represent the concerns of their people. The outcome is further marginalisation and alienation from the processes and policies that affect the lives of Aboriginal people.

During the discussion concern was also expressed about the dismantling of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) within the Port Augusta community. This, along with the decisions about municipal funding, was presented as an example of a failure by government to recognise the distinctive needs of Aboriginal people and a clear working out of a policy to draw them into the mainstream of community services, with the consequence that the policies appear very much like the failed assimilationist policies of the past.

Lakeview Transitional Accommodation Centre

The day the delegation visited Lakeview it was about 40 degrees Celsius and the wind created a dusty environment. It was reported that approximately 27 people are currently using the site.

It is apparent that staff members are very committed to providing a quality service within the parameters available and they clearly care for the people who stay at the camp.

The delegation noted that construction was taking place for special needs accommodation and alongside the current site 12 more permanent cabins were being constructed which will be air conditioned. This can only be a positive development, notwithstanding that the advice given is that some itinerant people prefer the wiltjas for a variety of reasons, including the opportunity for food to be cooked in traditional ways. The wiltjas will continue to be used by those who want them and to deal with overflow occupancy.

Even though the building taking place on the site gives cause for hope that the worst features of the original Lakeview site can be ameliorated it is obvious that it will take several months before these works are completed and so the peak period of demand, and the hottest time of the year, will see people subjected to the same conditions that gave rise to the concerns Congress originally expressed about the Lakeview transient camp. The question remains unanswered – why are these sorts of living conditions deemed to be good enough for any Australian in need of crisis accommodation?

Notwithstanding the improvements that will be eventually made to the accommodation and the very good meal and common room provisions at Lakeview, the site continues to have a number of problems. There is no public transport to town, the ground is uneven and lighting for night use of the ablution blocks presents dangers to frail or aged people.
Port Augusta Congress Faith Community

Congress in Port Augusta has begun a program that is aimed at assisting young Aboriginal people to reconnect with formal education and to, ultimately, enable them to return to schooling. The point was made that many young Aboriginal people find school an alienating experience and do not flourish due to a range of social, family and socio-economic factors. The reasons for high drop out rates need to be addressed in ways that take into account the special situation in which Aboriginal young people find themselves. The Congress program seeks to address this issue for a small number of people. It is hoped that this program which is tailored to the needs of Aboriginal young people, will be able to attract adequate and timely funding to enable it to continue and to build on what, in its early stages, appears to be receiving positive support from school principals due to their early results.

The Mayor and Senior Staff of the Port Augusta City Council

The delegation was very appreciative of the time given by the Mayor, Councillor Joy Baluch; John Stevens the City Manager; the Community Harmony Manager, Marie Williams; and the recently appointed Council Community Harmony Coordinator, Fiona Coulthard. The conversations were open and were directed to understanding the approach being taken by the Council and the goals that they are seeking to achieve through particular actions that they have undertaken.

A good deal of time was spent hearing about the particular circumstances facing Port Augusta in respect to Aboriginal issues. The Mayor emphasised the diversity of Aboriginal groups, some 27 in all, and how difficult this made it to consult. The view was expressed that the elected Aboriginal Advisory Council was unrepresentative and dysfunctional. This group, while continuing to be recognised by other government bodies, resigned as an advisory group to the City Council after it considered that its opinions were being ignored on a matter of some importance.

Subsequent to this resignation the Council has set in train the establishment of an alternative body of Aboriginal people that will be available to the Council for consultation. It is acknowledged by the Council that the establishment of this group is a slow process and that it will take time to get a satisfactory level of ownership within the Aboriginal community for this group, and to get every Aboriginal family or clan group represented on it. Each family / clan is to agree among themselves and to appoint a person to speak for them. The model seems to be aimed at Council having access to all the family groups with the idea of the Aboriginal groups reaching an agreed position among themselves which can then be presented as the Aboriginal view for the consideration of Council.

In respect of this arrangement concern had been expressed to the delegation, prior to this meeting, that the Council was not taking seriously the input from the Aboriginal Advisory Council and did not change its position in the light of its comments. The new group is not regarded by all Aboriginal people as an adequate mechanism and the manner of recruitment for participation, eg writing letters to people, was not considered an appropriate approach. Particular comment was made that there was no discussion with Aboriginal people about the way they would like their voice to be heard, but rather there was what is perceived as a Council imposed solution. Fiona Coulthard is well regarded by the community for her previous roles and people hope for the best for her work. However there is concern that she is working with a mechanism that is not owned by the Aboriginal people and her role is not one that was created in response to the expressed needs of the Aboriginal people.
Division of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation staff, South Australian Department of Housing and Lakeview Management and the Executive Officer of Bungala Aboriginal Corporation

Wednesday morning was spent meeting with various people to explore further specific matters that had been raised during the visit. The consistent message that was reinforced was that programs that recognise the specific circumstances of Aboriginal people are being cut, and in area after area the services that are either specifically directed to Aboriginal people, or take into account their different circumstances, or that are governed and delivered by Aboriginal people are being brought into the mainstream programs of government. Examples given to the group included the closure of the Aboriginal Housing Authority in South Australia six months ago and the relocation of its functions within a new department, Housing South Australia; the Federal Government plans to withdraw the CDEP and introduce a new program which, while being specifically for Aboriginal Australians, is more closely aligned with the mainstream, compliance based Job Network program and the removal of separate funding for Aboriginal community councils such as Davenport with the expectation that the local Council will take up the provision of basic services and the specialist services previously provided by the Aboriginal community councils.

Mainstreaming and its consequences was one of the consistent concerns raised by people addressing the delegation.

While it was not initially part of the reason behind the visit of the delegation, the widespread concern about the sudden discontinuation of the employment training component of the CDEP resulted in a visit with David Pearce, Executive Officer of the Bungala Aboriginal Corporation, which is the very successful operator of the CDEP program in the Port Augusta region. The outcomes in placing and maintaining Aboriginal people in jobs and the commitment of the organisation to appropriate training and support are exemplary. It was alarming to the delegation to hear of the short notice that was given prior to the termination of the employment component of the CDEP program and the distribution of a so called “discussion paper”. The “discussion paper” did not address whether or not CDEP should continue but to the shape of what takes its place – the “enhanced step program”. It seems clear that a lot of work remains to be done. However what is apparent is that the Aboriginal CDEP program which, at least in Port Augusta, was very effective has been brought into a compliance-based, job network type model with all the problems that this introduces for CDEP’s traditional clientele. This appears to be another example of bringing Aboriginal services into the framework, systems and departmental approaches of mainstream government services.

While some of the group met with Mr Pearce, others met with Deb Butler, the Manager of Housing SA’s Transitional Accommodation Program, which administers Lakeview.

While uncertainties remain about how services being undertaken by the former Aboriginal Housing Authority will be continued, the greatest concern expressed by Ms Butler was the lack of suitable long-term public housing across South Australia.

She described the major housing stress in South Australia, including public housing, and the fact that there are large numbers of people who, despite being in relatively well paid full-time jobs, are occupying state housing and have been doing so for decades. This places significant demands on housing stock and means there is a significant shortage. In Port Augusta there are significant waiting lists for Aboriginal people who want to move from temporary accommodation like Lakeview and the Lois O’Donoghue Aboriginal Hostel.

She understands that many people view Lakeview as an inappropriate form of accommodation but stressed that it was far better than the alternative and was the best option available within current circumstances.

Ms Butler indicated that it is hoped that Lakeview will become part of the Pathways Housing Model being
trialled at the Ceduna Town Camp. This program moves people from transitional housing like Lakeview into a shared house, where they are supported intensively for six months to get established.

The entire delegation met with Sharon Platt and Alwyn McKenzie from the SA Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation.

As well as reiterating earlier concerns heard by the delegation about mainstreaming of services and a lack of representative consultation, they also indicated it was becoming increasingly difficult to secure funding for regional areas like Port Augusta.

They indicated that since the controversy over petrol sniffing in the APY lands, significant State Government funds have been re-directed into remote communities, which has made servicing Aboriginal people in cities and larger towns like Port Augusta more difficult. This was happening at the same time as the Federal Government has expressed concerns about the viability of remote communities and has begun to target funding to programs that support projects in regional centres.

Sharon and Alwyn also expressed concern at a lack of support and services to get communities together outside of times of crisis. They indicated that Aboriginal people often only seemed to get together for funerals or family emergencies and that far more needs to be done to build a sense of community and to celebrate the positives via events like carnivals and sporting events. In this respect they spoke very highly of the recent Family Fun Day run by Congress.

They spoke about the implementation of the “Dry Zone” in outdoor areas of Port Augusta as a response to public drunkenness and associated social issues and indicated that although it has served to reduce alcohol abuse in public it may well have pushed drinking into the outskirts of town and out of sight. On top of this, there are still issues of discrimination to be addressed in local pubs, many of which will not serve Aboriginal people, or look unfavourably on them.

While a dry zone addresses the presenting issue, their view seemed to be that that it was almost paternalistic to simply ban access to the offending substance, rather than address the underlying causes of alcohol abuse.

**Findings and commentary**

Port Augusta is well known as the gateway to Australia’s outback and is the last regional centre on the way north to central Australia and west to Perth. It has been a crossroads for some 40,000 years and a traditional meeting and trading place and stopover for Aboriginal people travelling across the country. Today the city of 13,756\(^1\) is an important regional centre for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, providing important health, social services and employment for smaller remote communities in the surrounding regions, particularly for Aboriginal people from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands to the north.

While there is much to celebrate in this vibrant town there are still many unresolved social issues impacting its nearly 2300\(^2\) permanent Aboriginal residents. While the delegation was invited to view the conditions of accommodation being provided to transient Aboriginal people visiting Port Augusta, it soon became clear that the decision to erect tent accommodation on the edge of Port Augusta was a response to a presenting issue and there was still a lack of coordinated responses that find solutions to the underlying problems.

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1. Australian Bureau of Statistics, National Regional Profile 2001. ABS cat. no. 1379.0.55.001
2. Ibid.
On the one hand, Port Augusta is a reminder of the important role regional cities fulfil in Australian society and on the other, it is a stark reminder of our continued failure as a country to properly deal with the divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

While there were many local issues presented to the delegation on its visit, this report aims to pick up some of the broader issues at play in the area and cite specific local examples to highlight these issues.

**The continued sense of disempowerment among local Aboriginal people**

While exact figures vary from source to source, Port Augusta contains one of the most diverse groupings of Aboriginal people anywhere in the country. Estimates are that there are between 30 and 37 different Aboriginal languages spoken in the immediate area and more than 25 clan or tribal groups represented in the community. This diversity presents challenges for not only Aboriginal people but for local authorities and community and social service providers.

The delegation heard regularly of the sense among Aboriginal people that their views were not being heard by decision makers. Conversely, decision makers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, expressed their frustration at often having their attempts to consult widely dismissed as being unrepresentative.

This tension was clear among the leadership of Davenport Community Council, who acknowledged there had been some concerns expressed by Aboriginal people after the establishment of Lakeview, including the appropriateness of tents, but maintained that during the consultation period, those who participated in discussions were supportive of the plans. While acknowledging they were not the only Aboriginal voice in Port Augusta, the leaders of Davenport Community indicated it was becoming increasingly difficult to undertake thorough consultation with Aboriginal people unless people were willing to make the time to attend meetings and voice their concerns.

A second example is the representation of the popularly elected Aboriginal Advisory Committee, which had a clearly designated role in relation to the Port Augusta Council. Although this group was established by popular vote as part of a Council election there appears to have been disagreement from the outset about how representative the group was of the various clan and family groups in the area. While a process of popular election may well seem democratic in the minds of Anglo Australians, in this case it clearly gave preferential representation to particular groups who were able to mobilise support more effectively than others. After a falling out, where the Council labelled the group ineffective and unrepresentative and the group felt it was not being listened to, the members resigned en-masse.

A new group has now been set up by Council in which a dedicated staff contact, an Aboriginal woman who previously worked with the local health service, has been tasked to build the membership up so that the group contains representatives of each of the identifiable clan and family groups. While this approach has some potential pitfalls, particularly in relation to being clear about the authority any one family member has to speak on behalf of that group, it still seems to offer a way forward in terms of ensuring local consultation is more effective. Nevertheless the effectiveness of consultation ultimately rests on the outcomes of the consultation and not the process itself. Whatever process of consultation is undertaken in Port Augusta it will only be valued if it is recognised as having an observable impact on the decisions of the City Council and others in authority.

As well as a feeling among many that their voices were not being heard in local decision making, there was also a strong sense that the Aboriginal voice was being lost in the national political context. The removal of several key programs, including plans to scrap the Community Development Employment Program and the withdrawal of Federal Government funding for Community Councils like Davenport, with little or no prior consultation, has left members of the Aboriginal community distressed and...
incredibly disheartened for the future. While some of this is a result of the physical withdrawal of funding and resources, much of it appears to be the result of the feeling of disempowerment that has resulted from decisions being made with a perceived lack of consultation.

In fact it is not just a lack of consultation that aggrieves local Aboriginal people it is the regular decisions that they encounter that are examples of where white people make decisions based on what they want without consideration of the views of Aboriginal people.

Service delivery appears fragmented with little coordination, even in non-Aboriginal service delivery

While the delegation visited, and was briefed by, representatives of many local service agencies it was often difficult to see where they intersected and how they may be working in cooperation together to achieve better outcomes.

The delegation was overwhelmed by the concerns of service providers about a lack of funding to provide services, but there appeared to be no obvious systems in place to ensure maximum efficiency and to ensure service duplication was avoided.

Although the Federal Government has established an Aboriginal Coordination Centre and the State Government has an office of the Division of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation in Port Augusta, there seems to be limited interaction between the two and at some points a sense of real antagonism around particular program and policy decisions that are being made by the other. The Federal Government has expressed concerns about the viability of remote communities and in response has directed funding to programs that support projects in regional centres, while the State Government, in response to the issues of petrol sniffing in the APY lands has directed increased funding into that area. In such a challenging situation, it seems incomprehensible that these policy decisions based on apparently diametrically opposed agendas should be impeding effective and integrated service delivery.

There are a wide range of services offered in Port Augusta by the various levels of Government and Aboriginal people, but members of the delegation struggled to gain a sense of how each related to, or was complimented by, other services in town. This frustration must only be amplified for Aboriginal people, for many of whom, English is a second or third language. Not enough is being done to address the causes of the presenting issues.

There are a range of issues affecting Aboriginal people in Port Augusta, including drug and alcohol abuse, violence and physical abuse and many initiatives, like the Lakeview Accommodation Centre, seem to be dealing with the presenting issue, in this case homelessness, rather than the underlying causes. While there are mixed opinions in the local community about the Lakeview facility it’s difficult to avoid the sense that Lakeview, which is located well out of town, was an easy quick fix which moved the issue of Aboriginal transients out of sight and out of mind.

While there are clearly a range of services being provided by different agencies, including four UnitingCare Wesley agencies, there still appear to be obvious gaps in services that address the underlying issues of alcohol and drug abuse, long term homelessness, poverty, poor retention rates of Aboriginal people in education and high levels of unemployment.

For example, despite high levels of drug and alcohol dependence among Aboriginal people, there is no drug and alcohol rehabilitation unit in Port Augusta. While the establishment of a dry zone by Council in the town has taken alcohol off the main streets, some community workers suggested it had only served to push it inside homes, which increased family stress and violence and to the outskirts of town. Alice Springs Correctional Centre for example, has recorded greater numbers of Anangu people within the prison population since Port Augusta’s dry zone was put in place.3

3.The Blackster Solution, Grant E. Published in Place South Australia, vol2.2 October 2006.
The dry zone at Lakeview is also similarly flawed because the centre is housed on private land owned by the Aboriginal Trusts Land where it is not possible to legally impose dry-zone legislation. The dry zone at Lakeview is an internal rule of the centre and the access road and nature strip to Lakeview from the main road (on which Council’s dry-zone applies) is owned by Davenport Council, where the dry zone does not apply.

**Mainstreaming of services and redirecting of funding**

While the delegation heard of a desperate shortage of funding and services it was also concerned that some existing services were being closed down or brought into a mainstream service delivery model within Government departments.

For example, the Aboriginal Housing Authority in South Australia was closed six months ago and its functions brought within a new department, Housing South Australia, and the Federal Government plans to withdraw the Community Development Employment Program and introduce a new program which, while being specifically for Aboriginal Australians, is more closely aligned with the mainstream, compliance based Job Network program. A further example is the removal of separate funding for Aboriginal community councils such as Davenport with the expectation that the local Council will take up the provision of basic services while the specialist services previously provided by the Aboriginal community councils will no longer be a priority for the larger Councils into which these groups will now be placed.

The effects of these decisions have been to further marginalise Aboriginal voices and hide Aboriginal issues within a larger Departmental framework.

The delegation was also left with a sense that funding allocations were being re-directed to different projects in response to matters where there was an increased public interest. For example, the delegation was told that significant money was being re-directed from regional areas into the remote areas in the APY lands in response to the inquest into petrol sniffing. The establishment of Lakeview itself is another interesting point as it was approved and completed very quickly ahead of the 2006 State election.

**The role of the local UAICC Faith Community**

The delegation very much appreciated the ministries being undertaken by the Congress Faith Community. The services provided locally by Congress range from personal development, remedial education, meeting urgent needs for practical aid and the worship life of a vibrant Christian community. Congress is an organisation, no doubt among others, which is striving to do their best to respond to an ever increasing range of demands. Congress serves as a beacon of hope and a strong voice calling for equity and justice for Aboriginal people within the Port Augusta community.

There are many community based groups responding with grass roots initiatives to the presenting problems faced by Aboriginal people in Port Augusta. Governments at all levels would do well to work with, support and harness this good will and care in an effort to build effective solutions to long term problems. Greater consultation and collaboration with community based groups would increase the likelihood that the real needs of Aboriginal people could be seen and the responses be more appropriate and owned by Aboriginal members of the community. This outcome could only be further enhanced by working with community based Aboriginal groups such as the Congress faith community.
Ways forward

1. It would be difficult to overturn many of the decisions that have been taken around issues such as Federal Government funding for Municipal Councils and the future of CDEP. Nevertheless the Uniting Church should make representations expressing our concerns on these issues and the processes involved to the relevant Government Departments.

2. A particular aspect of the advocacy should be to emphasise the church’s concern about the mainstreaming of Aboriginal services with the consequent reduction of Aboriginal perspective, delivery of services, establishment of priorities and capacity to give voice to the particular needs of Aboriginal people. Mainstreaming also has the insidious effect of denying the particular disadvantages that are experienced by Aboriginal people as the subjects of colonisation with all the attendant consequences related to health, racism, alienation and poor access to education and employment.

3. Encouragement should be given where possible. Correspondence should be directed to the local Congress Faith Community commending them on their ministries and assuring them of ongoing interest. Correspondence could also be entered into with the Port Augusta Council raising issues that have come to our attention and in particular encouraging the Council to seek solutions to the presenting causes, as well as urging them to not only listen to their Aboriginal advisory committee but to also act on their recommendations from time to time.

4. The wider Uniting Church cannot purport to speak for Congress, much less the wider Aboriginal community. Nevertheless the delegation heard a plea from Aboriginal people at Port Augusta – inside and outside the church – to help the voice of Aboriginal people to be heard. Indeed Congress representatives on the delegation, as well as local Congress members, challenged the wider church to put its resources into getting Aboriginal issues back on to the agenda of Australian public policy and debate. The wider church – both synods and Assembly, need to take that challenge seriously and to find the ways of working with Congress to identify the issues that they believe need to be addressed, and to develop strategies that specifically seek to find ways of bringing Aboriginal issues on to the national public and political agenda.
Specific Actions

1. The Assembly and Synod of South Australia write to the three levels of Government noting the specific concerns that have been identified within each Governments areas of responsibility as a result of the delegation's visit to Port Augusta. In particular all levels of government should be encouraged to engage in meaningful dialogue and consultation. Port Augusta City Council should be specifically encouraged in this regard.

2. A combined Assembly / Congress delegation seek a meeting with the Federal Minister to represent in person the issues raised in the final section of the report.

3. Produce appropriate media releases to follow up on the announcements already made. A special report should be prepared by the Assembly communications unit for distribution to the synod papers.

4. The Assembly explore possible new sources of funding, in co-operation with the synods, that might enable it to commit some resources to working with Congress on a strategy that will enable the wider church to play a part in bringing Aboriginal issues on to the wider public and political agenda.

Gavin Melvin and Terence Corkin (for the delegation)
7 December 2006