

30 October 2020

National Disability Strategy Governance and Engagement Section
Department of Social Services
GPO Box 9820
Canberra ACT 2601

To Whom It May Concern,

National Disability Strategy – Stage 2 Consultation

The Uniting Church in Australia's network of disability service providers, who are represented at the national level through UnitingCare Australia, welcome the opportunity to provide a brief submission to the National Disability Strategy – Stage 2 Consultation; particularly regarding the importance of people's spirituality, and the need for that to be recognised in the next Strategy.

In its Statement to the Nation in 1977 the Uniting Church affirmed its willingness to uphold Christian values and principles, including the importance of every human being and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race. At its most recent national gathering in 2018, the Church adopted a Statement of Access and Welcome concerning the dignity and value of people with disability, and the importance of all Uniting Church entities being accessible and treating people with disability justly.

The Uniting Church's community services network is one of the largest providers of community services in Australia, providing services to support the needs of individuals, families and communities at all ages and stages of life, with a focus on those that are most disadvantaged and vulnerable. We work towards a community in which every person meets their full potential. With over 1,600 sites, the community services network supports 1.4 million people annually, employs 50,000 staff and is supported by the work of over 30,000 volunteers.¹

Uniting Church congregations also provide a myriad of options for people with disability, be it for worship, as recipients of outreach, or beneficiaries of programs, such as drop-in centres and organised social activities.

The network is aware that there are many other faith-based outreach services and worship communities that also provide additional informal networks of support to people with disability, their families and carers.

Spirituality and Disability

Whilst Australia is a secular society, it is infused with the spirituality of many people: foremost that of First Peoples and supplemented by successive waves of immigrants.

Australia's 2016 Census reveals a religiously diverse nation with 52% identifying as Christian, with Catholicism being the largest Christian grouping (22.6%). The 52% figure is considerably down from an 88% figure in 1966, and is accounted for by 30% of people now reporting no religion, with Islam (2.6 per cent) and Buddhism (2.4 per cent) being the next most common religions reported. Hinduism had the most significant growth between 2006 and 2016, driven by immigration from South Asia.² Many of those who say they have no religion nevertheless describe themselves as religious, engage in spiritual practices such as prayer, or profess a belief in God or a spiritual entity.³

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* is concerned about the “difficult conditions faced by persons with disabilities who are subject to multiple or aggravated forms of discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, language, **religion**, political or other opinion, national, ethnic, indigenous or social origin, property, birth, age or other status”. [emphasis added]

Australian legislation in relation to people with disabilities is underpinned by the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA), which affirms the full participation of people with disabilities in all dimensions of community life.

Faith communities and faith contexts have significant potential to provide informal support networks and safeguards for people with disabilities and their families.

Within formal structures and planning, initial and ongoing support plans for people with disabilities rarely if ever address interest in giving expression to spirituality, including community participation and development of pathways to faith communities. In Australia, the spiritual dimensions of older people and people with mental illness have increasingly been closely linked with their health and quality of life. It is of concern that similar attention is not paid to the dimension of spirituality within the disability services system.

This need for participation in a range of communities, including faith-based ones, was recognised in the ‘SHUT OUT’ report:

Disability is characterised by desire for positive change and striving for emancipation and flourishing. It is seen every day amongst people living with disability. It is active hope. **We desire a place within the community!** This place is not just somewhere to lay down our heads, but a place which brings comfort and support with daily living, **friendship**, meaningful work, exciting recreation, **spiritual renewal**, relationships in which we can be ourselves freely with others. And out of this great things may flourish.⁴ [emphasis added]

Government and Faith communities

One recent example of government's recognition of spirituality's importance was the Victorian State Disability Plan 2002-2012, which affirmed: “*people with a disability are citizens who have the right to be respected and the right to have equal opportunities to participate in the social, economic, cultural, political and **spiritual** life of society. As citizens, people with a disability also have equal responsibilities towards Victorian society and should be supported to exercise these.*” [emphasis added]

There is a growing recognition and receptivity amongst faith communities and those in the services and advocacy sectors of the spiritual needs and aspirations of people with disability.

In Victoria this is evidenced in policy statements by:

- (1) The Faith Communities Council of Victoria (FCCV Inc.)
<http://www.faithvictoria.org.au/images/stories/fccv-disability-13-09-16.pdf>
- (2) and also significantly, the Victorian Advocacy League for Individuals with Disability (VALiD) has recently developed an Easy English Statement on Spirituality <https://www.valid.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Spirituality-Policy.pdf>

Further recognition in government policies and documents, particularly within the next National Disability Strategy, will encourage responses from service providers and faith communities for people with disabilities wishing to express their spirituality.

Recommendation 1

That person-centred planning needs to include a spiritual dimension in a way that is meaningful to the person's beliefs, culture, and circumstances. In turn, staff awareness and preparation must complement that.

Recommendation 2

That the Federal Government funds the development and implementation of national spiritual guidelines for use within the NDIS and disability services sector.

We welcome further dialogue about this important issue.

Warm regards,



Claerwen Little
National Director
UnitingCare Australia
On behalf of the Uniting Church in Australia's network of disability service providers

¹ Figures are approximate at 30 June 2018.

² <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mediareleasesbyReleaseDate/7E65A144540551D7CA258148000E2B85?OpenDocument> accessed 29 January 2018.

³ Gary Bouma, "Defining Religion and Spirituality," in The Encyclopedia of Religion in Australia, ed. James Jupp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 22-23.

⁴ "SHUT OUT: The Experience of People with Disabilities and Their Families in Australia," (National Disability Strategy Consultation Report prepared by the National People with Disabilities and Carer Council: Commonwealth of Australia, 2009): viii.