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HOPE
SYNOD 36



Report from
Presbytery of The Downs



[Image provided by author: Photo taken at Spring Creek QLD - Sunflower - the National Flower of Ukraine]

Report

Presbytery of The Downs is located on the lands of the Giabal, Jarowair, Wakka Wakka, Gooragooby, Kambuwal, Banrungam, Kooma, Bigambul, Mandandanji, Gunggari, Kenja and Bidgari people.

The broad area for congregational and agency mission within the bounds of the Presbytery include large regional towns Toowoomba (approx. pop. 170 000), Warwick (approx. pop. 21 000), Stanthorpe (approx. pop. 5400), Chinchilla (approx. pop. 6 600), Dalby (approx. pop. 12 700), Oakey (approx. pop. 4 500), Roma (approx. pop. 6 800), Goondiwindi (approx. pop. 6 300) and St George (approx. pop. 3 000).

There are 27 Uniting Church congregations supported by 5 Lay Lead Ministry Teams and 16 Ministry Agents and a dedicated team of Local Lay Pastors, retired Ministers and Lay Preachers. Surrounding these centres are many smaller towns and rural communities more lightly populated areas are supported by two patrol ministries, the Leichhardt Patrol, which is based out of Chinchilla and runs North and South along the Leichhardt Highway. This patrol has been funded by a combination of support from the Presbytery and congregations both within and beyond the Presbytery and is currently under review. The Cunnamulla Burke & Wills Patrol, based out of Charleville, covering most of the Southwest of the Presbytery (half of the area of the Presbytery) and is funded by Frontier Services. The Presbytery also supports the ministry of 3 Chaplains, one each at Scots PGC in Warwick, Darling Downs Health Services and UnitingCare BlueCare in Toowoomba.

This Presbytery is called to be present alongside the communities within its bounds. We have strong, growing ecumenical links across the Presbytery and continue to work with other churches to bring the gospel hope to rural Queensland. We are also engaged in a very active interfaith network that supports and encourages peace and harmony across the region.

Tell us what your key priorities since the last Synod have been.

Since the last Synod, the Presbytery has been focused on living out its 2022 plan to KNOW GOD, CONNECT, DO IT! and WORK TOGETHER; we we have discovered that these four priorities (discerned over some years) fit well with the Shared Life, Flourishing Communities priorities of Project Plenty - Discipleship, Transforming Communities, Fit for Purpose and Life Together. This has assisted the Presbytery to engage in conversations that inspire and encourage local congregations to live out and refocus their lives on the mission of God.

A Life and Witness consultation of the Leichhardt Patrol has engaged the Presbytery in a wider conversation (Presbytery Review) to reimagine how we will resource the communities currently supported by this ministry as well as other small communities within the Presbytery. A draft report is due for this review in July 2022.

We have also, like the rest of the world, been living with COVID19 - a constant reminder of our fragile humanity and the need for meaningful connectedness amidst the communal fear of connectedness. The preparation for the opening of the borders in January increased the tensions around the issues of vaccination and gatherings. Yet, despite these stresses, we have seen an increase in creativity as we have learnt to adapt to online methods of meeting together.

Shared Life, Flourishing Communities

In what ways have you been approaching the challenge of making disciples of Jesus?

Tell us about how you are building a discipling culture

This has linked with the Presbytery priority to KNOW GOD and was the focus of our February 2021 Presbytery meeting. TCQ led the bible study focussed on Discipleship. This is the first step in engaging with the work that is coming from the Plenty Discipleship Working Group. As part of the Presbytery Review, we are exploring ways in which we can release people some of the administrative pressure in small churches to encourage them to refocus their energy on discipleship.

Tell us about how you are engaging children, youth, young adults and families

An event for youth in Toowoomba that was open to the Presbytery. We have hosted Easter Madness in our Presbytery, and we promote Easter Madness through the Presbytery and provide a subsidy for youth from our region to attend. We are looking to build a team in the Presbytery that will focus on supporting children, youth and families and intergenerational worship in our smaller churches and communities. We have some congregations with flourishing ministries to children, youth, young adults, and families.

Tell us how you are reimagining the identity and posture of the church, in your community, in a changing world

Since the last Synod, the Presbytery has engaged with Queensland Churches Together, Toowoomba Heads of Churches and Toowoomba Down Churches Together to reimagine ecumenism in regional and rural communities. Denominational identity is less relevant in regional and rural communities, and communities and churches have a desire to work together, understanding that we are better together than separate. The Heads of Churches have monthly meetings to foster and formally understand how churches work together.

In what ways have you been drawn into Transforming your Community?

Tell us about how you have responded to the rising challenge of wellbeing and mental health support

The Presbytery provides personnel and funding for Blue Care Grief and Loss training across the Presbytery and beyond, which leads to several training opportunities each year; Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) funding support for Uniting Church members in our Presbytery, and funding towards other pastoral care training. The Presbytery also supports our Ministry Agents' wellbeing through a yearly live-in retreat and funding towards Professional Supervision for Ministry Agent. We are particularly concerned and aware of the high amount of stress the pandemic has placed on our ministry agents and congregational leaders (in particular the COVID advisors) as they have managed the risk to keep people safe

Tell us about your commitment to the Uniting Church's ongoing work of covenanting with First Peoples

The Presbytery has supported the local NAIDOC initiatives; in particular, support was given to the Garulbo (All Together) committee to organise the First Indigenous Conference in Toowoomba Yumin bah (Talk Place) Conference and look forward to being invited to join them again this year.

Tell us about your how you are building a deeper understanding about what is possible as a church, called to care for all of God's creation

This Presbytery covers the largest area of prime agricultural land in the state, and sustainable farming practices are part of the DNA for farmers. Alongside this, two thirds of the coal seam gas wells in Qld were drilled in the Surat Basin – practically living with this tension in small regional communities can be a challenge; the church's role is to provide a neutral healing space for local communities and to prayerfully hold that tension. The church also has been practically supporting local communities as it continues, despite the recent rains, to be fully drought-declared (since 2013).

Tell us about any other ways you have sought to listen and respond to the needs of your community

Each congregation has its own way of linking with its local community. We have many projects in our Presbytery in which congregations are engaged with their communities, such as the Winter Homeless Shelter at St. Stephen's Toowoomba (in partnership with other local churches and Lifeline Toowoomba), the Community Garden at Warwick Uniting Church, Millmerran Uniting Church support for Seasonal Worker, and OzHarvest at Lifeworks Uniting Church. Through our Presbytery wide review, we are listening to congregations and local communities to identify community needs and opportunities. We have also supported an application for a Building Better Regions Community grant through the Synod Business Development Unit.

In what ways have you been sought to reshape your part of the Synod, to be Fit for Purpose and wise stewards of all that God has given you?

Tell us about changes you have made (to systems, policies, technologies, governance) that has brought life and freedom into processes that had become stuck or burdensome:

The Presbytery has been intentionally shifting the way we do 'business', recognising that effective and healthy teams that live out of shared valued and are more focused on prayerful decision making. We have also adopted a Delegations policy to clarify the powers and responsibilities of the Presbytery committees. This has allowed us to move to bi-monthly meetings in between our three live-in Presbyteries a year, focusing on story-telling, celebrating, struggling with issues, and praying and worshipping together. We have engaged with the Synod Business Development Unit, which has supported us in exploring ways to resource ministry more effectively. COVID has taught us that some meetings (not all) can happen online effectively, and we are learning which meetings are best face-to-face and which can happen online. The productive work of Presbytery Synod Interface and Synod Standing Committee to provide a way to give voice to exciting missional engagement of the local congregation and to encourage and develop those connections across the Synod (see proposal Mission Collaboration Coordination Committee)

Tell us about the pain points you identified in your operations that need to be addressed in the next season

Three operational pain points:

1. The Presbytery would like to expedite decisions regarding property so that we can better use these assets for the benefit of mission within the Presbytery. However, property matters and gathering experienced people across the Presbytery to dedicate time and effort to the growing responsibilities in the area of risk and compliance is difficult.
2. Many of our smaller congregations are struggling with the demands of compliance, governance, and property. We are exploring ways to provide training and support to those congregations. One of the more difficult pain points for congregations and Presbytery has been the organisational changes in the Synod office and multiple complicated systems that have to be managed by church council leaders.
3. The pressure to resource the work of the Presbyteries through the Combined Presbytery Mission Pool (CPMP) has been a struggle and a part of the bigger question of how do we effectively resource the Presbytery into the future?

Tell us about how you have stewarded your property and assets to best facilitate healthy and vital mission in your part of the Synod

The Presbytery worked together, in a ground-breaking way, to use MDF funds held by congregations within the Presbytery to support the much-needed purchase of a manse for Warwick/Killarney Uniting Church. There was an outpouring of generosity from congregations and presbytery, and personal contributions from congregational members was such a blessing for the whole Presbytery to witness. We have also undertaken a review of the properties' needs within the Presbytery, considering the current needs of the Presbytery alongside the future needs; this will allow us to re-evaluate the use of MDF held within the Presbytery. We have been able to secure a long-term lease in a church that is no longer being used that will assist the Presbytery to support other missional activities.

Tell us about how you have sought to identify, develop and release leaders to participate in the ongoing work of the church

The Presbytery had three women participate in the Synod Plentiful Leadership Program, and each of these participants is exercising ministry in key roles within the church. The Presbytery is excited to be a part of the conversation with the St George congregation in their growing relationship with New Life Uniting Church (South Moreton Presbytery). Together we are exploring how, across Presbytery boundaries, we might work together to equip people for mission.

In what ways have you sought to collaborate with others across the Uniting Church as an expression of our commitment to doing Life Together:

Tell us about a part of the Uniting Church's history, DNA, story and culture that has come alive for you

We give thanks to God for the gift of those who have gone before us in this Presbytery and have pathed the way and been faithful in ministry in these small communities. We acknowledge the ministers and laypeople dedicated to ministering to the people in rural and regional Qld. Those who have travelled the long distances (without a 4WD), slept in the backs of churches in a swag, forfeited valuable time with family and loved ones to serve God in these communities. Last year we recognised and celebrated the role that retired ministers, lay leaders, lay pastors, community ministers, deaconess and lay preachers have played in passing on the faith to the next generation, and we continue to give thanks to God for them and want to honour their faithful witness.

Tell us about ways in which you have both benefited from and contributed to other parts of the Church:

We have appreciated the work of the Synod Business Development Unit and members from the Synod office who have travelled out to the Presbytery to address our needs. We are excited to have one Connect 100 initiative in Roma that has grown out of our relationship with UnitingCare, and another with St Stephen's exploring community chaplaincy and look forward to these relationships growing. We have been enthused by the process of Project Plenty, and the refocus on the mission of the church. We have two members on the Board of Scots PGC who keep us up to date with the needs of this school community. Our Presbytery acknowledges the generosity of the other Presbyteries who contribute to the mission of rural and remote ministry both through the CPMP and individual congregations who have fostered relationships with small regional congregations. We acknowledge Frontier Services and their continued financial support of Bush Chaplaincy

Tell us about where you see relational tensions that need to be addressed over the next season

The Presbytery appreciates the hard work of the staff in the Synod office and understands that organisational changes have meant a loss of the personal contact and relationship between the staff and the congregational leaders. This has been a point of tension for congregations. We also recognise the relational tension amongst smaller congregations in decline as we meet and pray with them about where God is leading them and what we might need to let go of in order that new shoots might grow.

Threats and opportunities as we step into the future together

Some opportunities for further exploration:

- Highfields Community Church (HCC) church plant continues to bless the Presbytery and the community. The ministry at HCC has continued to grow and provides excellent opportunities in fostering stronger connections as new Christians explore discipleship beyond their local community.
- Roma district as an opportunity for a resource hub to the whole of the Maranoa region. Roma has a modern manse and 'the Shed' that provides a modern and compliant space for training and education and the church building itself. The Presbytery is working with Roma and the Maranoa region to reimagine ministry with a Bush Chaplain/Resourcing style of ministry. An initial proposal and application to Frontier Services for funding of a Maranoa patrol have been sought. Other possible thoughts include Roma being a base for one part of a team, such as the Saltbush model from NSW Synod.
- The mining and gas industry has a series of 'camps' in the Western Darling Downs and Maranoa, including three in Chinchilla. FIFO workers have added to a number of social issues to these communities. Although there may be an occasional visit by a psychologist to the camps, there is an opportunity to seek funding for a Community Chaplain through the mining companies. This could be linked to the local congregation to facilitate the development of a mission plan. Further investigation into the viability of this potential opportunity will be a part of the next stage of our review.

- Lay ministry teams remain the main connecting fabric of our communities; the supporting and strengthening of their capacity is an opportunity for future ministry in the region.

The areas for growth and threats seem to be similar across many of the congregations, particularly those who do not have a ministry agent.

- One of the most significant threats to congregational hope and witness is being overwhelmed with compliance and governance. Although there are often opportunities, the enactment of these opportunities is stifled by the difficulties of completing the workplace, child or covid safety plans. There is a recognition of their necessity; however, smaller, ageing congregations do not have the facilities and sometimes the expertise to complete these. As it becomes too hard, it is easier to revert to keeping things the way they were. This is a significant inhibitor to the mission of God.
- The protestant focus of 'doing' has driven a culture of service, which has provided great fruit. Some fruit is ripe and juicy and sweet; some are not. Sometimes we can be driven by the need to be needed or the need to get things right. Also, when congregations are able to transition from 'doing' to 'being' as they age and become those who mentor and hold the younger members in prayer, a multigenerational mission can thrive. Where this is not the case, grief, struggles, fear of irrelevance, and the need for control prevail. Sadly, this is inhibiting God's mission in our Presbytery.
- COVID-19 has impacted our congregations in many ways. It has not only seen reduced numbers at worship in many centres but there has also been reduced giving. On the flip side, it has offered members the opportunity to assess what is important to them, and it has asked congregations to consider what their role is. It is a threat, and it is also an opportunity to consider how we witness Christ's redeeming love in a post-Christian world where the rules are not 20th-century rules.
- The UCA has the most sustained presence across the Presbytery. There may be more Anglican and Catholic churches; however, there has been a larger supporting presence for worship and pastoral care from a ministry perspective. How do we maintain the support for lay people within communities that cannot sustain a resident theologian, acknowledging that God is at work in these small communities? This is wider than a UCA question.
- We are challenged to consider who we are as pilgrim people, especially in the larger centres and what this means for ourselves, our communities, and our fellow congregants in rural Qld.

We currently have vacancies in placements in Chinchilla and Dalby/Jandowae and Cunnamulla, Burke and Wills Patrol, and a change in placement in Maranoa in early 2023 which means there are no ordained ministers west of Millmerran. This highlights the fragility of ministry in the west and a real issue for the Synod and the Board of Christian Formation as we address and explore what a call to ministry (ordained or lay) rural and regional ministry will look like into the future.

Proposals to the 36th Synod

It is proposed that the 36th Synod receive this report.

Contact for report questions

Name **Rev Yvonne McRostie**
Position Presbytery Minister
Email pm@downspresbytery.org.au
Phone 0427962781