Report for
32nd Queensland Synod
May 2016

Report from
The Moderator

Context

The Synod sits in a network of inter-related councils of the Uniting Church in Australia.

Its responsibilities according to the Constitution are to “have general oversight, direction and administration of the church's worship, witness and service within its bounds. It shall exercise executive, administrative, pastoral and disciplinary functions over the presbyteries within its bounds …”

The role of moderator is to chair the meetings of the Synod, and as expressed in the regulations and variously over the years in reviews and resolutions, to give “pastoral and spiritual leadership to the life of the church in Queensland”.

The context of ministry, subject to our conciliar structure, is thus the life of the church in Queensland.

Much of the Synod’s work is defined in the *Together on the way* term “organised for mission”. It does not do the mission of the church; its role is to resource, support, and exercise general oversight of the mission of the church that is fulfilled through congregations, presbyteries, agencies, schools, residential colleges and other bodies.

Report

Identified priorities by members of the 31st Synod

The members of the 31st Synod engaged in an Open Space discernment process which identified eight themes. Although the Council expressed no view on these themes and as a result they lack the authority of the full discernment of the Synod as a council of the church, these themes have nevertheless contributed to dialogue in the church's councils about directions and priorities. So I have kept them before the Church in my deputations to congregations and presbyteries. They in turn make their own discernment against their own mission and context of ministry.

Particular themes for the life of the church in which I was involved were:

Developing leadership

This is being addressed in a number of ways.

Firstly, through the development of a Grad Cert in Ministry and Leadership through the Board for Christian Formation. The first round of this course has been directed at people in congregational placements. Fourteen people are in the first cohort. A second cohort is planned to start later this year. Secondly, presbytery leadership has been encouraged and offered opportunities for the development of their ministry; some have taken that up. Thirdly, a leadership development framework is being constructed in consultation with the Board for Christian Formation, presbyteries and agencies. The scope of this leadership development framework is at the time of writing not yet described. My hope is that it will include, beyond congregational ministry, the issues facing chaplaincy ministry, lay leadership in the councils of the church, lay ministry, and ministry in the leadership of agencies, schools and colleges.

Resource sharing

In this synodial term, the Synod and the presbyteries have developed further processes to share resources across presbyteries and support ministry across the state. Synod and presbyteries developed a budget discernment process that identified major categories to the presbytery budgets and then allocated resources against those categories, identifying and prioritising projects submitted by the presbyteries for funding. This has allowed for greater clarity in seeing where resources are being directed. The challenge for the Synod and presbyteries is to monitor resource sharing so that we are being both equitable and fruitful in the funds released to our stewardship. There is a temptation to cost-shift, i.e. to argue for a pilot project to get up and then expect the wider church to fund it. The discipline for the church is to recognise an age-old truth about mission work; that the resources for the mission are in the mission—only then does such development work become sustainable and fruitful over time.

Developing healthy relationships between the parts of the church

This is an ongoing journey for us in the complexity of our organisational structures. The challenges are around goals, roles, and boundaries: where are we headed, what do we expect of each other? How do we say "we're on track"; and how do we keep from being co-dependent, internally focused, and conflicted over resource sharing—the parts seeing the whole only through their own perspective?

Another major challenge is the issue of authority and responsibility. If a council of the church has responsibility for an aspect of the church's life, then it must have authority and capability to address that responsibility, and the relationships with other councils should support that authority and responsibility.

The attempts of *Together on the way, enriching community* over the past six years have been to articulate some priorities for our life. The main advantage of this work so far has been that we are at least collaborating on priorities together, and this is no small achievement. Through the development of the Presbytery/Synod Interface meeting, and the development of new governing documents for UnitingCare Queensland, we are advancing deeper clarity about roles and expectations. We have yet to articulate clear goals, and we are yet to develop mechanisms for being able to say "we're on track". Our inter-conciliarity also means that each council exercises its own discernment, "giving heed" as they see fit to what the goals should be. The presbytery is a key council in this regard, as it has "such oversight as is necessary to the life and mission of the church in the area committed to it" (Constitution para 26). In many ways we are still, after 40 years of life, working out what it means to be the Uniting Church. At times our regulations point in different directions than can be seen from the *Basis of Union* and the Constitution, and the cultural norms that drive our behaviours as church are still being conformed to the vision of the church as described in the *Basis of Union*. So, while we're not there yet, we're on the way.

Holy Spirit as defibrillator

It's an odd appellation, yet how closely it goes to the core of the issue; our hearts need constant renewal and "defibrillating". The time of being in this position has caused me to see, for myself and for the church, that many of our issues are matters of the heart: of identity, of where we find our security and our purpose; of where we find our hope and what gives us self-respect and confidence.

It's understandable that we are at times seduced to things like size and prestige and position. That in the face of the challenges before us we experience that which comes with forced dislocation and shock. That out of our fear of what the church might become, or what we might perceive it is becoming, we lapse into cynicism and disengagement.

It is the faithfulness of our Lord, who comes by the power of the Spirit in word and sacrament, in the stranger in need, who is fulfilling his purposes in history, who calls us out of these dead ends. This is our foundation and our confidence. Our prayer is that in the power of that same Spirit we might know him as he comes, and follow.

Representations to government

On two occasions I, with other heads of churches, had meetings with the premier. I raised issues of coal seam gas exploration and development—particularly the impact on local communities. I also raised youth justice matters, support for refugees by the state government, gambling proliferation, alcohol management in Brisbane and mental health care.

Synod Standing Committee

At the last Synod I committed to work on this. With the good offices of the general secretaries and particularly our executive officer Kellie Broderick and governance officer Belinda Bones, we have developed a reporting plan so that the Synod Standing Committee (SSC) can exercise its regulatory responsibilities. The Presbytery/Synod Interface meeting receives the reports of the moderator and general secretary and the minutes of the SSC. It may be that in the future the Synod Standing Committee agrees to publish its minutes online.

General secretary position in the life of the church

Given Gary Doyle's resignation from the position some ten months after he took up the role, the Synod Standing Committee undertook an exit interview process with him and also held a workshop to address the church's expectations of the role. Presbytery representatives, former moderators, former general secretaries and the general secretary selection panel were invited.

This workshop helped in clarifying expectations around the role. It is a complex role—it has executive officer roles in terms of the Synod office. In terms of relationships with other councils, it is very much a “relationship manager” role, with some executive and pastoral capacity. In terms of the agencies and schools, its role is to hold the interest of the whole and facilitate those entities’ roles in the mission of the church.

The workshop helped SSC come to a clearer picture of the role, and some changes to the position description were made as a result.

Conclusion

The church in the West has been facing major challenges for the past 40 years. Movements of the Spirit have come and gone, with varying influences on the church’s life. We are in many ways struggling to come to terms with the fluidity of our context. In times of national crisis, we are welcomed for the role we play; dark and sinful parts of our history have had the light of a royal commission shone into them; we have given sometimes unpopular leadership where the dignity of people has been abrogated by government policy; we have experienced a less-than-benign environment at times when we have confessed our faith; there are movements which are seeking to put us in the most negative light and push us out of public life. Our responses have been sometimes reactionary and nostalgic; some ask us to move to a posture that looks to others like appeasement and relativism.

Some of us are tired from keeping a model of church going because that’s the model we know and love.

Societies have their own trajectories; the challenge for the church will be to keep returning to those ways of being that have been life-giving since the church was formed. I’m thinking of gathering around word and sacrament, being formed in the image of Jesus, building up one another in love, the art of forgiveness and reconciliation, forming disciples who can “perceive the times”, serving others in a way which bears witness to the dignity with which Jesus ennobled us all, and keeping before society issues that just need to be addressed.

These are as old as the church, but they are forever being called to be re-presented in ways that encourage us, empower us, and enlighten us, and in ways that are intelligible to those around us.

Key achievements/initiatives

- development of the Grad Cert program for those in placements
- ongoing development of presbytery/synod relationship
- development of new governing documents for UnitingCare Queensland
- getting around the presbyteries.

Challenges/risks as we progress

- ongoing decline due to inflexibility and lack of imagination and faithfulness in responding to the challenges and opportunities in the current context
- inability to supply a new generation of leadership to the church.

Issues to be addressed

- leadership development
- quality relationships between councils
- developing our capacity to translate identified priorities into actions
- building our capacity to demonstrate that the church is a safe place for minors and the vulnerable
- ongoing decline due to inflexibility and lack of imagination and faithfulness in responding to the challenges and opportunities in the current context
- inability to supply a new generation of leadership to the church.

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