

‘Be Patient, Ladies! Be Patient!’: Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), 1982–2021

Patricia Madigan*

Sometime around the mid-1980s I heard from a network of old school friends about a meeting of Catholic women in the Northern Beaches area. It was held over 2 days and I stayed at a hotel nearby. Graham English and Erin White were involved in this group and Bernice Moore was an executive secretary. Erin co-authored with Marie Tulip a book called ‘Knowing Otherwise’. The first meetings had been held in Sydney. A priest, when he heard about it advised us, ‘Be patient, ladies! Be patient!’, but we had already been patient for around two thousand years!

Patricia Horsley¹

*The Early Days of WATAC*²

It was nearly forty years ago, in May 1982, that the topic of the place of women in the life of the Australian Church was on the agenda at a meeting of a ‘mixed commission’ of representatives from the national Conference of Major Superiors of Women of Australia (CMSWA) and the NSW Conference of Leaders of Religious

* Patricia Madigan OP is a member of the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and the Solomon Islands. Her doctorate, completed at Sydney University, was concerned with issues of religion, women and culture. Her publications include *Women and Fundamentalism in Islam and Catholicism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011); *Iraqi Women of Three Generations* (co-authored with Martha Ann Kirk CCVI; San Antonio, TX: PeaceCenter Books, 2013); and many book chapters and journal articles. Currently she is a sessional lecturer in church history in the Diploma of Pastoral Ministry program at Divine Word University, Papua New Guinea, while she remains active in many interfaith initiatives in Australia. Having been involved with WATAC since the late 1980s, she recognises its historical significance during this transitional time for women in the Australian Catholic Church.

1. Interview with Patricia Horsley by telephone, 30 November 2020.
2. For the early years of WATAC, I am drawing on a summary compiled by Jan (Punch) Lovell of all the available minutes of meetings, WATAC newsletters, newspaper clippings and letters from 1982 to 1998, and *Women-Church: An Australian Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vols. 1–40, which was published twice yearly between 1987 and 2007, and which includes Bernice Moore, ‘WATAC Herstory, 1982–2007’, *Women-Church* 40 (Autumn 2007): 96–101.

Institutes (CLRI) together with some Catholic bishops of New South Wales. One express concern was for migrant women in Australia who, alienated by both culture and language, may have become locked into an infantile view of the church. Ten days later, the CMSWA supported the concept of a project to study the role of women in society and in the mission of the church, over a two-year period. It would have the title 'Project on Women' and the agreed theme was 'Women's Ministry in the Church'. It would be an exercise at grassroots level in listening to women, both lay and religious, and in sharing ideas with a focus on their perception of their present role in the church and their hopes for the future. Each region of CMSWA would initiate the project in a manner suited to their region.

By the end of 1982 a Steering Committee of three women held its first meeting in Sydney. The members were Camille Paul,³ a lay woman; Pauline Smith, a Parramatta Mercy Sister; and Patricia Bartley, a Josephite Sister. The first meeting was chaired by Mary Ronayne SGS.⁴

The Steering Committee early in 1983 conceived the title WATAC (Women and the Australian Church) so that women who no longer saw themselves as part of any church would be included. On 4 March 1983, the CMSWA discussed the proposed outline for the national project with representatives of the bishops of New South Wales: Archbishop Edward Clancy, recently appointed as Archbishop of Sydney, and Bishops Bill Murray and Patrick Murphy. In a letter dated 6 June 1983, the NSW bishops indicated that they supported the project as outlined to them by the major superiors in March. The secretary of the bishops stated:

It was agreed that the Bishops accept the Project on Women proposed by the Major Superiors according to the terms agreed on at the meeting between the three Bishops and the Major Superiors. Bishop Heather will continue to liaise with the sisters.⁵

3. Camille Paul in 1982 was one of the first two women to graduate with a baccalaureate in sacred theology from St Patrick's Seminary in Sydney, where she was also awarded a licentiate in sacred theology *cum laude* in 1986. She later completed a PhD in 1993 at the University of Sydney. As well as being a founding member of WATAC, she was coeditor with Elaine Lindsay of *Women-Church* between 1993 and the final issue in 2007, a founding member of the Australian Feminist Theological Foundation, a member of the Archdiocese of Sydney Commission for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, and a member of the Catholic Moral Theology Association of Australia and New Zealand.
4. Camille Paul, 'This Is Your Life: WATAC', *WATAC NSW Inc. News*, December 1996, 5. The religious congregations referred to throughout this article are the Religious Sisters of Mercy (RSM), the Sisters of the Good Samaritan (SGS), the Sisters of St Joseph (RSJ and SSJ), the Presentation Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary (PBVM), the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM), the Marist Brothers (FMS), the Franciscans (OFM), and the Blessed Sacrament Sisters (SSS).
5. Relationships with bishops varied. Although one bishop, when approached by members of WATAC to discuss the issue of inclusive language, was reported as labelling them 'a bunch of trouble-making feminists' (WATAC Report, Broken Bay Diocese, given at the state representatives' meeting, 26–27 October 1990), other bishops who spoke at WATAC gatherings over many years, including Bishops Geoffrey Robinson, Patrick Power, Bill Morris and Vincent Long, were pastorally supportive in their relations with WATAC.

The Steering Committee felt that it was important that the infant project have a national voice, so Mary Ronayne approached the CMSWA executive, which, in May 1983, authorised the setting up of a National Committee with representatives from each region. The first National Committee members were: Patricia Bartley RSJ, Pauline Smith RSM, Camille Paul (the NSW Steering Committee), Patricia Fox RSM, Betty Bowes PBVM (TAS), Anne Twomey RSM (WA), Mary Scarf (VIC), Marlette Black PBVM, and Christine Burke IBVM (SA).

At a meeting of the CMSWA executive on 2 August 1983 the following clarifications were given: that Sr Patricia Fox RSM would be the representative of CMSWA on the National Committee of WATAC; a budget allocation would be made for the Project on Women; national funds would pay the fares of state representatives for the first meeting; the WATAC National Committee would present a proposed budget to the executive of CMSWA so that further allocation of funds could be considered.

However, by 1984, during the history of the project, the religious orders in Australia were themselves engaged in restructuring.⁶ The two councils of the major men and major women superiors amalgamated to become the Major Superiors of Women and Men Religious in Australia (MSWMR). At its May 1984 meeting the CMSWA agreed to submit the project to the national assembly of major superiors to seek support of superiors of both men and women. They authorised the project as a national endeavour and summarised it as:

The Project on Women

Goal: a change in the understanding of the role of women in their participation in the Australian Church and in the broader society.

Primary Task: consciousness-raising on Christian feminist issues.

The process was to be the development of locally based groups to integrate the raising of consciousness, education and provision of information.⁷

At the end of 1984 the membership of the National Committee was as follows: Patricia Bartley RSJ, Pauline Smith RSM, Camille Paul (the NSW Steering Committee), Dorothy Campion RSM (CMSWA representative), Betty Bowes PBVM (TAS), Anne Twomey RSM (WA), Mary Scarf (VIC), Marlette Black PBVM, Christine Burke IBVM (SA), Alex Turton FMS (Conference of Religious Brothers), Cormac Nagle OFM (Conference of Clerical Major

6. In the years between 1984 and 1990 the major women superiors, who had formerly belonged to their own Conference of Major Superior Women of Australia (CMSWA), amalgamated with the major men superiors to become the conference of the Major Superiors of Women and Men Religious of Australia (MSWMR). Then, in 1990, after a trial period of two years, the three conferences of religious—priests, sisters and brothers—combined to create the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (ACLRI) and new statutes were approved by the Holy See in 1992. In 2006, the ACLRI Council made the decision to change the working name to Catholic Religious Australia (CRA).

7. Paul, 'This Is Your Life', 5–6.

Superiors), Rosa McGinley PBVM (National Catholic Research Council), with Margaret Lewis as facilitator.

On 2 September 1984 the WATAC National Committee confirmed the appointment of Mary McDonald SGS (QLD) as part-time national coordinator. Her first task was to draw up a national survey of women and men, lay and religious, in Australia, 'to gather information regarding the role of women in their participation in the Australian Church and the broader society'. The findings would be used 'to formulate an informed approach to the role of women in the Australian Catholic Church which will contribute to the development of Christian feminist theology appropriately related to the Australian context'. Eight thousand survey sheets were distributed throughout 1986–87 and over 3000 were returned.

In 1986 Anna Flynn organised the first ever WATAC home group, which met in the suburb of Gymea, Sydney.

I invited all the women I knew to come to my home for the very first WATAC day in Gymea. I can't remember how many people came but my lounge room was full. We had a wonderful day with much talk and laughter; however, there were some who did not appreciate or couldn't cope with what they thought was 'radicalism' so I did lose a few friends that day ... which was a shame but once your eyes are opened, you cannot go back to where you were before. WATAC has changed my outlook on life and I will always be thankful for how much it has taught me to question and helped me to grow as a person.

—Anna Flynn⁸

In Victoria a four-week program was designed and produced in the form of a booklet that included material for discussion. Both Queensland and New South Wales produced a kit including an audiotape and booklet that was sold to groups wishing to use it. South Australian women co-sponsored with the Adult Education service a workshop and two courses aimed at increasing informed awareness of women's issues in the church. WATAC Western Australia established a core group comprising twelve women and two men committed to working with other groups in their own areas. In 1986 Tasmanian women were in a process of establishing links between interested women.⁹

The first national WATAC conference, held at the YWCA Centre in Sydney on 20–23 August 1987, was an important milestone.¹⁰ Sonia Wagner SGS

8. Interview with Anna Flynn by email, 5 November 2020.

9. Angela Coco, 'Women and the Australian Church (WATAC): A Proclamation?' in *Women-Church* 12 (Autumn 1993): 39.

10. The first issue of *Women-Church*, with editors Hilary Carey and Erin White, was launched at this national conference as well as a week earlier, on 15 August, at the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW) conference in Melbourne (*Women-Church* [1], August 1987).

addressed the conference on the topic of Catholic feminism, and her address was received enthusiastically. She declared:

Feminism rejects sexism—all those attitudes, beliefs and actions that relegate women to a secondary or inferior status. It critiques patriarchy where men own, control, shape and administer all facets of life in such a way that the assumptions, beliefs and authorities of the group favour the males of the society ... [Feminism] wants transformation of values and a working for justice and a new reality from within ... [It] values co-operation rather than competition, mutuality and shared decision-making rather than top-down hierarchical decision-making; integration rather than dualism.¹¹

Wagner asked, 'Why did we arrive so late on the scene?' During first-wave feminism, of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Australia became the first nation in the world where women could stand as parliamentary candidates as well as vote, in 1902. Yet the consciousness of Australian Catholic women of their place in the church against the backdrop of second-wave feminism was decades slower than their Protestant sisters in Australia and their Catholic sisters in the United States.¹²

Drawing on an article by Erin White, 'At My Wits' Beginning', which was published in the first edition of the *Women-Church* journal, Wagner outlined four reasons for the slowness of Australian Catholic women, including religious women, to awaken to feminism: 'we were too busy to hear'; 'we had too many responsibilities to feel powerless'; 'we were encouraged to be anti-intellectual'; and 'we lived in a Catholic female ghetto, largely shielded from the more crass aspects of sexism and the more enlightened aspects of ecumenism'. Wagner noted it as one of the 'signs of the times' that women were seeing their role differently and were calling for their role in the church to be different.¹³

The conference called on each person to take up the goal and primary task of the WATAC project through networking at the local level. It also generated a comprehensive statement, which provided a basis for WATAC future planning:

11. Sonia Wagner, 'Women and the Australian Church: Our Changing Role; Some Patterns and Predictions' (paper, WATAC National Conference, 1987). Wagner was drawing on an article by Erin White, 'At My Wit's Beginning', *Women-Church* [1] (August 1987): 11–14.
12. First-wave feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had opened up opportunities for many of the world's women with a focus on women's suffrage. In the 1960s and 1970s, the women's movements around the world fought with ongoing success for women's legal and social rights, and this second wave was about to morph into third-wave feminism in the 1990s; it was concerned with responding to perceived limitations of second-wave feminism as well as a backlash to it.
13. Wagner, 'Women and the Australian Church'.

The WATAC National Conference Statement, August 1987

Our basic understanding of Christian feminism rests on the principles of the equality of personhood of women and men, and on our equal call, in baptism, to fullness of life in the discipleship of Jesus.

This calls us to recognise that we are at a new point in history which is both creative and religious. It calls us to TRANSFORMATION through listening and responding to the Word. This Word is spoken in the scriptures and in our tradition, in the events of our lives and in the shared wisdom that we speak to one another. We are, therefore, challenged to act in a collaborative way, to:

- (1) ensure the realisation of the equal dignity of women and men;
- (2) answer the call to the exercise of full baptismal rights and responsibilities;
- (3) take account of the particular needs of Aboriginal women and men of various ethnic origins;
- (4) recognise that the use of our talents in our everyday lives is an exercise of ministry;
- (5) explore and open all forms of ministry within the church to both women and men and support similar movements in other churches;
- (6) promote the use of inclusive images, symbols and languages;
- (7) explore new scriptural insights and critique our tradition from a feminist perspective;
- (8) use language that is inclusive of women and men;
- (9) know God in multiple images including the feminine and the masculine;
- (10) affirm the intrinsic goodness of human sexuality;
- (11) address issues relating to women's health, bioethics, rape, sexual assault and pornography;
- (12) address issues related to marriage and family;
- (13) deepen awareness of ourselves as women through bonding and the sharing of lived experiences;
- (14) contribute to the development of a Christian feminist theology appropriately related to the Australian context;
- (15) recognise that feminism seeks to redress the domination underlying sexism, militarism, racism, poverty and the exploitation of the environment;
- (16) recognise the need for women to affirm themselves and other women;
- (17) affirm the central role of women in social and political reconstruction.

At my first WATAC conference in 1988, I was totally blown away by the speakers, the atmosphere and the joy of finding like-minded people. Like most of my generation, I had a very black-and-white view of the world and my faith. Raising a family of six children, all very different from each other, I learned so much about life and what love really means. My whole thinking changed and I began to feel very differently about God, faith and belief. The most beneficial aspects of WATAC for me was that it opened my eyes to the possibility of having faith without the strict rules and regulations that had been part of my Catholic upbringing.

—Maureen Watterson¹⁴

ACBC Assembly, April 1988: Mary McDonald Speaks

In a presentation to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) in April 1988,¹⁵ Mary McDonald described the underlying principles of the project as:

- a participative, inclusive model of church which commits women to work towards new forms of partnership with men and with each other in the church;
- the emergence of the feminine as intrinsic to an understanding of God, to human wholeness and thereby to church renewal.

She informed the bishops that state representatives had been appointed, that local and national networking had continued, and that it was estimated that over seventy groups throughout Australia were meeting regularly to share experiences, study church and social issues, read the scriptures and pray together. Though the WATAC project had been sponsored by the major superiors, more lay women than religious were actively involved in group meetings. These women and a few men, she said, were generally representative of the active membership of the church.

As McDonald was to complete her term as national WATAC coordinator in May 1988, in March of that year a meeting of the WATAC National Committee requested that the Major Superiors of Women and Men Religious (MSWMR) continue their sponsorship of the WATAC project for the next three years, with or without financial support. This was seen as important because WATAC now had a national identity and credibility but was still fragile, and the consciousness-raising was far from complete.¹⁶ At a meeting of the assembly of major superiors that took place in June 1988 they agreed in part to the

14. Interview with Maureen Watterson by email, 25 November 2020.

15. On 8 April 1988 two papers were presented by WATAC to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference — 'Women and the Australian Church' by Mary McDonald SGS and 'Women and Scripture' by Elaine Wainwright RSM — both of which addressed 'The Question of Women and Ordination'.

16. Mary McDonald, 'Project Report: Women and the Australian Church (WATAC)', 31 May 1988.

recommendations of the March National Committee meeting. They decided to continue formally sponsoring WATAC and to encourage the formation of state initiatives for a two-year period, and to meet half the cost of the annual National Committee meeting.

As she completed her term of service on 31 May 1988, McDonald summarised the challenges still facing the project as:

- Trivialisation of the serious injustices that face women in Church and Society
- Lack of information on these issues
- Powerlessness in the face of widespread oppression
- Australian cultural characteristics—‘okker’ mateship, the good wife ...
- Fear of the word ‘feminism’.¹⁷

A Transition Period for WATAC Begins

At a gathering of people interested in WATAC at the 1989 combined national conference, Mary McDonald indicated that the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (Major Superiors) was no longer in a position to give financial support to WATAC other than through the funding for the Christian Feminist Writing Project.¹⁸ The completion of her term as national WATAC coordinator without an assurance of adequate funding marked the beginning of a transition period for WATAC, though the structural and sociopolitical ramifications of this event did not become apparent for some time. She had indicated that the project should be continued at the grassroots level and it now became the sole responsibility of state committees to develop initiatives and to set priorities and goals best suited to their local situations.

*

I think it was in July 1986 that a friend phoned me to say: ‘Margaret—you must come to the next meeting of a group I have joined called WATAC’. I went and was totally hooked. It was as though the tectonic plates of my brain had shifted and light suddenly poured in. The ‘patriarchal church’ had never bothered me before, but has never stopped bothering me since—and 34 years later it still bothers me!

—Margaret Knowlden¹⁹

Although the National WATAC Committee had met in March 1989 as though it were continuing, there was a considerable loss of momentum and networking in WATAC circles in the following year as the involvement of women religious decreased.

A WATAC QLD conference took place in Bardon, Brisbane, 14–16 October

17. McDonald, ‘Project Report’.

18. Report by Anne Boyd and Margaret Tan, 23 August 1989.

19. Interview with Margaret Knowlden by email, 5 November 2020.

1988. Participants came from the Northern Territory, New South Wales and Queensland, and a new group was formed to take WATAC on to the next stage. WATAC QLD continued to produce newsletters until 1991 but soon after that went into recess. Another group started up in Brisbane in 1998 but also was not able to continue. Up until early 1992, WATAC SA was run by a core of lay women and was coordinated by a group that consisted of satellite committees, each with its own area of concern.

In 1989 WA women applied for funds from the 'Western Australian Women's Trust' to continue WATAC work in that state, with considerable planning occurring in 1990 to ensure WATAC was organised and continued to progress. The work of the Victorian WATAC was supported and facilitated by the services of the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau and its functioning connected to the Brigidine Sisters' initiative, 'A New Vision for Women'.²⁰ The first WATAC NSW conference, with the theme 'Women Speak Justice', was held in Parramatta, Sydney, 19–21 August 1988.

From the end of 1990, there were ongoing attempts to gather together the threads of national WATAC in most Australian states. In July 1997 WATAC members from New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia came together in Adelaide as a 'Working Group' to once more attempt to formulate ways of enabling WATAC to function as a national body. This was followed by a meeting of nine state representatives at St Carthage Parish Centre, Melbourne, on 14–15 March 1998. Reports from WATAC in each state were given: the Australian Capital Territory (Andrea de Carvalho), Victoria (Vivien Williams), Tasmania (Margaret Chandler), Queensland (Fran Sheahan), New South Wales (Bernice Moore), South Australia (Moirra Deslandes and Roberta Hakendorf), and the Northern Territory (Margaret Gaff), with Bernadette Keating PBVM as facilitator. Bernice was elected as national coordinator, and a national conference was planned to take place in Alice Springs in June/July 1999.²¹

However, despite the efforts by state representatives to maintain a national structure, which continued up until at least 1998, this was not successful. Meanwhile in New South Wales groups continued to grow.

WATAC NSW, Incorporated

In October 1989 WATAC NSW met at the Annandale Centre and resolved that WATAC NSW would continue to be basically a movement within the Catholic Church but with outreach to all other women, and that women religious would be encouraged to remain at all levels of WATAC NSW, where their gifts, training and leadership skills were needed. They would approach CLRI to increase their support and also to reach out to individual religious orders.

20. Reports in *Women-Church* 4 (Autumn 1989): 5–6; *WATAC NSW Inc. News*, February 1998; Coco, 'Women and the Australian Church (WATAC)', 41–2.

21. *National WATAC News* 1, no. 1, September 1997; *WATAC NSW Inc. News*, July 1997, February 1998, April 1998.

A key step was taken by the CLRI (NSW) executive in 1990 when it decided to fund a full-time state coordinator of WATAC in the person of Bernice Moore,²² who had been on the National Committee since 1984. As NSW state coordinator, Bernice often became the 'face' of WATAC as her activities included speaking at parish, diocesan and Catholic school gatherings, and presenting reflection days for catechists, conference workshops, and adult education programs. She spoke to classes at Australian Catholic University and Western Sydney University, and collaborated with government bodies such as the Office for the Status of Women 'on the key issues of concern to Australian women into the future'.²³ Bernice also featured in programs produced by ABC and SBS television, and contributed to articles published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Many religious orders supported WATAC for the three-year period 1990–92. A WATAC NSW newsletter (which had existed in some form since 1988) was mailed out nationally and internationally from April 1990 and became a regular medium of communication.

Another step was taken on 30 November 1993 by WATAC NSW, when it became incorporated under the *Associations Incorporation Act 1984*, making it possible to raise funds and own property in its own right and to develop its own directions. The first WATAC NSW Inc. Committee, established with four members nominated by CLRI and four elected at the WATAC annual general meeting, consisted of Edith Hall (president), Angela Cameron PBVM, Clare Condon SGS (treasurer), Mary Crowe (assistant treasurer), Maureen Watterson (secretary), Trish Hindmarsh, Anne Kearney, and Patricia Powell RSM. Bernice Moore was invited to attend.

The goal of WATAC from its earliest beginnings was a change in the understanding of the role of women in their participation in the Australian Church and in the broader society, with a primary task of consciousness-raising on Christian feminist issues. To achieve this goal, WATAC NSW provided a wide range of educational opportunities and pathways to effective action for Catholic women and others throughout Australia by means of its national and state conferences; home group meetings; luncheons held in NSW Parliament House; lectures, forums and interfaith symposiums; its justice work; and its ecumenical connections.

The NSW WATAC newsletter was a valuable resource for many Catholic

22. Bernice Moore had been an experienced teacher in secondary schools in Canberra, Victoria and Queensland, where she developed creative programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and was also part of a committee that produced a groundbreaking Mission and Justice Education Programme at the request of the bishops of Australia. She took up her role as full-time coordinator for WATAC NSW in 1990 and, after her retirement at the end of 2003, continued to work for WATAC in a voluntary capacity until 2019. Bernice received an OAM award in 1997 for her service to community, women and Catholic education.

23. See, e.g., *WATAC NSW Inc. News*, May 1997, and WATAC coordinator's reports in *WATAC NSW Inc. News*, April 1999 and April 2001.

women and others as it provided up-to-date information and theological reflections on events such as the Vatican veto on discussion of women's ordination in 1994,²⁴ and the Vatican ban on the involvement of the Sisters of Charity in Australia's first trial of a legal heroin injecting room in King's Cross in 1999.²⁵

*

Through conferences, seminars, regular WATAC group meetings, WATAC news, and so on, WATAC has grounded me in a spirituality that is inclusive, gospel-centred, hopeful, dynamic and empowering. It has provided me with a critical platform and given me the courage and the freedom to reinterpret my concept of the 'divine', to contemporise some traditional doctrines and church practices, and has enhanced for me an ethical stance that is incarnational and relational. WATAC has not led me to reject the formal practice of my faith, but with the insights and support of other WATAC members, it has helped me to discern, question and at times openly challenge the 'trappings' as opposed to the 'essentials'.

—Maureen Brian²⁶

WATAC National Conferences

After the first national conference in 1987, two further conferences, largely organised by WATAC NSW, were a WATAC national conference with the theme 'Centre-ing Women' (4–6 July 1999) in Alice Springs, which included a panel of Aboriginal women, followed by a third WATAC national conference, 'Forging an Inclusive Future' (16–18 August 2002) in Canberra. The Canberra conference was attended by over 250 women and a few men. Its focus was 'women in Christian biblical tradition in light of contemporary feminist exegesis and in relationship to the cultural and political issues of our society as we enter into the new millennium'. An important feature was its emphasis on 'both the ecumenical and interfaith dimensions of our societal response to today's issues'. The process included roundtable discussions, interactive panel sessions and a wide variety of workshops, topics and activities. One response to this conference included the following appreciation of the conference liturgy:

Our group named one of the highlights of the WATAC Conference the Saturday evening sharing 'We meet as friends'—especially the offering to one another of the shared symbols of the common loaf and cup—and all this means to us. We ... rejoiced again at the strength and endurance we embody as we journey together on the way to mutual ministry. We

24. WATAC NSW Inc. News, June 1994.

25. WATAC NSW Inc. News, November 1999.

26. Interview with Maureen Brian by email, 15 December 2020.

recognised again how each of us gives grace and peace to the other in these times which are both so fulfilling and chaotic.²⁷

WATAC State Conferences—WATAC NSW

Although national conferences ceased after 2002, Mary McDonald had indicated as she officially completed her term as national coordinator in 1988 that it was expected that the project should be continued at the grassroots level. WATAC NSW was instrumental in making this happen in New South Wales with state WATAC conferences held on a two-yearly basis up until 2013.

The first WATAC NSW conference, with the theme 'Women Speak Justice', was held in Parramatta, 19–21 August 1988. At this conference Franca Arena MLA spoke about the 'Pain of Exclusion for Migrant Women'. This conference was followed in 1990 by one focused on 'Women Empowering the Future', at which the Hon. Susan Ryan addressed the gathering on 'Feminism—Its Friends and Foes'.

In 1994 Prof. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Professor of Systematic Theology at Notre Dame University Indiana, was visiting Australia and addressed the WATAC NSW conference being held on 30–31 July at Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta, with the theme 'Women in Search of Round Tables'. Following the pope's recent statement banning any further discussion on the issue of women priests, the attendance of over 300 was the biggest ever. Her lecture addressed the theology of the church's official teaching on the ordination of women in *Inter Insigniores* (1976), in which, she explained, a new argument for refusing priesthood to women had appeared: 'that the priest acts *in persona Christi*—the priest must be a man, for Christ himself was and remains a man'. Prof. LaCugna went on to say:

The doctrine of the Trinity insists that relationality, not solitariness and least of all biological sex, is at the heart of what it means to be a person. With respect to gender, the subordination of woman to man is a condition of the fallen, sinful world and is unnatural, not natural, because it contravenes the revelation of true personhood in Jesus Christ. The momentous implication is that not even the church at the present time is *in persona Christi*, because the church has not yet achieved the fullness of the personhood of Jesus Christ, in whom there is neither male nor female, free nor slave, Jew nor Gentile.²⁸

Helen Kearins RSM wrote the conference theme song, 'Searching for Round Tables', beginning with the words, 'Been a long, long journey', which became a favourite at many future WATAC gatherings. At this conference funds

27. WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, November 2002.

28. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 'Catholic Women as Ministers and Theologians' (booklet released at WATAC NSW State Conference, 30–1 July 1994), 13–14.

were raised with the aim of sending a representative to the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995.

Later NSW conference themes included 'Being There: Women Deciding the Future' (1996), 'Why Walk When You Can Fly?' (1998), 'Women Walking Free' (2000), and 'Futuring Now' (2009). Two other memorable conferences were 'Women Making the Vision Happen' in July 2007, with keynote speakers Joan Chittister OSB (USA) and Mary Malone (UK), and 'Illumination in Darkness' in September 2011, with keynote speaker Patricia Fresen, who had been ordained as a priest and later a bishop in the 'Roman Catholic Women Priests International' movement.

*

The most beneficial aspect of WATAC was meeting educated women who had a voice and who were willing to speak up. The WATAC newsletter always gave new insights and helped me continue to believe that the gospel message was still alive and well, despite the somewhat moribund parish. Knowing that there were WATAC members with the same aims and hopes really gave me support in some 'lean spiritual times' over the years.

—Rosemary Breen²⁹

Luncheons

Another very popular activity was the luncheon held annually in NSW Parliament House, Sydney, in the Stranger's Dining Room. The first WATAC NSW luncheon was held on 2 May 1995 'to celebrate the contribution of women to the Australian Catholic Church and society' and was hosted by NSW parliamentarian and WATAC-er, Franca Arena. The luncheons often featured outstanding keynote speakers who addressed topical issues. At the 1997 luncheon, Sonia Wagner SGS addressed the issue, 'Listening to Women Speakers for a Change', and at the Sorry Day luncheon in May 1998, the speaker was Indigenous parliamentarian, Linda Burney. In 2003 during the National Council of Churches' Decade to Overcome Violence (DOV 2001–10), the luncheon theme was 'WATAC Creating a Culture of Peace'. WATAC's 21st annual luncheon in Parliament House took place on Thursday, 22 June 2017. Many WATAC-ers remember the luncheons as events 'with great speakers and a great sense of comradery'.

Justice Work

Significant forums and speaker events, often held in the theatrette of NSW Parliament House, were occasions when WATAC raised its voice on social justice and church issues. As much as WATAC was focused strongly on voicing

29. Interview with Rosemary Breen by email, 7 November 2020.

concerns regarding women's roles and ministry within church structures, this was seen as part of the church's wider mission to be a sign of God's kingdom in the world.

Many justice themes were addressed at WATAC symposiums and forums, while WATAC newsletters connected members with numerous activist organisations. In the 1990s these justice causes were as varied as Women for Wik, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaRC), the National Women's Media Centre, Australians Networking for Reform (ANFR), Catholics in Coalition for Justice and Peace (CCJP), and a Community Forum on Banking and the Low Income Consumer by the Consumer Credit Legal Centre.

In 2017 WATAC sent two letters to the Australian bishops that drew attention to the concerns of women related to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse and critiqued the lack of women's involvement in governance structures and decision-making in the church.³⁰ WATAC's justice concerns also went far beyond Australia at times, one example being the Living Water Myanmar project of Rosemary Breen, a WATAC regional representative from Inverell, New South Wales, which provided hundreds of villages and schools with clean drinking water and functional toilets; it had support from WATAC and individual members from 2010 onwards.³¹

In the words of Sr Maureen Flood SSS, who was WATAC president for several years:

As we are Church, our responsibility to ourselves and to the whole Body of Christ is to act justly: to ourselves and to all others by speaking our truth and working for justice in the world without fear or favour ... so many women speak of WATAC in terms of friendships, sharing, nourishment, support and action—a good description of Eucharist! Let us go ahead as a truly Eucharistic Community.³²

Interfaith Symposiums

Beginning in the year 2000, WATAC organised a Women and Interfaith Dialogue Symposium once or twice a year in the theatre at Parliament House. Based on the Year 12 studies in religion curriculum, a panel with representatives from Judaism, Islam and Christianity and an Indigenous speaker addressed the topic, 'Religion and Peace—What Are the Challenges and Implications for Us All?' These symposiums were consistently very well attended by school students and teachers, with the feedback indicating that the dialogue that occurred was very important to our young people.

30. WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, March 2017.

31. See, e.g., WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, September 2017 and February 2019.

32. WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, February 2006.

Home Group Meetings

From the very first years of WATAC, 'small-scale' groups of women began meeting in various locations such as the Shalom House of Prayer in Bathurst and other church venues. This soon extended into WATAC home groups meeting in members' homes. A WATAC group in Wollongong in 1990 reported that they met on the last Friday of every month in various homes and followed the pattern, action/education/liturgy. They hoped that this would allow them to plan serious action like letter writing; media-watch; contacting local parishes, parish councils and the diocesan council; and arranging for guest speakers. They had a mailing list of sixty people.

*

I was listening to a tape of a talk by Joan Chittister given at a WATAC meeting and thinking, 'Where have you been? Why didn't I know about this?' A blinding light, a flash of illumination! My life was turned upside down instantly and my conversion was as sudden and complete at St Paul's on the road to Damascus ... The main achievement of WATAC was raising the consciousness of feminism within church members, putting the viewpoint of women particularly to the male hierarchy, bonding women together and giving them a voice. Thank you to all those members of WATAC and especially Bernice who made those years so exciting, stimulating and unforgettable.

—Jackie Wall³³

WATAC newsletters in 2007 listed meeting times and contacts for groups meeting in Beenleigh (south of Brisbane), Broken Bay, eastern suburbs (Sydney), Engadine, Glebe, Lane Cove, Lismore Heights, Manly, Milton/Ulladulla, Mount Claremont (WA), Parramatta, Penshurst, Wagga Wagga, Wollongong and Young. Newsletters in 2013 reported that thirteen WATAC home groups met regularly: eleven in New South Wales, one in Queensland and one in Western Australia. In 2018 it was noted how WATAC was enlivened by the many local groups that met regularly in various members' homes.

Some [groups] have been doing this for many years and as happened in the early church (recorded in the Acts of the Apostles 20:7) sometimes the groups break bread and share wine together. They also read and reflect, then discuss and share their insights and questions. This is very life-giving.³⁴

A 2019 survey of WATAC members showed that there continued to be wide support for home groups, which were described as 'life-changing' and

33. Interview with Jackie Wall by email, 30 November 2020.

34. WATAC NSW Inc. News, June 2018.

‘inspirational’. Some were disappointed that there was none developed in their area. WATAC newsletters from 2019 and 2020 continued to feature home groups in South-East Queensland, the eastern and inner suburbs of Sydney, Engadine, Leura, Milton/Ulladulla, Parramatta, Wollongong, and the Australian Capital Territory / Canberra.

Ecumenical Outreach

In the early years of WATAC there occurred two combined national conferences that were ecumenical in character. The first combined national conference of the Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW), WATAC and Women-Church, which was MOW’s fifth national conference, was held at Collaroy, Sydney, on 18–20 August 1989 with the theme, ‘Towards a Feminist Theology’. It was attended by 450 people, with WATAC organising the liturgy on the Saturday evening.

A second combined national conference of MOW, WATAC, Women-Church and the Feminist Uniting Network, with the theme ‘Women Authoring Theology’, was held at Santa Sabina, Strathfield, on 24–26 May 1991. The following year members of WATAC participated in a prayer vigil held immediately before the Chrism Mass in the Adelaide Catholic cathedral at which women anointed each other with oil and many ministries already provided by women were named. The Anglican MOW and other friends were also present.

Members of WATAC recall how, in the 1990s, ‘(we) supported our Anglican sisters in MOW; we laughed and cried with them, and we grew through ecumenical interaction and dialogue. OCW (Ordination of Catholic Women) was born at this time’.³⁵ As the Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women came to an end in 1998, WATAC joined with the Catholic Women’s League to organise an information table as part of the Churches in the Market Place at the Australian Ecumenical Conference, and three WATAC-ers attended the ecumenical dinner.³⁶

WATAC regularly contributed to ecumenical prayer events such as a Holy Thursday Prayer vigil organised by MOW, ‘Stations in the City’ in Sydney on Good Friday, a sunrise celebration of the resurrection at Mrs Macquarie’s Chair, and the Women’s Day of Prayer in March each year.³⁷

*

A significant influence was WATAC’s ecumenical, and beyond that, interfaith outlook and also the ability to engage with the ‘secular’ world in listening to and promoting sympathetic ideals particularly in social justice areas. A most beneficial aspect was to be exposed to the

35. Moore, ‘WATAC Herstory’, 100.

36. WATAC coordinator’s report for 1998 (WATAC NSW Inc. News, April 1999).

37. WATAC (NSW) Report, 22 October 1993.

writings of feminist theologians, which have developed my understanding of how our church structures should be reformed.

—Anne Byrne³⁸

In the early 2000s WATAC joined with WISE (Women in Solidarity Ecumenically) from the NSW Ecumenical Council to plan a women's 'Day Away—On a Road to Refuge' and participated in a day of spiritual journeying with refugees.³⁹ Another 'Day Away', a visit to the Auburn mosque, was organised with WISE for a day of listening and learning with Muslim women. Bernice Moore and Rosemary Breen were members of the National Council of Churches Gender Commission during the 2000s.⁴⁰ In 2020 WATAC described itself as 'Catholic in origin, ecumenical by membership and committed to working with other faiths'.⁴¹

Theological Education and Formation for Women

Over the years Sr Joan Chittister has been a generous and long-time friend and mentor of WATAC. She wrote a letter to WATAC women at the time of the 1992 NSW state conference, and was in Sydney in September 1997 to launch the Australians Networking for Reform (ANFR) at Our Lady of Mercy College, Parramatta. Her lectures and talks on topics such as 'Spirituality and Culture', 'Recovering Our Tradition for the Next Century: What Is Our Vision of Church?', and 'The Role of Leadership in the Church', were recorded and enthusiastically shared among women who did not have the opportunities for theological study that were available to men.⁴² Other women speakers included Elizabeth Johnson CSJ, Mary John Mananzan OSB, leading Catholic journalist Margaret Hebblethwaite, and local theologians Erin White and Elaine Wainwright RSM. Margaret Hinchey RSM also contributed greatly to the ongoing spiritual and intellectual formation of WATAC members with 'stimulating input on Women and Scripture'⁴³ and on a range of theological and social justice issues.

*

There was a growing awareness of the role that women could play. Their involvement in WATAC made women more aware of the injustice done to women in the church—especially as the Catholic Church became involved in the ecumenical movement. We visited other churches and Catholic women saw the Anglican and Protestant Churches allowing women to do more ... WATAC gave me a sense of my

38. Interview with Anne Byrne by email, 7 November 2020.

39. WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, November 2002.

40. Reports were frequently included in WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, 2001–06.

41. WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, December 2020.

42. WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, November 1997.

43. WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, November 1999.

own ability and what I could do and the courage to go ahead and do these things.

—Genevieve Davey IBVM⁴⁴

Contribution to ‘The Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia’

WATAC made significant contributions to the ACBC national research project, ‘The Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia’ (1996–99).⁴⁵ On 21 August 1996, WATAC representatives were present at the official launch of the first phase of the project by Cardinal Clancy in St Mary’s Cathedral, Sydney. Bishop Kevin Manning acknowledged that it was at the instigation of three WATAC women (Anne Lane PBVM, Marg Hinchey RSM and Bernice Moore) some five years previously that the bishops agreed to look at the possibility of a national survey on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, to be conducted at diocesan level and coordinated nationally.⁴⁶

In 1997 WATAC’s official membership was around 900 and growing.⁴⁷ When hearings began in April of that year, WATAC women were well represented amongst those giving presentations in twenty-one public hearings in capital cities and regional centres. The launch of the report on the bishops’ hearings into the participation of women in the Australian Catholic Church, *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*, at the National Press Club in Canberra in August 1999, was attended by fifty WATAC women. WATAC produced a discussion kit and a PowerPoint presentation kit to assist in publicising the report to larger audiences.

WATAC also supported a subsequent proposal to the ACBC for the establishment of an Australian Board of Catholic Women to give women a voice in the Australian Catholic Church; this eventually led to the setting up of the Commission of Australian Catholic Women (CACW). Its mandate was to assist in the implementation of the practical steps the bishops had decided to undertake to improve the participation of women in the Catholic Church and to play a part in facilitating an ongoing dialogue.⁴⁸

44. Interview with Genevieve Davey by telephone, 17 November 2020.

45. There are many references to contributions by WATAC women and updates on the progress of the project in the *WATAC NSW Inc.* newsletters from 1996 to 1999.

46. *WATAC NSW Inc. News*, December 1996.

47. *WATAC NSW Inc. News*, December 1996.

48. However, despite making significant contributions to church life, the commission was reduced to the status of a council as part of a restructuring of the ACBC in 2009 and was eventually disbanded in November 2019. See Patricia Madigan, ‘Women Changing the Church: The Experience of the Council for Australian Catholic Women, 2000–2019’, in *Changing the Church: Transformations of Christian Belief, Practice, and Life*, ed. M.D. Chapman and V. Latinovic (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 101–10.

The Australian Plenary Council and WATAC

WATAC has also contributed in important ways to the Plenary Council taking place in Australia 2021–22. WATAC has been represented by Faye Lawrence on the Archdiocese of Sydney Working Group for the Plenary Council, at which around nineteen lay groups have been present. Seven of these groups have mentioned particularly the need to include women in the reforms of the church.

In 2018/19 WATAC engaged in an extensive consultation with its membership before forwarding a substantial submission to the Plenary Council with the comment, 'It is a source of continuing disappointment and frustration that so many of the recommendations [outlined in the 1999 *Woman and Man* report] that had promised such hope have never come to fruition!'⁴⁹

Trish Hindmarsh is currently the WATAC representative on the lay forum ACCCR (Australian Coalition for Catholic Church Renewal), which has consistently asked for a woman to be appointed as co-chair of the Plenary Council. Her view is that 'It seems evident that the full inclusion of women at every level of our Church is emerging as a major issue for consideration at the 2020 Plenary [Council] ... The Church in our own times is in serious need of the full gifts and wisdom of women as well as men in order to be faithful to Christ and a sign of the Kingdom'.⁵⁰

*

There was much discussion around topics of interest which were 'music to our ears'. It was very new to me, but it fitted in well with other things I had been reading and thinking of in a number of areas. It was answering a need. One of the main achievements was that it was making women aware of their wisdom, which had been suppressed. We have a lopsided church and hierarchy, and lopsided thinking—but God is not lopsided. God is the fullness of the male and the fullness of the female. How can we describe who God is or how God is? It is as human that God wants to relate to us.

—Patricia Horsley⁵¹

Funding and the Future of WATAC

Up until 1988 WATAC was ably led by Mary McDonald SGS as national coordinator, appointed and funded by the religious men and women. After 1988 that funding ceased and WATAC, still in its early stages of formation, suddenly had to find the financial resources to enable it to continue at state level. It was a

49. Plenary Council 2020: Submission by Women and the Australian Church (WATAC), February 2019.

50. Letter from Dr Patricia Hindmarsh to All the Australian Bishops in 2018 (WATAC NSW Inc. News, December 2018).

51. Interview with Patricia Horsley by telephone, 30 November 2020.

confused period as the religious orders were undergoing their own transitions and in most states of Australia WATAC groups were left to work out their own way of moving forward.

In 1993 Clare Condon SGS, at that time CLRI president, was able to obtain ongoing financial support from CLRI (NSW) for the next three-year period. In September 1996 WATAC developed a website with the financial support of ACLRI.⁵² ACLRI also provided WATAC NSW with an office within its own administration centre in Annandale. But towards the end of 1996 serious questions regarding WATAC's future funding were being asked.

At the same time, throughout the 1990s, there were increasing pressures bearing down on the WATAC reform agenda from Roman authorities. The year 1994 was the time of the papal ban on inclusive language in the Universal Catechism and in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The English-language edition of the Catechism had originally been translated into inclusive language but a rewrite in exclusive language had been ordered by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It was also the time that Catholic women's ordination was banned, as was talk about women's ordination in the Catholic Church. Ironically, in May 1994, on the anniversary of Joan of Arc being burnt at the stake, Pope John Paul II released the historic document *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, declaring that the church had 'no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women' and that his view was to be 'definitively held by all Catholics'.

Bernice Moore comments: 'Indeed, looking back over the 1990s, it becomes very evident that it was a decade of extraordinary energetic thought and challenging activity in both Australian society and the churches. WATAC was never more relevant and it grew in numbers and energy'.⁵³

WATAC NSW Inc. *News* November 2002 conveyed information regarding the 'financial difficulties that we as an organisation are facing'. The generous funding received from some few religious orders was not enough to continue financing a full-time worker and WATAC would need to be less reliant on this as a source of funding for the future. 'We end this year with an increased membership and as a very much alive, dynamic though not financially rich organisation'.

When Bernice Moore retired from her position as full-time coordinator for WATAC NSW at the end of 2003, a garden party was held to honour her outstanding fifteen-year contribution to WATAC,⁵⁴ described as 'a commitment marked by good humour, generosity and extraordinary energy and enthusiasm'. As Bernice continued her work for WATAC in a voluntary capacity for another fifteen years, she was accompanied by a number of long-time WATAC-ers who maintained the mission of WATAC with enormous energy and a remarkable

52. Minutes of meeting of WATAC NSW Inc., 18 July 1996.

53. Moore, 'WATAC Herstory', 99–100.

54. WATAC NSW Inc. *News*, February 2004.

spirit of generosity. In later years these women included Helen Coles (administration officer), Maureen Watterson (secretary/treasurer), Margaret Knowlden (newsletter typing and design), Rosemary Breen, Maureen Brian, Anne Byrne, Janet Cain, Marg Day, Trish Hindmarsh, Kaye Hodge, Margaret Keyes, Faye Lawrence, Alma Madden, Carmel Maguire, and many others who contributed to the day-to-day efforts to keep WATAC afloat in difficult times.

*

We had about seven or eight members in our home group, including three men. Book readings helped us to bring our thinking into line with modern ideas. The liturgies we celebrated, breaking the bread and sharing the wine together as we remembered Jesus 'present with us', were the highlights.

—Mary Maguire⁵⁵

Despite receiving occasional bequests, even one from a self-declared atheist,⁵⁶ generating the funding to maintain the life and activities of WATAC was a constant struggle, with more than one year showing a budget deficit. One WATAC member, Trish Horsley, even donated a cow, 'Miriam, and her offspring', for funding into the future.⁵⁷ Treasurer Maureen Watterson insisted in 2013:

WATAC's financial deficit is clearly a result of decisions to be active rather than passive in the face of justice issues which continue to confront us ... Of course, there are significant and obvious consequences to be faced if WATAC continues to operate with an annual deficit ... On the other hand, is there any point existing if we stop being actively involved?⁵⁸

One aspect that remained constant was WATAC's sense of purpose and the commitment of its members. In order to plan financially for 2014, WATAC decided to increase its basic annual membership fee from \$50 to \$60, and a decision was made not to organise a WATAC NSW conference in 2014 but to direct the resources of the membership towards maintaining the annual WATAC luncheon and the interfaith sessions.⁵⁹ From 2014, it was decided to reduce hiring costs by combining the luncheon with the AGM. Then, in 2017, a decision was made to move the luncheon to another, less costly venue.

By the time of the AGM on 30 June 2018 at Club on East, Sutherland, there

55. Interview with Mary Maguire by email, 17 December 2020.

56. A substantial bequest was received from Phyl Hulse, a declared atheist with an interest in feminism, theology and justice (WATAC NSW Inc. News, June 2004).

57. WATAC NSW Inc. News, April 2003, February 2004, June 2006.

58. WATAC NSW Inc. News, September 2013 and August 2014.

59. WATAC NSW Inc. News, December 2013.

were twenty-five members present, eighteen apologies, and fifteen other members unable to attend who shared written memories of what WATAC meant to them. It was a time of remembrance as those present struggled with the question of WATAC's continuing, recognising the diminishment in the size of the membership and wondering whether it was time to 'fold the tent', but also aware of the importance of maintaining a voice for women in the Catholic Church. By 2019 the situation was dire as WATAC declared its financial position as 'the worst ever'.

Discerning WATAC's Future in 2019

On 30 March 2019, during the WATAC NSW Inc. AGM at Club on East, Sutherland, at which thirty-two members were present with eleven apologies, Trish Hindmarsh conducted a 'Discerning Our Future' workshop using 'See, Judge, Act' methodology. A formal written motion was put by Anne Byrne that a special meeting of WATAC members be convened soon afterwards to consider and vote on the proposal to 'close WATAC NSW Inc. in the near future'. Although it was not voted on formally, a majority at the meeting indicated they were in favour of this as a strategy. A Working Group for 2019 was set up that included Anne Byrne, Karyn Green, Laraine Jeffs and Faye Lawrence along with Bernice Moore.

The WATAC NSW Inc. Working Group met again on 22 May 2019 at Engadine Bowling Club to reflect further on the 'Discerning Our Future' workshop results. The key realities were seen as dwindling membership and aging and exhaustion of members, as well as declining finances. Some religious orders and others who previously gave WATAC considerable financial support were no longer able to do so. It was also recognised that WATAC was failing to connect effectively with younger women, who have often found the church 'irrelevant'. Many think the feminist struggle has been won and they are not likely to realise until later in their working lives that there is still some way to go. There are generational differences in understandings of feminism, and they are more likely to find social media platforms, plus environmental and other social justice issues more meaningful.

At the same time, it was felt strongly that WATAC was needed as never before as the current state of the church presents both a crisis situation and new opportunities for growth and change. There are now many national and global church reform groups, and the Plenary Council submissions are picking up WATAC's longstanding agenda for the full inclusion of women in the church and society. WATAC is specifically about women and has an important role to play.

There was a general acceptance that WATAC was in a time of transition.

In June 2019 a survey was sent to all WATAC members. By 18 July sixty-five members had responded—the majority having been members for 25–35 years—along with donations amounting to \$7255. The Working Group met

again on 25 July 2019 to discuss and organise follow-up plans.

At a Working Group meeting on 16 October 2019 at the Engadine Bowling Club, which was attended by Anne Byrne, Karyn Green, Laraine Jeffs, Margaret Keyes, Faye Lawrence and Tracy McEwan, it was recognised that WATAC's communication strategy urgently needed updating if WATAC was to attract a younger generation of women. Tracy McEwan set up WATAC's first Facebook page during the meeting.

On 29 October 2019, a letter was sent to WATAC NSW Inc. members by Anne Byrne to inform them that Bernice was to step down from her role in WATAC due to ongoing health problems. The Working Group, established as a new interim team with Anne Byrne as interim president, would carry on the responsibilities of WATAC as an incorporated organisation until the 2020 AGM. *WATAC NSW Inc. News* December 2019 gave notice of the 23rd AGM, to be held on Saturday 7 March 2020, 1–4 pm, at the Ron Dyer Centre, St Mary's Catholic Church, North Sydney.

Between the meetings of October 2019 and March 2020 much networking occurred, including the making of new connections with local and international women's reform groups such as Voices of Faith and the Catholic Women's Council (CWC). Although the AGM in 2019 had flagged the closure of WATAC NSW Inc., the careful work done under the leadership of the interim team bore fruit.

*

That marvellous WATAC newsletter was a great joy and source of up-to-date information. I attended some conferences which were so well-organized and a wealth of information, and great to meet so many other women from all walks of life. Very inclusive! It was a great achievement for WATAC to connect with so many women over so many years, giving them accurate and authentic news. No easy task! This enabled us to grow in our own spiritual development and share with others. I'm also so excited to see the new team take over WATAC, and I know they will continue to provide great news and resources for women who long for a more inclusive, Christ-centred church.

—Mary Crimmins⁶⁰

At the special general meeting held just before the 2020 AGM, the rescission motion to overturn the 2019 decision to wind-up WATAC was passed unanimously. A new committee was elected: president, Andrea Dean; vice-president, Tracy McEwan; treasurer, Karyn Green; secretary, Margaret Keyes; with committee members, Faye Lawrence, Laraine Jeffs, Lee-Ann Wein, Kim Stephen-Pope. *WATAC NSW Inc. News* May 2020 announced: 'WATAC has come through its season of quiet and reflection. Now it is ready to grow and

60. Interview with Mary Crimmins by email, 1 December 2020.

develop' with many fresh initiatives under discussion.

At its 2021 AGM, held on Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions, WATAC NSW Inc. adopted a new Constitution developed by Laraine Jeffs and Karyn Green, and elected a new executive and committee: president, Andrea Dean; vice-president, Tracy McEwan; treasurer, Karyn Green; secretary, Danielle Lynch; with committee members, Laraine Jeffs, Louise Roach, Cristina Lledo Gomez, Margaret Keyes, Rachel McLean, and Kim Stephen-Pope. Life membership was awarded to Bernice Moore, Margaret Knowlden and Maureen Watterson.

The new Constitution restated in fresh language the vision of WATAC: to model 'a church based on a discipleship of equals', and a mission that:

- honours and celebrates women's faith seeking understanding of the divine;
- promotes dialogue where the voices of feminist and women theologians can be heard;
- works for greater opportunities for women's ministry, leadership and decision making;
- provides community to those longing for an inclusive church;
- stands in solidarity with our First Nations Peoples in their quest for full recognition and full reconciliation;
- acts for social and environmental justice in local and global issues;
- practises collaborative organisation and governance.⁶¹

Among the WATAC projects birthed in 2020–21 despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 were:

- *WATAC Presents* (via Zoom), held on the second Wednesday of every second month at 6 pm, Sydney/Melbourne/Canberra time, featuring conversation with current and future women leaders in the fields of social justice, theology, biblical studies, church reform and feminism.
- *Australian Women Preach*, an initiative of WATAC and the Grail in Australia, launched on Zoom on International Women's Day 2021, featuring thirty Australian women who preach the Gospel on consecutive Sundays. It aims to model the church we want to be: diverse, inclusive and welcoming.
- A Zoom and 'in-the-room' gathering of women members of the Australian Plenary Council, for the purpose of getting to know each other and for conversation and sharing, on 29 April 2021.

As WATAC moves on to embrace a new future, the words of another popular WATAC song seem to capture the moment:

The bonding power of woman
Brings new hope upon the earth;

61. *Women and the Australian Church (WATAC) Incorporated Constitution*, amended by a special resolution at the AGM on 6 March 2021.

The hollowness of empires
The timelessness of birth.
Begin the celebrations
Give image to the real
Full consciousness of Being
Only woman can reveal.⁶²

62. Words from the song, 'Moments', by Helen Kearins RSM.