Report for
32nd Queensland Synod
May 2016

Report from
General Secretary

Context

The office of the general secretary provides collaborative leadership to develop the Synod's capacity for mission and ministry in partnership with presbyteries, congregations, institutions and other Synod bodies. The general secretary is also responsible for the effective and efficient operations of the Synod office and business units through delegations to the Finance and Property director, associate general secretary and the executive officer corporate.

In offering this report, I acknowledge that I have been in the position since 18 December 2015, and all of the accomplishments and initiatives contained in this report are attributed to others. In particular, I would like to start this report by acknowledging the tremendous team effort that coalesced to make this office and the Executive Management Team (EMT) function efficiently this past synodial term. It was certainly a term of hard work and at times in isolation as the EMT of the Synod saw most positions turnover, and in some cases more than once.

I would like to acknowledge and record my thanks for the ministry of:

- Gary Doyle as general secretary of the Queensland Synod (January to December 2016). Much of the content of this report is work started and/or undertaken by Mr Doyle during his term as general secretary.
- Rev John Cox who continued his service as general secretary from the close of the 31st Synod until January 2015 and then as associate general secretary to February 2016.
- Rev Heather den Houting who replaced Rev Cox in January of this year as acting associate general secretary and is currently in this role.
- Neil King who held the position of director of Finance and Property Services from 16 February to 2 April 2015.
- Peter Cranna who replaced Mr King as director of Finance and Property Services on 13 July 2015.

Our identified priorities

By way of background, I want to just remind us that we have been travelling for a while towards this vision (*Together on the way, enriching community*); this description of the kind of church we want to be. The image of 'the wheel' listed the things that are important to us. We have been working on this since 2010 when we established it as a ten-year vision of what we might become.

We set in place some initial priority directions for the first few years—naming the things we needed to concentrate on in that initial period. These we called our Priority Directions. We have progressed in these areas—sometimes a long way, in other areas we still have some work to do. But we recognised too that along the way our priorities might shift as we encountered change both within the church and in the wider world. We would need to respond to these changes in order to continue on our way.

So we recognised that our roadmap toward 2020 and beyond should include some key review points—and planned for one of these to occur in 2016. That is where we are now; checking in to see how we are progressing toward our vision by discerning what's important to us now, and to identify the areas for our priority for the next few years.

Taking into account the initial set of priority directions, the work of the 31st Synod open space, the discernment of Synod Standing Committee and the Presbytery/Synod Interface committee, and the ways in which the world around us has changed, SSC has identified a set of five draft priority directions for the next period of our life together. These are:

1. make and equip disciples
2. grow the whole church
3. connect with children, youth and families
4. develop and deploy transformational leadership
5. contribute to nurturing stronger communities.

The prime focus of the Synod support team is to develop sustainable mission-oriented organisation for the church in Queensland.

Report

Much of the detailed activities of the general secretary and Synod support team are covered within the subsequent reports: Synod Standing Committee; Finance and Property Services; Uniting Communications; Project Officer – Mission Engagement; and Synod Advisory Committee on Ministerial Placements. I would like to highlight a few initiatives and activities.

Youth ministry initiatives

The Synod is exploring how to most effectively support youth ministry across the church in Queensland. Some congregations and presbyteries are able to resource ministry with teenagers but most lack the critical mass and resources to provide successful youth programs.

The two challenges are how to keep Uniting Church young people connected to the church, each other and God across a sparsely occupied space, and how to engage with young people who are currently not associated with the church, inviting them to consider their response to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

After time spent with families and at school, the third space where young people spend most time is on social media. On average, Australian teenagers are spending almost an entire day of the week (21 hours and 48 minutes) on their smartphones. The Synod is exploring whether an effective youth ministry strategy for the Uniting Church Queensland Synod can be conducted virtually in this online space.

This is “greenfield” work and there are a number of issues to consider before the Synod initiates any ministry activity in this way. It does however offer the potential to provide a ministry with young people isolated in congregations that are predominantly composed of older adults, and to those with no current faith commitment.

Easter Madness 2016

Just over 100 young people and youth leaders from all over Queensland joined together over the Easter long weekend to take part in Easter Madness 2016. It was both exciting and humbling to be able to take time out to walk through the Easter story together over the weekend and focus on who Jesus is. It was great seeing God working in lives so deeply throughout these experiences. We also had a plethora of amazingly fun group activities that were running all weekend—from Battle of the Sexes to bush dancing to fast-paced group games including Hungry Hippos and Angry Birds.

Feedback from the campers has been overwhelmingly positive. They have stated that they had an amazing weekend—both in their faith having grown as well as having a whole lot of fun—and cannot wait until Easter Madness 2017.

Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Royal Commission) continues to run and has been granted an extension to December 2017. The Uniting Church in Australia has maintained constant engagement with the Royal Commission through responses to discussion papers, by invitation to roundtable discussions, appearances at public hearings and responding to requests for information.

Importantly in September 2015 the Royal Commission delivered their recommendations in relation to types of redress which they believe should be provided to survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and some indication of the methodology of delivery for that redress. Assembly had responded by developing a national redress framework. The Queensland Synod is working towards the finalisation of a process to provide redress at a Synod level consistent with that framework.

The Queensland Synod has over the past 13 years met with a number of survivors from many varying activities and agencies of the church in a redress-styled approach which involved many of the aspects recommended by the Royal Commission.

The legal team within the Synod have reviewed the outcomes and findings of the public hearings and associated work of the Royal Commission and provided guidance and assistance to the church. All areas of the church are reviewing and revising policy and procedures to work towards best practice in child safety throughout as they implement the outcomes of their reviews. At a Synod level one of the significant bodies of work achieved through collaboration with congregations and presbyteries has resulted in the launch of a suite of materials contained in the Safe Ministry with Children program.

Safe Ministry with Children

Thank you to all the presbyteries, congregations, agencies and schools who responded to the 2015 compliance audit requested by the Synod Standing Committee in August 2015. Results were reviewed and have led to quality improvements within the Synod.

These improvements affect around two-thirds of congregations conducting some form of activities with children. In response to feedback, audit results, Royal Commission learnings and best practice recommendations, the Synod Standing Committee has approved a shift to ‘Safe Ministry with Children’. The development of these resources has been collaborative work between Synod support staff, presbyteries and congregations. The new package is not a fundamental change. It is an improvement in quality, a sharpening of focus and streamlining of materials to better meet the express needs of congregations.

This brings a new suite of resources to support the continued ministry efforts being undertaken by presbyteries and congregations. The Synod website has been updated to allow for open access to the policy, process and tools. By adopting and utilising these new resources, presbyteries and congregations are assisted to address their legislated responsibilities for a child and youth risk management strategy.

Uniting Communications

Strategic planning to refresh and renew the purpose and currency of Synod’s communication platforms is being undertaken. An editorial advisory panel has been formed. Ben Rogers replaced Rohan Salmon in April 2016 as cross-platform editor/producer.

An internal communications review of the Synod office functioning has been undertaken and the report has made several recommendations about how the Synod office might improve its processes in order to better service the wider needs of the church.

Christmas and Easter campaigns were again run successfully with a great response from the church.

Project workers in both the justice and green church field keep the Synod office properly briefed about significant movements and concerns. The wider Synod is kept informed through regular communications.

Admission of ministers

A small but steady stream of ministers from other denominations is being received as ministers of the Uniting Church. As this process involves both state and national processes, the timelines are sometimes quite lengthy. However the process to assess the suitability of applicants is clear and robust.

Placements process review

A placements review was initiated in 2015 and an updated report is being brought to the Synod in Session.

Sexual Misconduct Complaints Committee (SSMCC)

The committee has a number of people appropriately trained to manage the processes of sexual misconduct complaints. Annual training was held to keep the panel, advisers and appropriate presbytery representatives updated on all aspects of the process.

Frontier Services

The patrol ministries previously operated by Frontier Services were transferred to the operation of the Queensland Synod. Funding was provided in 2015/2016 but remains uncertain for the future.

Blair Athol

The activities of Blair Athol Accommodation and Support Program that were oversighted by a board appointed by three congregations have been merged with the operations of UnitingCare Community.

Beneficiary Fund

A decision by the Federal Government about the taxing of defined benefit superannuation of public servants will have an impact on some retired Uniting Church ministers by reducing their current Centrelink benefits. Representations have been made to the Minister, local members and government officials but we have yet to see a positive outcome.

Key achievements/initiatives

Shalom Christian College: A considerable amount of Synod resources have been put into Shalom Christian College. It now has a stable, balanced and experienced board who have returned modest surpluses in the last two years with substantial growth in enrolments. The college still bears considerable debt to the Synod and will be challenged by the contingent liability on Crystal Creek campus.

Governance National Conversation: The previous general secretary with the assistance of Board Matters successfully raised the issue of the need to review our complex governance practices in the face of corporate legislative changes. In particular, there are challenges associated with taxation, the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission, the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Sexual Abuse etc. The governance conversation is still on the general secretaries and Assembly Standing Committee's agendas, but is now championed by the general secretary of the Synod of South Australia.

Budget: The previous general secretary instituted a spending review of the Synod office and introduced a Budget Development Oversight Committee to review the expenditure of presbyteries' operations and strategic projects. Specifically, the spending review focused on Trinity College, the Synod support organisational and committee structures.

UnitingCare governing documents

Considerable resources have been invested into the By-laws, constitution, delegations and reporting framework for UnitingCare. This has been a cooperative effort oversighted by the Governance Nomination Remuneration Committee and resourced through Board Matters, the Synod support team and UnitingCare. It is expected that the documents will be approved at the May Standing Committee meeting.

By-laws

In the last few years the By-laws have become disjointed with amendments being made in a new style and not integrated with the older By-laws. Further, there were references in the By-laws to bodies that no longer exist (e.g. Synod Leadership Team), to By-laws that have been repealed or changed and to regulations that have changed. The Synod Standing Committee has approved a new consolidation that will appear on the Synod website during April 2016. There is further work to complete to modernise some By-laws to reflect current practice.

Challenges/risks as we progress

Executive turnover

The major challenge for the Synod support team is the turnover in executive staff which has impacted priorities, communication and corporate memory. I am the sixth general secretary since 2008 and the long-term position is expected to be filled at the 32nd Synod. There have been three people in the director FAPS role since 2014, and three people in the associate general secretary role since 2014. The associate general secretary role will be filled after the appointment of a general secretary.

Possible outcomes of the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Abuse

Apart from a possible redress scheme, there are increasing societal expectations about the oversight/accountability of all entities working with children. In the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania they have resolved to incorporate the church (rather than the Property Trust) so that accountability can be demonstrated. There is an imperative to continue the national governance conversation so that the church is well informed to make fundamental decisions on its polity at the appropriate time.

Issues to be addressed

- Leadership development (particularly in placements).
- Finding better ways to communicate between councils, boards, commissions, committees and church members.
- Capacity to stop activities or relinquish control over bodies that are no longer core to the church's mission.

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