



#realunitingchurch

Report from **Presbytery of The Downs**

Context

The extensive area which is the focus for mission and ministry for congregations and Uniting Church in Australia agencies in the Presbytery of The Downs incorporates large provincial towns, small towns and rural communities.

Large sparsely populated areas, characterised as 'remote', are serviced by two patrol ministries; Leichhardt Patrol and Cunnamulla-Burke and Wills Patrol.

Many communities are responding to patterns of population decline, large-scale changes in agricultural business and the relatively recent impact of the mining industry developing in the Surat Basin.

Priority Directions

Following the 32nd Synod, the Presbytery of The Downs has intentionally focussed on developing a stronger and more corporate understanding of mission within its bounds.

This approach has incorporated elements of the five Synod Priority Directions particularly in the areas of leadership and Christ-centeredness.

Report

The question that confronts the Presbytery is how does a Presbytery of 22 identifiable congregations/clusters with 35 worshipping congregations, two patrol ministries, two Blue Care chaplains, one hospital chaplain and one school chaplain promote ministry and mission within its somewhat flexible boundaries.

The Presbytery's response was to form a mission task group in late 2016 with the purpose of identifying the missional priorities of Presbytery in the short to medium term. To assist in initiating this process, a two-day workshop was held in February this year with members of the task group, Standing Committee and the Pastoral Relations Committee to brainstorm some possibilities. These two days along with the work of Carolyn Kitto have formed the basis for the task group. Their work is anticipated to come to fruition shortly with any proposals being put to the November Presbytery meeting for consideration.

A major step to date has been the significant resourcing undertaken by the Presbytery for Highfields Community Church. This is an exciting church plant now numbering upwards of 180 people, seeking a ministry base to operate from in the future. Without the legacy of significant historical financial resources and existing buildings which can be sold to finance a community centre, church plants such as Highfields (as well as many of the church plants in new developments across this state) will struggle in mission.

In late 2016 the Presbytery purchased from Frontier Services the building complex at Birdsville. This will provide the patrol minister with a base to work from and to maintain ministry in the Diamantina Shire. The purchase also retains the building for the whole of the church as it has considerable historical significance in that it was one of the initial places where John Flynn established a presence.

As in other rural presbyteries, the impact of rural decline and depopulation is affecting the capacity of local congregations to sustain ministry and to maintain existing facilities. The Presbytery has shown generosity and commitment in supporting the mission work of other congregations in the past.

We are particularly grateful for project funding from Synod budgets which has assisted our support now and in the past.

The extent of need in rural and small congregations and the decreasing resource base across the Presbytery means a future in which we will have limited capacity to meet these needs solely from our own resources.

Challenges/risks as we progress

Maintaining a Uniting Church identity in existing small congregations

Increasingly, the Presbytery is finding that those who attend represent diverse denominational experiences. For example, in a small congregation within the Presbytery of 20 attenders, seven have previous denominational affiliations! In these congregations enthusiastic, newly arrived Christians with leadership ambitions have little connection with the ethos and theological alignment of the Uniting Church in Australia. The challenge for us is to continue to support and develop these new leaders and at the same time enable them to embrace the Uniting Church ethos.

Maintaining a Uniting Church presence in key locations

In remote locations and rural towns, the local capacity to support fully stipended ministry is diminishing to a point where external support needs to be considered. The challenge is for the Presbytery, in consultation with Synod, to determine which locations are critical for the Uniting Church to maintain an ongoing presence.

Ecumenical cooperation is a valid option; the key issue is that the desire for this to occur locally is not necessarily reflected in the centres of decision-making in the churches.

Cultural change/missional change

Presbytery consultations are identifying the need for congregations to establish new ways of engaging with their community.

Other congregations attempting to sustain their proud community connections of the past are becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of an aging membership.

Those congregations that continue to seek a 'comfortable' option of self-focussed ministry with the ministry agent primarily providing care to them, are unlikely to have a viable future.

The challenge for the Presbytery is to equip current and future ministry agents with the skills to engage and lead congregations in finding fresh ways of witness, worship and service in and with their wider community. This means cultural change in the expectations of Christian community and a willingness to release the ministry agent to explore further mission opportunities.

Proposal

It is proposed that the 33rd Synod receive this report.

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