

Report for 31st Queensland Synod October 2014



Report from **Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee**



Context:

The Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee has been tasked with fostering and facilitating ecumenical relationships with other Christian churches in formal and informal ways.

Current membership of the committee: Rev Kaye Ronalds (chairperson), John Agnew, Neil Ballment, Ps Richard Lance, Rev Bruce Johnson, Rev Craig Batty, Rev Dr Clive Ayre (Queensland Churches Environmental Network).

Responses to our Priority Directions since last Synod

Enabling a demonstrated commitment to the shared Call and Vision

Uniting in Christ

Members of the committee have sought to grow in their understanding of their own faith as well as to share with others through attendance and participation in local ecumenical events and in the work of Queensland Churches Together (QCT).

Queensland Churches Together is supported financially by the Synod, and along with the Roman Catholic Church and Anglican Church, we are the main sponsors of that work. Last November an additional \$10 000 one-off special donation was given by the Synod to further assist the work.

Thanks to the members of the Uniting Church who serve on the QCT commissions, and to Rev Bruce Johnson who was QCT president (April 2013-2014) and Rev Anne Hulbert who is a member of the QCT executive.

In May of this year the committee noted the loss of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Townsville Michael Putney from the ecumenical landscape in Queensland. Michael had been a long-term participant in the Roman Catholic Uniting Dialogue and was a lecturer at the Brisbane College of Theology. A measure of positive ecumenical relationships was the inclusion of Rev Bruce Johnson (representing the Moderator) and Rev Bruce Cornish (Presbytery Minister of North Queensland) in the funeral service in Townsville.

This committee joins the Christian Unity Working Group in inviting people to make a response to the World Council of Churches document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

Working towards our Priority Directions in the future

The committee has limited resources to do the work it would like to do in the future. This includes, as an important priority, encouraging and enabling Uniting Church members to be confident and respectful in sharing their faith with those of other Christian traditions, and in return listening to others as they share the insights of their own traditions. It has been noted that there is a pattern of diminishing funding for positions with an ecumenical focus in other churches.

We are seeking in the next 18 months to focus on one or two events which will enable opportunities for Uniting Church members to interact further with people of other denominations.

We are open to requests from individual congregations or agencies for speakers on topics.

Our website needs further attention to continue to provide relevant resources about current issues.

Responses to our Priority Directions since last Synod

Promoting a discipline of prayer and spirituality (individual and corporate)

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is held in the week leading up to Pentecost Sunday. Congregations were encouraged to use the resources on the QCT website in their local gatherings.

In the Redland Bay area near Brisbane, concerned members of local churches formed the Redlands for Refugees network and hosted a prayer vigil in April. Leaders from a variety of churches participated, with the Moderator addressing the gathering and offering prayers. The Scattered People choir performed some moving music written by refugees and asylum seekers.

Responses to our Priority Directions since last Synod

Engaging in opportunities for intentional, open community connections and partnerships

The Moderator and Sue Hutchinson (Synod Research Officer) worked with the social justice network and leaders from other churches to make a presentation to the Queensland Parliamentary Committee submissions on proposed changes to youth justice legislation. Brooke Prentis (Salvation Army), Rev Canon Richard Tutin, Major Bruce Robinson and Rev Kaye Ronalds made the presentation.

The Churches Together Indigenous Peoples Partnership (CTIPP) needs more funding to enable the project worker to be employed for more than two days per week.

Reconciliation services were held in three different locations in Brisbane during Reconciliation Week. Uniting Church members and Presbytery leaders were in attendance and continue to work towards building networks across churches to support Indigenous people in faith and life. A new event held on the evening before Australia Day in 2013 and 2014 was supported by Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee members and people from the wider Uniting Church.

A refugee and asylum seeker support rally held in May 2014 was well attended by people from across the Uniting Church and colleagues from other churches.

Members of this committee, synod staff and some ministry agents have joined in social justice networks across the churches.

Working towards our Priority Directions in the future

Queensland Churches Environmental Network (QCEN) has the potential to provide a common platform for information and partnerships on environmental matters, for example coal seam gas.

QCEN hosted a conversation at the Synod office to share how the Uniting Church is seeking to implement its Green Church aspirations. The speakers included Colleen Geyer, Director of Mission at UnitingCare Queensland, who described how the focus of her work on “sustainability” is an expression of God’s mission to the whole environment.

Rev Dr Clive Ayre’s book on eco-mission *Earth, Faith and Mission: The Theology and Practice of Earth Care* provided another opportunity for committee members to gather.

Key achievements/initiatives

Since the 30th Synod the committee has met on three occasions. In December a brainstorming session was held with the Synod Interfaith Relationships Committee on the roles and futures of the committees. That meeting decided, among other things, that we should have one or two projects to work towards. In April the committee shared in a profitable discussion with the Goodwill Committee of Toowoomba, a group containing people from a variety of faith and community perspectives.

Challenges/risks as we progress:

Someone has described this era as an ecumenical winter. Much of the enthusiasm for ecumenism that was evident last century and resulted in actual unions of churches such as our own has dissipated.

Nevertheless, practical cooperation on the ground across the state is quite strong. Covenants operate in some districts and other opportunities such as clergy offering support to all in need in some rural areas and in chaplaincy situations reminds us that Uniting in Christ is a reality at many levels. This is to be celebrated.

We need to be very intentional in what we do, given that our people and time resources are limited. We are intent on conveying to people that the work we do is a reflection of our commitment to Christ and his love for all people. If anything, our work has strengthened us in our love for Christ and his ways. We are determined that our work lead to further understanding and hospitality.

Issues to be addressed:

It is tempting in a season of ecumenical winter to think that we no longer need committees such as this one. The networking that occurs through this committee and through the QTC provides weight to the conversations that churches have in the public space and through their engagement with the government.

For example, when Education Queensland unilaterally decided to disband the long-standing Religious Education Advisory Committee, it was the energy from across the churches and particularly through the QCT Commission for Religious Education and Chaplaincy in Schools that enabled further conversation with Education Queensland. The members of that commission were able to bring forward their concerns about the changes in religious education policy, the paring back of staff for religious education and chaplaincy, and the diminished consultation with churches, faith leaders and Parents and Citizens Associations on matters concerning faith and education in public schools. Their concerns were raised by the heads of churches with the Premier and some adjustments were made although there remains ongoing concern. Without the vigilance of the people on that committee those changes would have simply been implemented with no visibility to the churches.

Chaplaincy in disaster settings. Rev Dr Stephen Robinson, National Disaster Recovery Officer for the Uniting Church is working with Rev Kaye Ronalds, Rev Bruce Johnson and QTC to establish an accreditation and training process for chaplaincy in disaster settings.

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