



General Proposal 1

Reappointment of Rev Heather den Houting as General Secretary, UCA Qld Synod

That the Synod

Extend the appointment of Rev Heather den Houting as General Secretary, Queensland Synod until 31 December 2023.

The scope of a proposal

Rev den Houting has a five-year contract as General Secretary that is due to conclude on 31 May 2021. This extension has been recommended by the Synod Standing Committee (SSC). The committee voted eight for, one against, with one abstention.

Rationale

Background

Since her appointment in 2016, Rev den Houting has been part of four reviews based on the set of Key Performance Indicators set by the Synod Standing Committee for this role. Each review has affirmed the significant executive capacity that she has brought to the role.

Rev den Houting has committed herself across her time as General Secretary to significant formation and coaching.

The SSC appointed a Panel of the Moderator, Mr John Lister (the then Chair of the Remuneration and Nomination Committee), Mr Nigel Alexander (Chair of UnitingCare Qld), Rev David Busch (Presbytery Minister, South Moreton), and Dr Marilyn Healy (Chair of PRC, Bremer Brisbane Presbytery, member of SSC) to oversee a review of Rev den Houting's performance in the role and bring a recommendation to the SSC.

The Panel believed that there needed to be a robust process of consultation for the SSC to be able to bring a recommendation with confidence to the Synod in Session. The panel appointed Ms Roisin Duffy of Blue Sky Careers to undertake the review. Ms Duffy had previously resourced the church for two General Secretary Appointment Panels and conducted the first review of Rev den Houting's performance in the role. The panel felt that Ms Duffy had a good appreciation of the role and the organisational life of the Queensland Synod.

Ms Duffy conducted interviews with 33 people across the life of the church; members of the SSC, Presbytery Ministers, Chairs of Synod Committees, key personnel in agencies, ministerial and lay leaders across the UCA in Queensland, and one General Secretary from another Synod.

General Secretary Performance

Following the appointment of the General Secretary in 2016 a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) was developed and endorsed by the SSC. The performance of General Secretary and the KPIs have been reviewed against KPIs four times since her appointment. On each occasion the review has generally been very positive.

In 2020 the KPIs were updated by the SSC to reflect the changed environment within the Synod, the outcomes of the 2019 KPI and “360” review, and the expectations of the future as being identified by Project Plenty. The 2019 review identified building stronger relationships as an area needing further focus.

Rev den Houting has served through a time of significant challenge and change in the life of the Uniting Church in Queensland. It has been a period requiring significant change management and leadership from the General Secretary. The requirement for participation and responses to Royal Commissions, a need for stronger risk management and the growing obligations of institutional compliance (to the extent hitherto associated with corporate business entities) has required the General Secretary to focus substantially on these areas.

We note the following as some of the key achievements that Rev. den Houting has led over her time as General Secretary:

- *Putting operational resources to **Together on the Way***
- *Governance review of Synod boards and Committees*
- *Responding to the Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sex Abuse leading to the Implementation of an Interim Redress Scheme*
- *Resourcing SSC on Synod directions: (in consultation with Presbytery leadership)*
- *Safe Ministry Framework and resources*
- *Leadership development framework*
- *Stewardship fee agreement with UnitingCare Queensland (UCQ)*
- *Place of schools in the mission of the church; strengthened oversight of schools’ ministry, particularly the review of Shalom Christian College, Townsville, and engagement with Calvary Christian College.*
- *Major review and redesign of Synod office functions*
- *Diversity policy*
- *Enterprise risk framework*
- *UCA nationally: leadership in Uniting Women’s conference, Regulation review, Uniting Leaders, resourced Assembly Standing Committee; led Synod collaboration on cost savings measures*
- *Supported the church in its relationship with the Presbyterian Church and the PMSA*
- *Covenant Action Plan development*
- *Strongly supported the development of Wontulp bi Buya (Ecumenical Indigenous training college in Cairns)*
- *Review of Alexandra Park Conference Centre*
- *Matured the Synod’s Audit and Risk capacity*
- *Project Plenty establishment including extensive consultation process and requisite external guidance and facilitation*

- *Focus on developing the funding base for the Synod Office*
- *Leadership development resourcing – Grad Cert Program and Plentiful Leadership Program*
- *Developed quality governance support for the SSC*
- *Preparation for the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability*
- *Resourced Board for Christian Formation and Trinity College Queensland through significant change.*

Synod expectations from the General Secretary for the future

Apart from Rev den Houtings' competencies and achievements, the task group recognised that what the Queensland Synod would require of the General Secretary role in the next few years was highly significant in informing the outcome of the review.

The task group identified five key priorities for the General Secretary's role over the next few years:

1. Ongoing leadership in developing structures and oversight processes to ensure the church in Qld is achieving missional and strategic goals and managing risk in a challenging environment. (Covid / Royal commissions / age demographic and ministry impact of congregational life / structures of agencies / organisational and cultural coherence of the UCA / clarity of the church's purpose and stewarding of strategic resources to promote and develop that mission.)
2. Leadership capacity to resource and strengthen the various aspects of the church's ministry so that entities - particularly congregational life - can fulfil their specific goals and priority development areas, especially as discerned in the light of Project Plenty.
3. Capacity to model and promote collaborative leadership, helping the Synod Office work harmoniously with the various entities in the life of the church in Qld, and with each other.
4. Continued development of the Synod Office as efficient, responsive, and financially secure, as it serves the mission of the church expressed primarily through Congregations, Presbyteries, schools and agencies.
5. Participating with Congregations, Presbyteries and agencies in exploring emerging ways the church can fulfil its mission.

These key themes are consistent with the General Secretary's Position Description.

The 2020 Review

The process of consultation has been described as above. The Panel received a report from the consultant, the Moderator discussed the report with the General Secretary, and the Panel prepared a report, with the consultant's report, to the SSC.

The report of the consultation with the 33 respondents noted some key themes:

1. Recent years have seen an increasing need for change where religious bodies have been called to account and required to demonstrate levels of attention to risk management, governance and compliance that had previously been the purview of corporate Australia. Rev den Houting has brought a high level of skill and acumen to developing these capacities in the life of the church in general and the Synod Office in particular.
2. Strong strategic leadership that is ready to make tough decisions. "She has shown a clear and purposeful understanding of what needs to be addressed. Her deep calling and commitment to always act in the best interests of the church leaves no doubt that she will face the uncomfortable, surface the festering, and make the tough and unpopular decisions." Rev den

Houting has provided credible, objective, and valuable contributions to the SSC, institutions under the Synod’s oversight, and the wider church.

3. Attention to risk. While some have found her language around risk challenging, Rev den Houting has helped the church identify that risk management is not about “not having faith”, but about ensuring that strategic intent and energy are not imperilled by a failure to identify and address the risks to the mission of the church.
4. Advice based on independent evaluation and reliable analysis. Heather has brought a thoroughness to seeking advice, from both within and outside the church, on challenging issues so that quality decisions can be made by the relevant authority. The role and performance of the Synod Office in the life of the church has also been subject to quality reviews, which in turn have led to organisational changes that seek to better orientate the office to serve the church.
5. Ethical standards and modelling change management. Rev den Houting’s approach to her role has been to lead by example, serving the church and facilitating change in a way that is helping the church experience generational change.
6. Relationships and engagement with Presbyteries and Presbytery Ministers. Responding to the external drivers for enhancing the church’s risk management, governance and compliance capacities, Rev den Houting has sought to ensure that Presbyteries and Congregations have strong organisational support through the Synod Office. This focus has come at something of a cost to her personal attention to nurturing collaborative partnerships with Presbytery leadership. With future directions now focusing much more on resourcing and supporting Presbyteries and Congregations as Project Plenty moves to into implementation, the role of General Secretary will need to turn more to collaborative and empowering engagement with Presbyteries and congregations. Rev den Houting has welcomed this as a new focus of work for the General Secretary going forward.
7. Strong executive team and professionalisation of the Synod Office. Rev den Houting’s push for change has set a strident pace over the past four years. She has prioritised building a strong core team in the Synod Office which is committed to high standards of professional competence, performance, service delivery and ethical behaviour. This executive team has been served well by the General Secretary with encouragement and support for their roles, and in their own development. Overall, the Synod Office has been professionalised, processes have been streamlined and improved, and custom and practice arrangements, which previously relied heavily on personal relationships to get work done, have been replaced by a sharper focus on service quality and accountability. These changes have seen a higher than usual staff changes in some areas. This is a constant work in progress to achieve the desired levels of efficiency and excellence in the complex and wide range of the Synod Office’s work. Rev den Houting has demonstrated a commitment to quality external feedback in terms of the Synod Office’s performance. That feedback has indicated significant positive change in the way recipients of the Synod Office’s services value its work.

The Panel and the Synod Standing Committee believe that the extension of her term to the end of 2023 will ensure continuity of oversight over what will be a demanding, difficult yet exciting time for the Qld Synod. The leadership of the Church – institutions, Congregations, Presbyteries, and Synod – will continue to adapt to a Covid-19 informed world and respond to the discernments coming out of the Project Plenty journey.



Rev den Houting has close to her heart the mission of God in Jesus Christ to the world. She will bring her best to support the Church's fulfilment of its purpose.

Proposers

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