Uniting Church in Australia

2021 Annual Report to the National Office for Child Safety

Acknowledgement

The Uniting Church in Australia acknowledges sovereign First Peoples of the lands and water where we work in locations across the country. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and to all their descendants who have cared for this place since creation.

The Church acknowledges that as First and Second Peoples, ours is a 'destiny together' – in acknowledging the wrongs of the past and the present, we continue to commit ourselves to take action to bring about a more just Australia. As we actively engage in the process of reconciliation, God calls us toward and gifts us with a new human community of mutuality, dignity, care and compassion, and respectful and deepened relationship with this ancient land.

Contents

1. Introduction

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is the third largest Christian denomination in Australia, and one of the largest providers of community services in the country. We are a large and diverse organisation present across every state and territory in Australia, in metropolitan, regional and remote areas.

Fig 1: Screenshot from the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly website. Image description: A photograph of people celebrating their faith and culture with a text overlay. Text reads we are the Uniting Church.

The UCA is organised as a series of inter-related councils – local churches, regional presbyteries, state synods and the national Assembly. Our congregations are communities of faith who come together in many different ways to worship, often centered around a local church or other location. A presbytery is a council of the Church which has oversight of congregations, ministry and programs within a region. Each of our six synods act as state/territory councils of the Church and are responsible for overall support and resourcing of the Church in their areas - including in community services and educational services. The Assembly is the national council of the Church.

The UCA, through its schools, agencies and congregations, provides a wide range of services directly to children and young people, including:

- Worship and pastoral care
- Youth/children's ministry activities within Church settings (Sunday school, youth groups, playgroups, online groups, etc.)
- Local, regional and national camps and gatherings
- Boarding and day schools
- Hospitals and health services, mental health services and disability services
- Child and family services such as out-of-home care, foster care, parenting programs, counselling, crisis support, family intervention services and child protection programs
- Community services such as homelessness services, counselling services and community recovery programs
- Redress and direct personal response for people who experienced child sexual abuse in UCA settings

The UCA participated in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and has reported annually on its progress to implement the Commission's recommendations. Previous reports can be found here.

The UCA established a National Safe Church Unit (NSCU) in 2019 to lead its response to the Royal Commission. The NSCU manages the development and delivery of national child safe church policy, frameworks, training and resources in collaboration with people from across the life of the Church.

2. Key actions taken by UCA to address child safety risks

Across the reporting period (September 2020 – September 2021) and against the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UCA has continued to work towards a nationally consistent approach to child safety, as was recommended by the Royal Commission.

Key deliverables for this reporting period include:

- Delivery of nationally consistent child safety training, available online to people across the life of the Church
- Development of a UCA Safeguarding Framework and identification of measures to provide safeguarding assurance
- Appointment of a quality assurance specialist to the NSCU to lead the national safeguarding assurance project
- Delivery of an inaugural UCA National Child Safe Week which included a range of engagement opportunities supporting a safe church culture
- Delivery of a series of online events and engagements to support safeguarding activities:
  - Engagement with Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to support and inform legislative and system reform
  - Engagement with ecumenical partners about safe church issues, including providing safe church training to partners
  - Theological reflection to ensure our values inform our safe church work, actions and activities
- Created new resources to communicate the Principles of a Child Safe UCA in different languages as well as plain English
- The collaborative development and delivery of new child safe resources for the UCA
- Recruited a communications specialist to the NSCU to raise the profile and quality of safe church messages and information supporting the development of a safe church culture
- Launched a new NSCU website to enable ease of access to national safeguarding resources
- Launched an NSCU Facebook page to increase engagement with people across the life of the church and create an additional platform to promote safeguarding, child safe and safe church issues which support the development of a safe church culture across the UCA
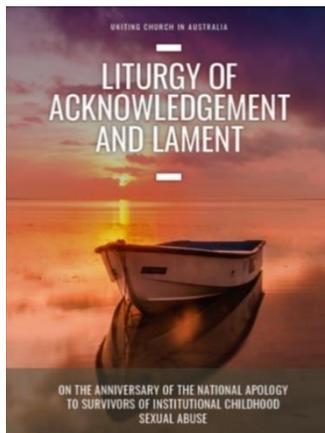

Fig. 2: Screenshot from the National Safe Church Unit website. Image description: three images from left to right, notification for UCA Child Safe Week, photo of the General Secretary Synod of South Australia speaking, photo of former UCA President Deidre Palmer kneeling and talking with a group of school children.

3. UCA Redress Limited

The Uniting Church in Australia continues to acknowledge that children and young people entrusted to the care of the Church did not always receive the care they deserved, this included separating some children and young people from their families and communities. We acknowledge the ongoing impact and trauma on individuals, families and communities of these actions. This is a part of our UCA story that we continue to acknowledge so that we never forget and never become complacent.

The Uniting Church marks the 22 October anniversary of the National Apology to survivors of institutional child sexual abuse annually. Each year the Church delivers a Liturgy for the anniversary and laments its role in causing harm to children and renews its commitment to be a safe place for all people.

The Uniting Church has publicly pledged to continue to implement the lessons of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, to grow our culture of safety and sustain our action to be a safe church for all people. We remain open to the insights of survivors and professionals, we regularly review our policies and practices in all parts of our Church, and we work to ensure that they reflect best practice for care, service and support of children.

UCA Redress Limited is a national body and a company limited by guarantee which was established by the UCA to facilitate the Church's participation in the National Redress Scheme. It supports Synods and institutions in providing direct personal response to survivors, contributes to awareness and understanding about redress, abuse and child safety, and informs policy and decision making through data and learnings.

As of 14 October 2021, UCA Redress Limited had received a total of 640 requests for information from the National Redress Scheme - 452 requests for information have been completed, of which 320 offers of redress were accepted and 117 resulted in a determination of non-liability.

Fig 3: UCA image informing of the anniversary of the national apology to survivors of institutional childhood sexual abuse. Image description: a small boat and sunset.

4. UCA Assessment of child safety risks

Given the diversity of the entities that make up the whole of the UCA, the level of engagement that children and young people have with the Church ranges from mandatory child protection through to informal or un-planned engagements. All our entities are expected to appropriately consider the engagements they have with children and young people, including spontaneous engagements, and to include child safety in their organisational risk registers.

The UCA recognises that effective governance is key to enabling the appropriate assessment and management of child safety risks. The NSCU has developed a growing suite of resources to support people in governance roles to ensure child safety is a standing agenda item at governance meetings and in the everyday activities of their organisation. This includes discussion tools to support governance bodies, such as Church Councils whose

membership is primarily volunteers, to assist them to consider the Principles of a Child Safe UCA in their particular settings and help them identify and explore child safety risks and address them.

Additionally, although many UCA entities, particularly schools, healthcare and community service providers, have formal compliance and reporting obligations which are mandatory requirements of the services they provide and/or the funding they receive from Commonwealth, State or Territory governments, many have developed sophisticated approaches to embed best practice risk assessment across their activities which go beyond compliance.

For example, UnitingCare Queensland's Child Safe Child Friendly Risk Management Framework guides practices across its services and supports in delivering and addressing its culture, people, risk environment and response. A dedicated steering committee was established to oversee implementation of the framework. Implementation has included the roll-out of Child Safe Child Friendly awareness training and signing a Code of Conduct for Interactions with Children by all members of the Uniting Queensland Board, Executive Leadership, staff and volunteers. The framework is reviewed annually, and recommended approvals require approval from the UnitingCare Queensland CEO before they can be made.

All our people, including all volunteers, are expected to understand and discharge their responsibility to help keep children and young people safe. This begins with supporting everyone to understand and identify child safety risks and address them. The UCA National Child Safe Training, launched mid-2021, is primarily directed towards people in the congregational life of the Church, particularly those involved in activities that directly engage with children and young people, and includes a specific focus on identifying and assessing child safety risk in different church and congregational settings. Although risk is specific to settings, activities and participants, there are general risks that all our people are asked to consider and address:

- Opportunities for unsupervised access to children, for example in areas of buildings that cannot be observed by others, in online spaces, or when transporting children
- Opportunities to develop relationships of trust with children and people close to them over time
- Instances and opportunities for interactions between children
- Factors which may increase a child's vulnerability, for example disability
- The power imbalance between children and adults
- Environments that create opportunities for grooming to occur

In addition to the UCA's National Child Safe Training, our people are supported to access professional development and training specific to their roles and functions. This is often delivered by a specialist external provider; training may include working with children who have experienced trauma, understanding, preventing and identifying vicarious trauma, leadership, and self-care. UCA community services agencies follow industry best practice with regard to professional supervision and all Ministry Agents are asked to engage in supervision. The UCA has also developed a Tools for Listening toolkit which includes a Plan for Safety resource that provides information about planning activities that will include children and young people. It outlines an assessment process that should be undertaken which provides examples of risks, a risk assessment matrix, consequence descriptors and action to take in response to identified risks.

In order to keep children and young people safe, the UCA recognises the need to ensure that the adults responsible for their safety pay particular attention to their own wellbeing. The NSCU is working with UCA Redress Limited to develop tools to help our people understand their risk of vicarious trauma and to put in place new resources to mitigate and manage that risk.

5. UCA Child safety measures

The UCA's National Child Safe Policy Framework continues to be the foundational document to guide action across the life of the Church to keep children safe. It was first developed in 2015 by the UCA's Royal Commission National Engagement and Response Task Group to guide action in response to the findings of the Royal Commission. Subsequent reviews of the framework (in 2017 and 2019) were undertaken to support implementation of the Commission's recommendations, the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and to ensure that it remains fit for purpose, aligns with current best practice and is appropriate to all our different UCA settings.

As part of the review timetable, the policy framework is currently under review through a consultation process with each Synod (geographically based council of the Church). The Assembly (national council of the Church) is responsible for approving updates and revisions of the policy framework as it is foundational to the UCA's approach to child safety. Once available, the NSCU will support Synods and entities across the UCA to implement the updated framework across their geographic responsibilities.

The NSCU is responsible for the development of national policy frameworks which guide Synods and entities across the UCA in developing policy locally to guide their practice and processes. Additionally, UCA schools and service agencies have child safe policies and practices which are specific to the services they deliver and the different legislative and compliance requirements applicable to them.

The suite of national policy frameworks that are available or currently under development includes:

- UCA Child Safe Policy Framework
- Collaboration Framework
- Person of Concern Policy Framework and Additional Measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Child Safe Screening: pre-appointment screening for staff and volunteers
- Child Focused Complaints Processes
- Grooming - Identifying and Interrupting Behaviours of Concern
- The Rights of Children and Vulnerable People
- Trauma Informed Engagement
- Record Keeping

As reported to the National Office for Child Safety in 2020, the Principles of a Child Safe UCA were created to support a nationally consistent approach to child safety across the UCA. The principles communicate the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations within the context of the Church and outline organisational expectations and specific actions required in UCA settings.

The UCA also uses the principles as a measurement framework for reports annually, both internally and externally, about its actions and outcomes to keep children and young people safe. An annual reporting template is sent to Synod General Secretaries and the Heads of UCA entities. It poses questions about each principle and requests examples of action and outcomes. Details of the reporting request and examples of responses are included in this report at Section 7 (p.12).

Over this reporting period the principles have been translated into plain English, Chinese, Korean, Indonesian, Spanish, Portuguese, Fijian, Tongan, Niuean and Samoan to ensure they can be easily communicated and

understood by people across the life of the Church. A series of presentations and online forums and conversations have been delivered to promote and explore the principles with different groups across the Church in order to deepen understanding about how the principles help us to keep children and young people safe and guide the individual and collective actions required of our people.

Fig. 4. Plain English poster of the Principles of a Child Safe UCA, incorporating artwork by Grace Williams. Image description: Ten small graphics to illustrate each of the principles which are described in text. The logos of the National Safe Church Unit and the Uniting Church in Australia are at the bottom of the image, with a website address and acknowledgement of the artist.

Principle 6 of the Principles of a Child Safe UCA calls for processes for complaints that are easy for children to understand and use. Examples of these processes are included in Section 6 (p.19). The Tools for Listening Toolkit includes a Tips for Listening resource which provides guidance to adults across the Church about how they can

create an environment where children feel safe to express what they want, how they feel and what is affecting them.

As outlined in Section 4 (p.7), the UCA National Child Safe Training provides nationally consistent online training which is primarily directed towards people in the congregational life of the Church, including volunteers. Module One of the training has been created to help every adult in the Church increase their awareness of child safety issues, understand their individual responsibility to keeping children safe, build their capability to take action and to speak up if they see, hear or feel something that raises a child safety concern.

Synods are rolling out this national training and are currently working to establish local processes for making it available to different cohorts. Nationally, we are undertaking a scoping project to improve access to the training, which is currently hosted in an online learning management system. Additional training modules and refresher training is currently under development, along with policy consideration about training obligations for people in specific roles, including volunteer roles.

Codes of Ethics and Codes of Conduct are in place across the UCA with variations dependent on specific entity, setting and role. The safety of children and young people is a common element across the codes, including the requirement for people across the life of their Church to understand their own responsibility for keeping children and young people safe and recognising and responding to child safety risks.

The introduction of "failure to report and failure to protect" legislation in some jurisdictions calls for adults to take action regardless of the setting and their role if they have concerns about child safety. The expectation across the UCA is that every adult is responsible for ensuring children and young people are safe and their wellbeing is supported. The NSCU has begun work to develop appropriate resources to support all adults to meet this expectation, and these resources will sit alongside the specific guidance developed by Synods for people in specific roles who are subject to state/territory legislation.

6. Safeguarding Assurance

Over this reporting period, the UCA has matured its approach to keeping children and young people safe, moving beyond child safety to adopt a safeguarding framework and assurance approach across the congregational life of the Church (which is aligned to the approach taken by our schools and agencies). We are beginning to make systemic and cultural changes to ensure that all areas of the Church are proactive in supporting the wellbeing of children and young people in addition to keeping them safe.

The National Safe Church Unit has recently completed a consultation process with Synods to identify how we can measure and report safeguarding to provide assurance. The safeguarding model below is part of UCA's National Safeguarding Assurance Framework.

A safeguarding reporting pilot will be undertaken in November 2021, with Synods asked to capture data to evidence the quality measures identified in the model below (Fig.5).

The pilot will provide baseline data about current safeguarding activities across the Church and will be used to inform future action and national quarterly reporting. Quarterly data capture will then inform our work going forward.

The safeguarding assurance project is envisioned to be a 3–5-year workplan. The Church does not currently have national reporting systems in place, and we are working towards a nationally consistent reporting system.

Effective Governance

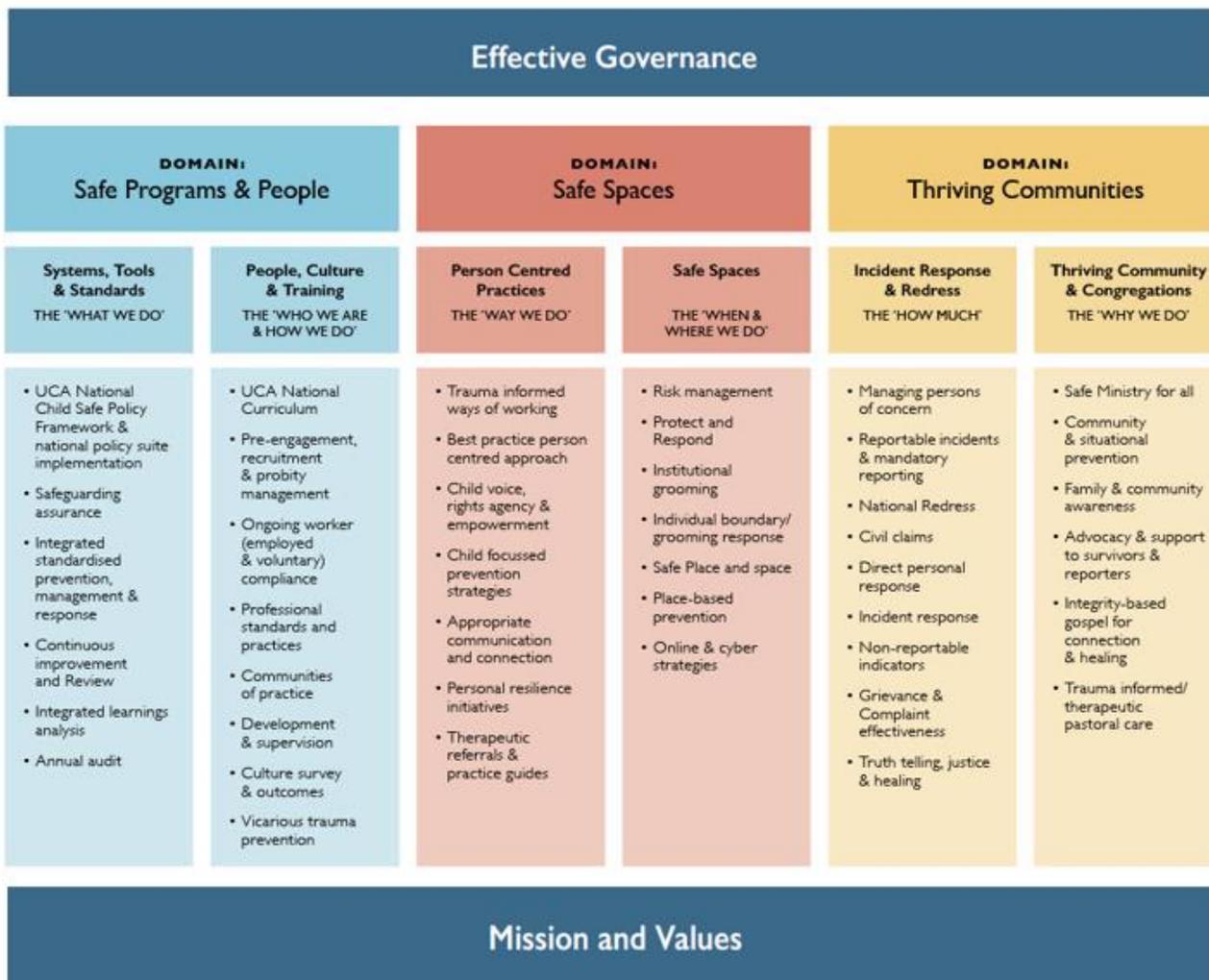| DOMAIN: Safe Programs & People		DOMAIN: Safe Spaces		DOMAIN: Thriving Communities	
Systems, Tools & Standards THE 'WHAT WE DO'	People, Culture & Training THE 'WHO WE ARE & HOW WE DO'	Person Centred Practices THE 'WAY WE DO'	Safe Spaces THE 'WHEN & WHERE WE DO'	Incident Response & Redress THE 'HOW MUCH'	Thriving Community & Congregations THE 'WHY WE DO'
• UCA National Child Safe Policy Framework & national policy suite implementation • Safeguarding assurance • Integrated standardised prevention, management & response • Continuous improvement and Review • Integrated learnings analysis • Annual audit	• UCA National Curriculum • Pre-engagement, recruitment & probity management • Ongoing worker (employed & voluntary) compliance • Professional standards and practices • Communities of practice • Development & supervision • Culture survey & outcomes • Vicarious trauma prevention	• Trauma informed ways of working • Best practice person centred approach • Child voice, rights agency & empowerment • Child focussed prevention strategies • Appropriate communication and connection • Personal resilience initiatives • Therapeutic referrals & practice guides	• Risk management • Protect and Respond • Institutional grooming • Individual boundary/ grooming response • Safe Place and space • Place-based prevention • Online & cyber strategies	• Managing persons of concern • Reportable incidents & mandatory reporting • National Redress • Civil claims • Direct personal response • Incident response • Non-reportable indicators • Grievance & Complaint effectiveness • Truth telling, justice & healing	• Safe Ministry for all • Community & situational prevention • Family & community awareness • Advocacy & support to survivors & reporters • Integrity-based gospel for connection & healing • Trauma informed/ therapeutic pastoral care

Mission and Values

Fig. 5 UCA National Safeguarding Model, part of the UCA National Safeguarding Framework. Image description: an information table of safeguarding elements organised into three colour coded domains.

7. Reporting against the Principles of a Child Safe UCA

The ten Principles of a Child Safe UCA continue to be foundational to our work to safeguard children and young people and to identify the progress and outcomes we have achieved in our continued work to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

Each of the principles is set out below, including the UCA's commitment to uphold each principle and the actions it is and will continue to take in order to live that commitment.

Under each principle are some short examples of the actions taken by different UCA entities to deliver against the principle. These are a small representation of the work and progress across the life of the Church.

Principle 1: Child safety and wellbeing is embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture

The Uniting Church commits wholeheartedly and publicly to being a child safe organisation. This commitment will influence our decision-making and guide our practice. Children's voices will be listened to, and every adult who is working with children will be supported to act in the interests of children.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

1.1 In policy, practice and making decisions which affect the safety of children, the Uniting Church in Australia will ensure child safety is its paramount consideration.
1.2 Our leaders and our people will publicly commit to child safety, will model and champion child safe policies and practices and will make decisions that will support a child safe culture across our Church.
1.3 Our governance arrangements will facilitate the implementation of child safe policies and practices   and will set clear accountabilities.
1.4 We will document the standards of behavior we expect from leaders, staff and volunteers and ensure our people accept individual and shared responsibility for the safety of children in contact   with the Church.
1.5 We will work to understand our risk areas and develop strategies which aim to prevent and mitigate risks to children and young people.
1.6 We will support our people to understand their obligations for information sharing and record keeping.

Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

This Synod has numerous governance bodies which have responsibility for the different entities within the Synod. Each governance member is required to understand the UCA National Child Safe Policy Framework, Code of Conduct and the Principles of a Child Safe UCA; specifically, how they apply to themselves as individuals, and how they apply to the entities/people for whom they have governance responsibility for.

Not all UCA congregations have children among their members or regularly participating in activities. These congregations are still supported to consider child safety and wellbeing because children are likely part of their broader community and the lives of congregational members. The rural presbytery of Western Victoria is working with congregations without children to identify the broader benefits of being a safe church for children which is leading to consideration about how congregations support and engage with all vulnerable people within and outside their congregation.

UnitingSA

UnitingSA provides housing, aged care and community services to support people across regional and metropolitan South Australia. The CEO and nominated staff are *Office of the Guardian for Children and Young*

People Champions who advocate for the rights of children and young people across the organisation and provide support and advice to staff and volunteers.

Child safety and wellbeing is deeply embedded in organisational leadership. The UnitingSA Board is responsible for approving any policies related to child safety and protection. Board Directors lead by example and are required to maintain a positive child screening/working with children check.

Principle 2: Children and young people are informed about their rights, participate in decisions affecting them and are taken seriously.

The Uniting Church acknowledges children's rights and wants to ensure children know that they have a right to be and feel safe, and what to do about it if they don't. We know this means providing information to children and young people and their families in a way that is easily understood and accessible, taking into account their age, culture and the context of our contact with them.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

2.1 All Uniting Church entities will work to inform children, young people and their families with information about their rights, including to safety, information and participation.

2.2 In our interactions with and decision-making impacting on children and young people, we will recognise the importance of friendships and encourage support from peers in helping children feel safe and connected.

2.3 Where relevant to the setting or context, we will consider the need to ensure children have access to sexual abuse prevention information that is appropriate to the age and context.

2.4 We will ensure our staff and volunteers are familiar with the signs of abuse and grooming and are skilled to facilitate child friendly ways for children to express their views and raise concerns.

Uniting Vic.Tas

Uniting Vic.Tas is a community services organisation of the UCA which delivers services and programs across Victoria and Tasmania. It has developed a suite of child friendly resources to inform children and young people of their rights and to help them engage in decision making.

These resources include age-appropriate posters which are displayed in prominent places in Uniting Vic.Tas spaces and provide information about how to make a complaint, the rights of children and young people, types of abuse, and the specific rights of people in out-of-home care.

Fig 6: Uniting Vic.Tas poster communicating the right of young people to feel safe. Image description: photo of a young person above text about the rights of young people

Uniting Communities

Uniting Communities provides community services, advocacy and community building activities for people in South Australia. In 2021, Uniting Communities renewed its membership of the Charter of Rights for Children and Young People in Care and as such each of its services accessed by children and young people is required to have a Charter Champion.

A consultation was undertaken with young people to identify the best way to promote Charter Champions across the organisation and to ensure they are accessible for all children and young people. This consultation identified a preference for social media and an Instagram site was created. A group of young people came together to produce artwork for the site.

As part of a young person's induction to a Uniting Communities service, they are given information and access to the site which provides photos and contact details for all Charter Champions across Uniting Communities.

Figure 7: Uniting Communities Charter Champions on Instagram. Image description: screenshot of Instagram post with photos of six Uniting Communities champions.

Principle 3: Families and communities are informed and involved in promoting child safety and wellbeing

The Uniting Church acknowledges that families have the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children and that strong family, community and cultural connections create protective factors which can impact on a child's vulnerability to abuse. We will include families in our ways of working and make space for all people to voice concerns in relation to the safety of children.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

3.1 We will support the participation of families in decisions that affect their children and recognise the need to facilitate culturally safe spaces and ways of working.

3.2 We will communicate openly with children and families about our child safe approach and make sure that information about it is accessible and available.

3.3 We will seek input and feedback from children, families and communities as we develop and review our child safety policies and practices.

3.4 We will keep families and communities informed about our child safety approach, operations and governance.

UnitingCare Wesley Bowden, SA

UnitingCare Wesley Bowden (UCWB) provides community services and supports, including specialised support for young carers, and NDIS services to people in the Bowden area. UCWB also operates two social enterprises – Psychology SA and Torrensville Community Childcare Centre.

In early 2021, UCWB undertook a survey of all families with children currently enrolled in Torrensville Community Childcare Centre to gauge their experience with the Centre. The response rate was high, and feedback covered centre staffing, educational program, communication, facilities, and amenities. This feedback has informed improvements and changes at the centre and families continued to be informed about that work.

UCWB is also partnering with Flinders University to conduct an evaluation of its Child and Family Support Services. Evaluation was undertaken of a psychoeducational and prevention workshop which is delivered by UCWB. Surveys were completed with 47 Family Support clients, 45 Family Mental Health Support Services children and young people, and 37 parents. The data will inform continuous improvement for these child and family programs.

Also, in partnership with Flinders University, UCWB is delivering a Nurse Practitioner Clinic providing outreach to children and young people to address and promote health, safety and wellbeing.

UCWB is working with the Lived Experience Leadership and Advocacy Network (LELAN) to codesign a consumer engagement strategy, to be implemented across all areas of the organisation and inform the review and development of child safe policies, procedures and practice.

Synod of NSW and ACT

The Synod of NSW and ACT has created a quarterly compliance calendar which outlines all the compliance actions required each quarter. It is sent to all Synod entities who are encouraged to share it widely. Each quarter a different UCA Child Safe Principle is included, with detailed information about how the principle can be applied in different local settings, and the resources and support that is available to help make this happen.

Uniting (NSWACT)

Uniting (NSWACT) provides services in aged care, disability, community, early learning, education and training throughout NSW and the ACT. In April-May 2021, Uniting undertook the Child Safe Organisation (CSO) self-assessment across its 44 early learning centres. The assessment solicited feedback from families and communities about their engagement and involvement.

Examples of direct feedback include:

"The complaints policy is handed out in the enrolment pack and a family/parent feedback box has also been made available in the foyer."

"Families have opportunities to provide feedback about our programs. Family surveys on various topics (produced by Uniting) - Orientation, Management of Service, Overall experience at the service etc. Surveys/questionnaires produced by service i.e., Philosophy review, Menu review. Parent, teacher information exchanges (minimum of 2 per year). Informal daily conversation with families at drop off and pick-up. Complaints Procedure provided in the Parent Handbook."

"Our Parent Handbook provides information on how families can give us feedback, make suggestions or raise grievances and complaints. It refers families to the relevant policy. Information on the notice board at the sign-in area informs people of the area manager and the process for making a complaint. A suggestion box and forms are available at the sign-in table. Regular email communication takes place between the service and families. The Policy Folder is available on the bookcase in the community library. We have formal and informal conversations with families. Surveys are used to allow families to provide feedback to the service. Newsletters are distributed at least twice a term with relevant information."

Principle 4 Diversity is respected and equity is promoted

The Uniting Church wants to be a child safe organisation, but also a child friendly organisation, where we embrace and value diversity and provide safety for all people to realise their full potential, noting this is different for everyone. We commit to equitable treatment of all people regardless of age, abilities, gender or social, economic or cultural background.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

4.1 The Uniting Church will promote inclusion of all children, considering the diversity of their circumstances.

4.2 We will ensure that children and young people have access to information, supports and complaints processes that are accessible, easy to understand and appropriate to age and culture of the child.

4.3 We will pay attention to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and children from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, children with a disability, children who have experienced trauma and other vulnerable children.

National

The UCA has a long history of advocating for equity and celebrating diversity across the life of the Church.

Our covenant relationship with First Peoples is at the heart of our Church. It is a commitment to stand with our First Nations brothers and sisters in Christ in their struggle for justice. The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) was established through a series of meetings in the 1980s and continues to bring together Aboriginal and Islander members of the UCA and other denominations to fulfill their calling as Christians among their own people, especially in the area of holistic community development. The UAICC Interim National Chairperson has worked closely with the NSCU to ensure child safety messages and information are accessible to First Nations People.

Figure 8: Images from The Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Image description: three photos from left to right, four people standing and participating in Holy Communion, a line of people standing with their arms raised in worship, two people standing to deliver a presentation.

Entities across the UCA are at different stages of their Covenant and reconciliation journey, supported by reconciliation action plans and local community.

UCA entities strive to be welcoming spaces for everyone and have developed diversity and inclusion plans specific to their settings.

UnitingCare Queensland

UnitingCare Queensland's (UCQ) Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) publicly promotes the rights and dignity of our First Nation Peoples in recognition of the injustice they have faced.

UCQ's LGBTIQ+ Ally program helps staff to support each other to be safe and comfortable in the workplace. It is standard practice that we have dedicated roles to promote diversity and inclusion in all of our services.

Currently a Coolamon Group (a UCQ internal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative group) meets on a regular basis to strengthen our cultural capability across the organisation. Achievements to date include:

- Implementation of a mentoring program for Indigenous staff to support their career development opportunities
- Development of Cultural Awareness Training, compulsory for all staff and volunteers across the organisation
- Hosting an annual Groundwater Gathering to bring together Indigenous leaders and community representatives to discuss and progress inclusion and diversity across services.

Building on the annual Groundwater Gathering, in 2021 UCQ's Family and Disability Services held the inaugural Diversity and Inclusion Symposium to strengthen awareness of and promote UCQ's diverse services and work with CALD communities, and to raise the profile of UCQ's multicultural staff and their approach to practice across diverse communities. Given the success of the event, a Diversity and Inclusion Symposium will occur annually.

Queensland Synod

The Queensland Synod recognises the challenges that people living in rural and remote areas often face in engaging with safe church and child safe training. Although this training is available online, a reliable online connection is not possible for everyone and learning in person as a community is the preferred approach for some.

The Synod Safe Church Assurance Officer travelled to Innisfail in May 2021 to deliver in-person safe church training to Ministry Agents and chaplains from across Far North Queensland and the Cape area. In bringing this group together, peer-to-peer learning was supported through sharing knowledge and experience.

Principle 5: Our people are suitable for work with children and committed to the values of child safety and wellbeing

Recruitment and screening of all people who work with children is a vital part of keeping children safe. We will be intentional with our people, exploring values, understanding motivations for working with children and ensuring ongoing training and supervision to maintain awareness and vigilance amongst our communities.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

5.1 We will ensure that recruitment, referee checking and screening processes for all our people include   an emphasis on child safety and wellbeing.

5.2 All persons who need a working with children check will have a current check, including national police checks and international criminal history checks where required.

5.3 Those working with children will receive an induction which emphasises child safe culture and sets   out behavioural expectations in working with children, along with record keeping, information   sharing and reporting obligations.

5.4 Ongoing staff support, supervision and people management will include a focus on child safety and wellbeing.

National

The UCA has a national policy framework for [Child Safe Screening: pre-appointment screening for staff and volunteers](). It provides policy direction to Synods about the pre-appointment screening processes that must be undertaken to ensure staff and volunteers are suitable to work with children and are committed to the values of child safety and wellbeing. It is explicit within the policy framework that it does not replace Commonwealth, State or Territory legislation and that the UCA expects Synods to undertake appropriate screening checks, including working with children checks, for all individuals seeking to work or volunteer in roles that engage with children and young people.

Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania operates a number of opportunity shops (op shops) in regional towns because of the generosity of volunteers. The Synod requires that all volunteers are screened, before they begin in their roles.

A UCA op shop in a small rural Victorian town had several potential new volunteers who had been invited by a friend already volunteering at the shop. Each was asked to undertake a working with children check, which identified that one potential volunteer was ineligible because they held a criminal conviction. The individual was informed that if they wished to volunteer with the op shop, they would need to follow the [UCA's Person of Concern Policy]() – which restricts how an individual can engage in UCA activities and spaces, requires them to sign a safety agreement and to be monitored by another UCA person to evidence they are abiding with the

agreement. The individual chose not to volunteer at the op shop and this upset some people who liked the person. In this instance, following the policy and process to ensure that people are suitable for work with children was challenging for the small UCA community, however it was the right thing to do because children and young people visit the op shop and the UCA, in all its spaces, has an obligation to take action to identify, assess and appropriately mitigate risks to the health and wellbeing of everyone.

The experience of this community evidences the outcomes that are being achieved through the implementation of the UCA's national policy frameworks, which have been created to support the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. In this instance, following the guidance provided in the [National Policy Framework – Child Safe Screening: pre-appointment screening for staff and volunteers](#) identified a potential risk, assessment of the risk led to action to follow the UCA's Person of Concern Policy and the outcome was that a person of concern was not appointed as a volunteer.

Uniting (NSWACT)

Uniting's recruitment system does not allow a person to be engaged as a staff member or volunteer without valid referee checks, interview screening and probity checks. Uniting uses a background checks compliance matrix to determine probity requirements across all roles and an automated system for working with children checks, national criminal history checks and renewals, with reminders sent to staff and their supervisor.

Principle 6: Child focused complaints processes

We acknowledge that to be effective, processes to raise concerns and complaints about the safety of children need to be known, simple and taken seriously. Uniting Church processes will prioritise the safety and wellbeing of children in the way we manage and respond to complaints and concerns.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

6.1 Each Uniting Church entity will have an accessible, child focused complaint handling policy which clearly outlines the roles and responsibility of leadership, staff and volunteers, approaches to dealing with different types of complaints, breaches of relevant policies (including codes of conduct) and obligations to protect and report.

6.2 Our complaint handling processes will be culturally appropriate, clear and easily understood by children and young people, and all our people.

6.3 Complaints will be taken seriously and responded to promptly and thoroughly. Where a complaint of abuse of a child becomes known it will be immediately reported to the authorities, including police and other statutory authorities, and we will immediately take the appropriate steps to assess and minimise any further risk or harm.

6.4 The Uniting Church mandates any person who is aware of, or suspects child abuse or harm to make a report to the authorities, including police and other statutory authorities, and we will support relevant authorities' investigations into any concerns about children and/or allegations of abuse or harm towards children. While investigations are being conducted, we will ensure child protection measures continue to be in place. In consultation with police and other authorities, and subject to their approval, we will conduct our own inquiries in order to identify opportunities for child safe practice improvements.

6.5 We will meet reporting, privacy and employment law obligations.

Uniting WA

Uniting WA provides a range of community services, including family group homes and foster care services, across the state. Children accessing the services receive a welcome box. This includes a Child's Manual which informs them of their rights and how to connect with Child Advocates who can help them make a complaint or provide feedback about any aspect of the service they are accessing, and a brochure which outlines the steps to raising a concern or making a complaint.

Family group homes, and other Uniting WA services, are expected to display posters about the complaints process and children's rights. The group homes hold weekly house meetings where young people are supported and encouraged to voice their complaints and raise issues that are important to them. Each house also has a complaints and suggestion box so that complaints and feedback can be made confidentially.

Children accessing services are provided with the opportunity to join and participate in Create WA (which is part of a national consumer body representing the voices of children and young people with an out-of-home care experience) and to attend Create WA events which help them to build relationships with peers, to find and use their own voice and advocate for themselves.

Principle 7: Our people are provided with ongoing education and training on child safety

The Uniting Church commits to keeping child safety high on our agenda and will provide initial and ongoing education and training on child safety to those who work with children. We know that this is critical to ongoing maintenance of a child safe church and to our people maintaining contemporary knowledge which supports them to make good decisions, to maintain vigilance in recognising the signs of abuse and to support children who have concerns.

We commit to the following principles and actions:
7.1 Our people will be trained and supported to effectively implement our child safety and wellbeing policies.
7.2 Our people will be given information to recognise indicators of child harm.
7.3 Our people will have information on how to respond effectively to disclosures or concerns of abuse by a child or another person.
7.4 Our people will be given information about how to build safe environments for children and young people, including environments which are safe for people of different cultures.

National

The NSCU has facilitated the creation of a number of advisory groups drawn from across the life of the Church to collaborate and inform the development of resources to help keep children and young people safe. During this reporting period, new Communities of Practice have grown from these advisory groups, comprising of people who are involved in on-the-ground delivery of services and actions focused on child safety.

The first Community of Practice is focused on managing persons of concern (people who hold criminal convictions for offences against children or whose behaviour is identified as being of concern regarding the

safety of children and young people) in their limited and monitored participation in the UCA to ensure they do not pose a risk to children and young people.

Synod of Western Australia

During this reporting period, the Synod of Western Australia has delivered a range of safe church training, including five child safe awareness workshops and one child safe refresher workshop. Participants came from 17 different UCA congregations in WA and from three other denominations. The 219 participants included ministers, retired ministers, lay leaders, chaplains, children's ministry leaders and volunteers, members of church councils and congregations.

Methodist Ladies College, WA

The Methodist Ladies College in Claremont is a girls' boarding and day school. Induction training for new staff and annual training for all staff includes mandatory reporting and child protection in line with WA legislative requirements and UCA principles.

Fig 9: Methodist Ladies College. Image description: Three students in school uniform, backs to the camera, running across grass in front of a school building.

Principle 8: Physical and online environments promote safety

The Uniting Church acknowledges that physical environments and online behavior can impact on the safety of children. We will be intentional in our assessment of risks and take steps to mitigate risk as much as possible by considering physical environments, evaluating high risk activities and making online behavioural expectations of our people very clear.

We commit to the following principles and actions:
8.1 Our people will identify and mitigate risks in our online and physical environments while facilitating a child's right to privacy, access to information, social connections and learning opportunities.
8.2 Our people will understand their obligations in using our online environments.
8.3 Where activities involve children, we will assess risk of the type of activity, the physical environment and the organisational setting.
8.4 If outside parties are engaged to provide services to us (including temporary/agency staff, procurement), we will consider the child safety requirements in engaging outside parties.

Congregations in Victoria

Like other organisations, the UCA and its entities have had to adapt to the continuing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Activities which normally take place in person with groups of people gathering, were not an option for many of our congregations across Victoria for much of the reporting period.

The Banyule Network of Uniting Churches uses 'messy church' to bring children and young people together to share in activities, storytelling, prayer and song. In response to the Melbourne lockdown, the network started

Messy Miners, a children's program using Minecraft to bring Bible stories to life. Play happens on a closed server by invitation only. Prior to joining, a child's parents receive an email indicating how the program works, setting out behavioural standards for anyone 'present' and noting that a parent needs to 'accompany' and provide supervision of their child. Parents are required to respond indicating they understand how the program works and that they agree to the expectations for participation. It is only then that they are sent the invitation with access information for participation.

The Messy Miners build Bible stories together using Minecraft. These are sometimes recorded to be shared more widely. If the story/game is being recorded, children participating in the activity use pseudonyms for their Minecraft character on screen, so they are not identifiable. If there is any recording in the Zoom environment, participants can either turn their cameras off, or permission is sought from their parent to keep their camera on.

Principle 9: Policies and procedures document child safety

The Uniting Church acknowledges that it is not enough to have in-principle commitment to child safety but that these commitments must be documented in policy and procedure so that there is clarity, accountability and shared understanding.

We commit to the following principles and actions:
9.1 Our policies and procedures will address all the Principles of a Child Safe UCA.
9.2 Our policies and procedures will be documented and easy to understand.
9.3 Development of policies and procedures will include stakeholder consultations.
9.4 Church leaders will champion and model compliance with policies and procedures.
9.5 Our people will be supported to understand and implement, and consistently apply policies and procedures.

National

The National Safe Church Unit has continued to develop a suite of national policy frameworks in collaboration with each of the Synods and stakeholders across the life of the Church. These resources are focused on child safety and are further growing a nationally consistent approach across the UCA.

Uniting Vic.Tas

Uniting Vic.Tas systems, including child safety systems, are monitored every month using the Management Systems Checklist. This tool helps to ensure child safety systems are robust and compliant with best practice standards; system users are set up to succeed with tools; adherence to best practice can be demonstrated; and reporting is evidenced up to Executive Leadership Team and down to teams.

Wesley Mission Queensland (WMQ)

The WMQ Guidelines for Child Safe Services is the key document for promoting child safety across WMQ. WMQ recognises the vulnerability of all customers who access their services, and all policies and procedures reflect this. WMQ is currently working on a new policy and procedure for protecting and safeguarding all its customers.

Principle 10 – Review and continuous improvement of policy, procedure and practice

The Uniting Church is committed to continuous improvement and will be intentional in its review of policy, procedure and practice. We will examine incidents and reports to identify systemic issues and take lessons from what we learn.

We commit to the following principles and actions:

10.0   We will monitor the implementation of our child safe policies and procedures and conduct regular reviews of our child safe practices.

10.1   We will critically review all incidents and reports to identify causes and trends, manage risks, identify systemic issues and improve our child safe policies and practices.

10.2   We will communicate with our people and communities on the findings of relevant reviews.

National

Each policy framework within the national suite includes regular (annual or biennial) review dates. Each review is taken in consultation with Synod Safe Church leads and other stakeholders. It includes consideration of how the policy has been implemented; the outcomes it has supported; new or emerging best practice and evidence since the previous review; need or changing need for the policy to support the delivery of agreed outcomes; and changes in any UCA settings since the previous review.

Congregations in Queensland

The Queensland Synod's Safe Ministry with Children annual audit survey captures information about implementation of the Safe Ministry with Children policies and procedures. This enables measurement of compliance against legislative requirements and alignment with the Principles of a Child Safe UCA. The audit is also used to inform continuous improvement. In this reporting period, actions flowing from the 2020 audit have seen the introduction of a requirement for all lay workers and volunteers to complete Safe Ministry with Children training (previously this was only a requirement for people in child-related roles), and for all lay workers and volunteers to undertake an annual wellbeing check, including signing or renewing, a Statement of Personal Commitment which includes child safety.

The audit also identified a need for new IT resources to help congregations and presbyteries improve their record keeping. The Synod negotiated for congregations and presbyteries to access an information and reporting system used by other Uniting agencies. This is helping to lift the quality of reporting across the Synod.

Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Each congregation within this Synod provides an annual safe church progress report, including details about how children participate and engage in their activities. The report includes specific questions to identify congregations' understanding of reportable conduct and reporting requirements, and local implementation of UCA child safe policies.

The Synod's Congregation Life Return Survey, that congregations are requested to complete annually, includes a number of questions about their engagement with child safe practices.

Penrhos College, WA

Penrhos College is a girls' school in Perth, WA. The principal engaged an independent consultant, Suzanne Murray of Fairchild Safeguarding (UK), to undertake a 360 review of how the college has addressed child safety and wellbeing. The review included engagement with students, staff and parents and a forensic review of all policies, procedures and practices in the area of child protection and safeguarding. The report and its recommendations have enabled the college to celebrate its safeguarding strengths and to develop a roadmap for continuous development.

Fig.10 Penrhos College. Image description: Students seated in a classroom, backs to the camera, one with their arm raised, teacher standing.

Synod of South Australia

The Synod's Safe Church Committee regularly reviews policies and procedures which document child safety to ensure that they are current with legislative requirements and appropriate to local needs. This review includes an annual Safe Church Audit.

The 2021 Safe Church Audit included specific questions about:

- Child safe screening and checks for all appointed leaders
- Participation in relevant child safety training and other training relevant to the responsibilities of people in appointed roles
- Local implementation of child safe policies and processes, including how information about the policies and processes is communicated to congregations
- Responses to actions taken, such as how local practices have been reviewed or revised.

The Synod uses the information collated in the audit to inform continuous improvement and shares de-identified findings with the UCA's national safe church stakeholder groups.

8. Future action

The UCA remains strong in its sustained commitment to keeping children and young people safe and recognises that to continue to deliver on this commitment, it is critical to review the structures it has put in place to lead this work.

The UCA, in establishing its National Safe Church Unit, agreed that a review of the NSCU against its original scope and functions would be undertaken in its third year of operation. This review is currently underway, and the findings and recommendations will be presented to the Church in March 2022. This will inform decisions about future priorities, operations, and scope of the NSCU.

The Safeguarding Assurance Project (section 6, p.10) will, for the first time, provide national data about safeguarding activities across the life of the Church. The data will inform future work of the NSCU and work across the life of the Church, including the continuous improvement of policy, practice, governance, systems and culture.

The NSCU will continue to lead work to expand the UCA National Child Safe Training, including the creation of additional training modules and the development of delivery, including face-to-face training and peer-to-peer learning. The NSCU will also continue to develop national policy frameworks in collaboration with the Synods and their agencies.

Communities of Practice will continue to be formed to support the development of practical tools to help people across the life of the Church to help children and young people flourish and thrive.

The UCA proposes to undertake a national consultation with children and young people in 2022 to deepen its understanding of their safety and wellbeing needs.

Fig 11: Screenshot from the Uniting Church Assembly website. Image description: A photograph of a young person signing their name on a t-shirt worn by another young person.