



UnitingCare NSW.ACT Disability Policy

1. Introduction

The NSW Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia is committed to policies which empower people with disabilities to enter fully into the life of the nation. These include policies which ensure that the voice of people with disabilities is heard, and that they receive the support and financial resources they need to fully participate in society, share its benefits and obligations, and live as independently as possible in the community.

This will often require additional support and resources to ensure that the conditions of everyday life of persons with disabilities are the same as, or as close as possible to, norms and patterns which are valued in the general community (see the attached *Principles and Application of Principles of the Disability Services Act., 1993*).

This policy will focus on three key activities; **services, advocacy, and inclusion of people with disabilities**. The Uniting Church recognises that inclusion not only refers to including people with disabilities in the life of the church, but also to demanding that society stop unnecessarily, unfairly and now unlawfully excluding people who have disabilities. Accordingly the Church will lobby for improved disability services and increased funding, promote an inclusiveness policy throughout the Church, and assist parishes and Uniting Church agencies to provide services for people with disabilities and their carers.

2. Background

In 1995 the NSW Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia endorsed the *Include Me In* policy. This policy includes people with disabilities in all aspects of the life of the Uniting Church. It was developed and introduced to the Synod by the Church's Board of Education Committee on Ministry with People with Disabilities. The Committee on Ministry with People with Disabilities has sought ways of generating an awareness of disability issues throughout the Uniting Church especially in local parishes.

As well, the Uniting Church is a major provider of community services, including disability services. Currently these disability services are provided through Uniting Church agencies including the Board of Social Responsibility (BSR), the Uniting Ministry with the Ageing (UMA), and local parishes. UMA's Aged Care Network has developed some excellent models which serve the needs of people with disabilities and ageing carers.

UMA has also sponsored two research projects carried out by the Balmain Uniting Research Unit of Balmain Mission. This research was funded by the Bequests

Committee of UMA, and resulted in two reports *Living in Different Realities : the Housing and Care Needs of Ageing People with Psychiatric Disabilities* and *The Price of Independence : the Housing and Care Needs of Ageing People with Developmental Disabilities and Aged Carers*.

The UMA accepted the recommendations of the reports and appointed a Disability Officer, initially for one year, to assist the Aged Care Network to integrate people with disabilities and aged carers into their programs.

In July 1991, the Board of Education engaged a part-time consultant to work with the Committee on Ministry with People with Disabilities. As part of this activity, and as a contributing factor leading to the 1995 Synod endorsing the Include Me In Policy relating to people with disabilities, the consultant completed a Doctor of Ministry degree titled *Hospitality as Sign and Sacrament for Persons with Disabilities*.

In June 1997 the Executive Director of the UMA convened the first meeting of the Disability Services Committee which was charged with acting as an expert resource to the UMA and BSR on issues of concern to people with disabilities and their carers.

The NSW Board of Social Responsibility will continue to publicly highlight the severe shortage of disability funding, especially for supported accommodation, and to demand that governments increase funding as a matter of urgency.

3. The Faith Context

All limitations to traditional concepts of 'normal' life pose a fundamental challenge for the Church whose message concerns the journey of faith which leads to spiritual growth and transformation. The Church's understanding is that the human journey is part of an eternal process which is not ultimately thwarted by suffering and disability. Elizabeth Hastings, the Disability Discrimination Commissioner from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, said in her speech to the 1995 NSW Synod "I believe in miracles. Mine are miracles not of the body but of the heart and spirit; the conversion of despair to hope, of bitterness to joy; and perhaps most wonderful of all, of isolation to belonging. It is these miracles which will be assisted by this policy (of inclusion) for Uniting Church ministry".

Indeed, Jesus' incarnation is a statement of divine solidarity with the hopes and joys, and the sufferings and disabilities of all humankind. His assertion "I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly" is a recognition of the innermost yearning of individuals to achieve their full potential and his proclamation that "the kingdom of God is within you" demands our recognition that without the unique contribution of every person irrespective of their disability, gender or race, the ultimate purposes of God in the world will not be realised. The special contributions and perspectives of people with disabilities are central to God's work in the world.

Our vision of God's purposes means Christians can never accept the unequal power relationships in the world, the existence of poverty amidst affluence, the prejudice which isolates people as different, and the lack of political will which could provide people with disabilities with the support and resources to experience the same range of life opportunities as others do. Therefore, the Uniting Church stands in solidarity with people with disabilities to achieve their fundamental right to access and equity to all the resources of the society. The Uniting Church is

committed to welcoming and including people with disabilities in all aspects of its church and worship, and will advocate politically for the funding base which achieves the support they need to achieve their goals.

4. The Social Context

It is estimated that at least a quarter of the Australian population has some form of disability. People with disabilities have experienced disadvantage in, and have been marginalised by Australian society. This disadvantage manifests itself in poor employment prospects, reduced access to suitable housing, and entrenched poverty. The marginalisation occurs when people with disabilities are judged by others primarily in terms of their impairments. In addition to marginalisation from society, people with disabilities have also experienced disempowerment, lack of choice, and abuse within the services that were established to look after their needs. Since 1986 legislation exists that clearly articulates that the rights and expectations of people with disabilities are the same as other members of Australian society. This legislation has been the basis of people with disabilities leaving institutions and moving into the community. Unfortunately, the funding from these institutions has never followed people as they tried to settle in the community. Also, inadequate funding and cutbacks in government funding of the welfare sector has led to enormous unmet need for services amongst people with disabilities, which also impacts upon the carers of people with disabilities. The *Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, applies equally to all church organisations and addresses some levels of societal discrimination against people with disabilities. The greatest challenges for people with disabilities are:

- the quest for true not token "inclusion" and acceptance by society at all levels;
- the huge unmet need for services that people with disability require if they are to experience the same conditions of living as other Australians.

5. Relating to People

5.1. Focus on Individuals

There is a basic need for people with disabilities to be perceived as people first, and their disabilities as secondary. The Church recognises that services which meet the genuine needs of people with disabilities will be many and varied, if individuals are to lead fulfilling and satisfying lives. In light of the recent abysmal history of institutional care, services to people with disabilities will be provided within the community, wherever this is possible and practicable.

In general, support should be provided to people with disabilities within ordinary community housing, and modifications made to such housing if necessary. Where alternatives in housing are to be considered, the residential facility should incorporate design features which provide a homely atmosphere.

If people with disabilities within services are to be treated as individuals, then they are in need of personal relationships and they should be able to pursue relationships without unnecessary restrictions or moral censure from staff. The maintenance and development of consumers' family networks and other personal relationships outside of the service will become a priority for any service that supports people with disabilities.

People with disabilities should be part of the planning and implementation of services to ensure they accurately reflect their wishes. Parishes, presbyteries, boards and agencies will strive to involve people with disabilities in plans for developing new or modifying existing services, and on an ongoing basis.

5.2. "Care for the Disadvantaged"

People with disabilities still experience disadvantage in our society, especially in the following areas: inadequate income, lack of housing, discrimination at work, political marginalisation, dependence upon government resources for basic services, stigma that affects personal relationships. Any services that the Uniting Church establishes will address these issues, as well as the physical and care needs of people with disabilities. There is a need for continuing education of people throughout the Uniting Church to understand and initiate action to overcome these oppressive forces that apply to people of all ages.

5.3. Enhancing the Degree of Choice

The challenge to the Church is to offer a variety of support options to people with disabilities which will enable them to live independently. In future, emphasis will be placed on the development of services which enable people with disabilities to live in their own home and community for as long as possible.

As well as providing direct support services to people with disabilities, the Uniting Church will consider taking on the role of coordinating support by purchasing the necessary services through the use of government and private funds.

5.4. Working with Others

Education programs need to stress that in the current climate of tight budgetary constraints, the development of new services may occur through partnerships between community groups and government departments. Churches might consider the redevelopment of under-used land or facilities for housing and services to people with disabilities. Parishes, presbyteries, boards and agencies of the Uniting Church will work with government and other community groups to:

- understand broad areas of need
- establish priorities for services in local areas
- plan appropriate service responses in particular areas
- develop new services with funds from a number of sources
- enter joint management arrangements to ensure maximum service quality.

Partnerships between these may generate savings and efficiencies for both government and non-government agencies.

5.5. Respecting the Rights of All

The Uniting Church will actively promote the rights and responsibilities of people with disabilities utilising rights mechanisms developed and agreed to by State and Commonwealth Governments eg the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, 1975. Services will be delivered to people with disabilities with

fairness and dignity, and respect for their individuality. The Uniting Church will implement the Applications of Principles of the NSW Disability Services Act 1993 to the disability services it establishes, and promote practices within its parishes, boards and agencies that actively uphold the rights of people with disabilities and eliminate discrimination.

6. Management of Services

Each disability service that receives government funds will establish and operate its own board of management, and operate in accordance with the NSW Disability Services Act. However, the Uniting Church will honour the general principle "no services for us without us" and ensure that people with disabilities are involved in the management of all projects. This commits the Church to ensuring that people with disabilities participate in all decision making which affects them either in terms of service delivery or ensuring that "inclusiveness" measures are addressing the right issues.

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