

Synod of Victoria & Tasmania

# Disability Action Plan 2015-2018

## History of the Uniting Church and People With Disabilities



Uniting Church in Australia  
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

Find us on [www.victas.uca.org.au/disability-inclusion](http://www.victas.uca.org.au/disability-inclusion)

Many new initiatives of the Uniting Church with regard to people with disabilities began in 1981 during the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP). An IYDP Committee, convened by Rev. John Howard, was established in 1980. A number of the church agencies had already done valuable work in this area and it was upon this tradition that the Committee built its work.

*Raising awareness* was a major task of the IYDP Committee. The 1980 Synod resolution, (80.3.6), raised issues of access and participation of people with disabilities in the life of the church and community. It recommended that parishes and the synod become intentional in dealing with such issues. In 1981 the Synod designated a particular Sunday as Access Sunday.

In 1982 the Committee had a more specific focus. The Synod resolutions (82.5.9) included a policy statement (S/D1a.2) and further encouragement for parishes to recognise the contribution of people with disabilities in the life of the congregation and presbytery. The then-Theological Hall and the Commission on Continuing Education were both urged to take up the needs of people with disabilities in their programs and activities.

The synod, presbyteries and congregations were requested to act on making *buildings and worship spaces more accessible*. All new renovation and building plans were to incorporate proper access arrangements and provide clear access signs.

During the three years of its existence the IYDP Committee achieved a great deal, particularly in raising awareness. Members spent a great deal of time in deputation work throughout the church and it is upon their shoulders that we stand today.

There has been significant work done in the area of building design to enable greater access, and there is enhanced sensitivity of the needs of people with disabilities. Ramps and accessible toilets are now much more common. It is now customary for sign language to be incorporated at the opening Service of the Synod.

It is true that some congregations have further to go than others. While the focus in 1981 was on congregational buildings, this has now been extended to all church agencies and schools. Property and architectural committees are much more conscious of their access obligations. The notion of access goes beyond the physical: it includes removing barriers to enable the full participation of people with sensory or intellectual impairments.

A significant change since 1981 is in the way the issue of access is addressed. Instead of seeing it as a problem for the person with a disability, we recognise the need to see it in terms of a society that, through its attitudes and actions, *disables people*. It has been a move from a medical to a social model.

Within the medical model framework, a person's functional limitations (impairments) are the root cause of any disadvantages experienced. Therefore, these disadvantages are 'treated' or 'rectified' by treatment or cure.

The social model, in contrast, shifts the focus from impairment onto disability, using this term to refer to disabling social, environmental and attitudinal barriers, rather than an individual's lack of ability.

After the high-energy years of 1980-82, disability issues took on a lower profile. But disability was now part of the language. Things were happening slowly and quietly. In 1996 the Synod Standing Committee endorsed “a process of intentional interaction with people with disabilities”. Congregations were urged to look at better ways of *involving people with disabilities* in the life and mission of the church (96/25.12).

The 1996 Synod established a Disability Working Group, convened by Rev. (Deacon) Andy Calder, the synod’s inaugural Disability Resource Worker. Mrs. Joan McKenzie was appointed as an Order of St. Stephen candidate to support the work. In 1997-98 councils of elders, agencies, presbyteries and ministers were surveyed to discover “the variety of creative and important ways people with disabilities are being included in congregational and community life”.

The Working Group’s Vision Statement was: “In recognition of the unique gifts of all people, the network aims to enhance the capacity of the Uniting Church to include and honor people with disabilities in all aspects of its life”.

Congregations and agencies were encouraged to form discussion groups to reflect on the issues. The emphasis was on involving people with disabilities in the decision making.

Four hundred surveys were sent out to parishes and agencies within the synod. Eighty-five responses were received. A range of questions were addressed, including participation and leadership in worship, pastoral care, use of auxiliary devices to assist people with hearing and sight impairments, and checking what physical modifications had been carried out.

With a 20% response rate, the information gave some indication as to what was happening in the church. Issues of physical access had been addressed by many of the respondents, as had the inclusion of people with disabilities in worship. Large print materials were also being used in some settings.

The Working Group used a newsletter to distribute material and also visited a number of parishes and agencies. One of the highlights of the year was the visit by Rev. Bill Gaventa from the USA in May 1998, a leading international advocate for congregational inclusion.

The Working Group looked at the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act* 1992 (DDA) and its significance for the Uniting Church. Consequently, the Synod of 1998 affirmed “its commitment to creating a church that is for all people with disabilities (as defined by the DDA), and in all aspects of its life, free from discrimination” (98.5.4.5).

As part of this commitment, the Synod appointed a Task Group to implement an Action Plan under the DDA. It began work in March 1999. In addition to discussing the Action Plan, the Task Group visited both a rural and a metropolitan presbytery to assess their current services and practices. This Action Plan was extended in the form of conversations and questionnaires to Uniting Church schools and agencies.

By the end of 1999 it became clear that the Action Plan would be quite an extensive project. Rev. Stuart Reid was enlisted to assist in editing the 2000–2003 Disability Action Plan. Endorsed by

the Synod of Victoria, the Plan was lodged with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, the first such to be lodged by a religious organisation in Australia. A significant outcome of that Plan was to designate a pool of funds, called the Disability Access Fund, which continues to this day, enabling congregations to make necessary modifications for access purposes.

Throughout 2003 to 2015, the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, through its agencies, congregations, missions and programs, continued to offer a range of supports, services, policy development, advocacy and care of people marginalised by disability. In that period, the synod continued to recognise the importance of a designated role for disability inclusion. People who served in that role were Rev. Robert Sangster, Mr. Andrew Gillett, Ms. Susan Stork-Finlay and Rev. (Deacon) Andy Calder. The current Disability Action Plan 2015- 2018 celebrates the positive changes that have occurred over the past decade, and lays down a path for further improvement and response.

