

Report for 31st Queensland Synod October 2014



Report from **Uniting Communications**



Context:

Uniting Communications' mission is: In serving God, Uniting Communications will inspire, resource and engage in conversations across all parts of the Uniting Church in Queensland, making mission and belonging possible.

Uniting Communications was formed in late 2011 with the amalgamation of the Synod's Communications Services Unit and the Finance and Property Department marketing team. This was to eliminate duplication within the Synod office and to utilise the expertise of all the communications and marketing staff as one team.

Since the 30th Synod meeting we have had a staff turnover of three people. Current staffing is:

Director – Mardi Lumsden

Marketing and Fundraising Manager – Raushen Perera*

Graphic Designer – Holly Jewell (part-time)

Cross-Platform Editor – Rohan Salmond

Advertising Manager / Communications Officer – Ashley Thompson*

Web Manager – Osker Lau

Writer – Dianne Jensen (part-time)

Research Officer – Sue Hutchinson (part-time)

Research Officer / Green Church Liaison – Bruce Mullan (part-time)*

*denotes staff who have replaced other staff since the 30th Synod

In the current communications climate it is essential to be active online and to produce original content that connects with people both in print and online. A key focus is achieving this in the best and most efficient way.

Another focus has been revitalising the Uniting Church Foundation into an active giving arm of the Queensland Synod that enables the mission of the church.

Finally, we are developing tools to inspire, resource and engage congregations to explore their local community with the *Stats have Faces* process and to get the most out of their communications through road shows.

Responses to our Priority Directions since last Synod

Enabling a demonstrated commitment to the shared Call and Vision

Key achievements include:

- promoting the year of Growing Faith (2014) and the year of Discipleship (2013) through various materials produced, most notably the Synod calendar and related art competition
- the redesign of [JourneyOnline](#) and continual improvement in the content and design of *Journey* magazine continues to embed the Call and Vision 2020 into what we do
- winning four awards at the Australasian Religious Press Association awards (September 2014) as a result of the 2013 *Journey* magazine redesign including gold awards for best cover (April 2013) and most improved hard copy publication and silver for overall best design. Special congratulations also go to Ashley Thompson for winning best new writer for her [piece on child sacrifice](#).
- [Uniting News](#), the General Secretary's weekly enewsletter, shares important updates for the administration of the church (e.g. ACNC information updates and new policies) as well as key presbytery updates, a section called Reaching Out and Speaking Out and Assembly and church agency updates, reminding people of the scope of the Uniting Church both in Queensland and beyond
- inclusion of presbytery events and key Uniting Church dates in the Synod calendar as a way of encouraging people to think about the whole Uniting Church
- the [Synod website](#) reflects the Call and Vision particularly through the 'Faith' and 'Social Responsibility' sections, but also through the slider banners on the home page which link to *Journey* articles each month showing how different parts of the church are living out the Call statement
- the [Call statement](#) is now displayed around the walls of the Synod office, on Synod office letterhead, business cards, email signatures and presentation templates; the Call statement is also featured on Synod social media channels, particularly as the Facebook banner image
- Synod office staff members receive a Synod calendar and a lanyard with the Call statement printed on it; Vision 2020 posters are displayed around the office
- The Uniting Church Foundation aligns with Priority Direction A as it seeks to create active and accountable disciples of Jesus who make the mission of the church possible

- writing and implementing marketing plans (including new websites and a promotional video) for [Raymont Lodge Residential College](#) and [Alexandra Park Conference Centre](#) assists them in best promoting themselves in a competitive market while making obvious links between their services and the Uniting Church.

Working towards our Priority Directions in the future

2015: the year of living the gospel

We are currently working on ways to engage people in 2015: the year of living the gospel. The 2015 [Synod calendar](#) will reflect this theme and give young people across the church a chance to express through art how they might live the gospel.

Creating online community

A new series on the Synod [Facebook](#) page called #knowyourbasis explores the [Basis of Union](#) and a range of other posts remind readers of the Synod's Vision 2020. The Queensland Synod Facebook page has continuous high engagement (people liking, commenting and sharing posts) compared to other Uniting Church and agency Facebook pages. Engagement is a higher priority than the number of page 'likes' as we are trying to build an online Uniting Church community rather than to reach everyone. [Twitter](#) is particularly popular during events like Synod or Assembly and [YouTube](#) is where all our video resources are stored. Links to all social media channels are on the Synod website footer.

One team

Our continued involvement in designing and editing documents for other parts of the Synod office means that the Call statement is reflected in a number of ways as well as presenting the Synod office as one team working together for the church. Developing one standard Synod office 'brand' also unites the different parts of the Synod office and reminds them of the Call and Vision of the church.

Video resources

[Online video](#) is a great way for people to learn and be engaged. Cross-platform editor Rohan Salmond will continue to create video resources to promote *Journey*, enhance the Easter and Christmas campaigns and teach people more about what the Uniting Church in Australia believes. Uniting Communications staff are part of a reference group for an Assembly project that aims to make a series of short videos explaining aspects of the Uniting Church in Australia and what it believes.

Dynamic digital content

To continue the improvement of [Journey magazine](#) we hope to launch a tablet edition in 2015. This may include more dynamic content, including embedded videos and photo galleries related to the stories in the print edition.

Website updates

The [Synod website](#) is continually being tweaked and updated to make it as useful as possible. We are in the process of creating a new section for the Uniting Church Foundation (Mission Possible) and updating the sections around mission (Church in Action), faith and growing faith.

Responses to our Priority Directions since last Synod

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

Monday midday prayer is a continued presence in *Journey*, the Synod website homepage, social media channels and Uniting News. The prayer is written each month by the Moderator and is emailed to all

Synod office, Raymont Lodge and Alexandra Park staff each Monday. The prayer is transformed into a graphic that is shared on social media. (Images are shared more often than words alone).

The Synod calendar includes weekly lectionary readings. Weekly Gospel readings are posted on Synod social media channels over the weekend.

The Communications team plays an active part in the monthly Synod office community prayer services. Work teams share the responsibility of planning and running community prayer. This is an important way for team members to express their faith at work and for those from other churches to learn more about what the Uniting Church believes.

Each month *Journey* magazine includes a theological reflection or opinion piece based around the annual theme (e.g. 2014 is the year of growing faith).

Working towards our Priority Directions in the future

We plan to continue to promote both the Monday midday prayer and the weekly lectionary reading in these ways. *Journey* will continue to address topics of spirituality and faith through its opinion pieces and feature articles.

Responses to our Priority Directions since last Synod

Developing sustainable mission orientated organisation (way of being) for the Church in Queensland

Uniting Church Foundation – Mission Possible

In response to the Uniting Church in Queensland Vision 2020, the Uniting Church Foundation aligns with Priority Direction C which aims to develop sustainable mission-oriented organisation for the church in Queensland. A fundraising strategy has been developed (2014–2016) for the Uniting Church Foundation along with four exciting mission categories (awaiting approval from Synod Standing Committee). The aim is that this will enable strategic mission projects that are not part of operational costs.

Stewardship Sunday

Stewardship Sunday (5 October 2014) is an initiative that encourages congregations to dedicate one Sunday a year to focus on issues around stewardship. Resources are being developed and a feature in the September edition of *Journey* focused on the various types of stewardship as a way to get the conversations started.

Rebranding Trinity College Queensland

Uniting Communications was involved in rebranding the amalgamation of chaplaincy education, Pilgrim Learning Community and Trinity Theological College into the new entity Trinity College Queensland. This amalgamation represents the Queensland Synod eliminating duplication in Christian education. Proposing names, strategies and developing the logo and 'look' of what became Trinity College Queensland gave us a glimpse of the exciting potential of this combined college.

Working towards our Priority Directions in the future

10 for 10

This campaign is the first active fundraising campaign of the Synod for a very long time. If every member of the Uniting Church community donates \$10, we can together make a Year 10 Indigenous student's future a little brighter. All member contributions will go towards the Indigenous Learning Pathways fund, managed by the Uniting Church in Australia, Queensland Synod, which will be used solely for the purpose of supporting learning pathways for academically competent but financially disadvantaged Indigenous students in Uniting Church schools. In 2014, applications will be invited from Year 10 Indigenous students across Queensland interested in pursuing a course of study or training to enhance their future employment prospects. Communications is focused on the continued rejuvenation of the Uniting Church Foundation into an active giving arm of the Uniting Church in Queensland to enable God's mission.

Eliminating duplication

Communications is always looking for ways to eliminate duplication and to do things more efficiently. Some examples include collaborating with other Synods on the Christmas and Easter campaigns and social responsibility projects and the creation of Uniting News (an amalgamation of UC Info and AdMinistry).

Responses to our Priority Directions since last Synod

Engaging in opportunities for intentional, open community connections and partnerships

Communications Road Shows

Communications staff ran two [Road Shows](#) (Toowoomba and Bundaberg) in June 2014 and will run another for Brisbane-based congregations in November. The aim of the road show is to share the knowledge within Uniting Communications and to inspire and resource congregations to use their own communications channels in the best way. If you are interested in hosting a Communications Road Show [email](#) Uniting Communications.

Uniting Green UPDATE

This weekly newsletter aims to encourage those who strive to live sustainably and exercise responsible environmental care as a legitimate expression of their Christian mission. The current subscription list is around 200 people with a high percentage of recipients opening and clicking links within the e-news. As well as providing news, events and information the UPDATE is helping build an online community of people with a shared interest in good ecological practice and eco-theology. Subscribe to Uniting Green UPDATE at the [Synod website](#).

Broader [Uniting Green](#) activity

Bruce Mullan began as the Uniting Green Liaison in March 2014. This is a one day per week role. This work is quite different to the wonderful work volunteered by Rev Judith Dalton and Rev Dr Clive Ayre, who continues to be a valued partner. Through this liaison role, the Synod is networking with a wide range of other groups to further the goal of the wise use of energy, protection of the environment and replenishment of the Earth's resources for the use and enjoyment of current and future generations. Significant among these is NEEN (National Energy Efficiency Network) who are coordinating specialist energy efficiency information, online Opportunity Assessment tools and learning community activities to help faith-based and not-for-profit community organisations reduce their energy intensity and

consumption. We hope that engagement in this area will help achieve the Synod Energy Management Policy (approved by the Synod Standing Committee 2 November 2012) to have in place structures, initiatives and practices to minimise energy use and energy costs.

Being a prophetic voice

The challenge in an era of significant welfare changes, budget cutbacks, reduced services, rising inequality and harsh treatment of those seeking asylum will be to speak into community dialogue in ways which uphold basic Christian values and principles, proclaim truth and justice, and express concern for the welfare of our community and the whole human race. With so many serious social responsibility issues facing our church it can be difficult to maintain adequate scrutiny and assess priorities for action. As a church we have pledged ourselves to hope and work for a nation whose goals are not guided by self-interest alone, but by concern for the welfare of all persons everywhere. As we partner with others in this undertaking we have the responsibility to do so recognising that we act as agents of the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth the one who gave his life for others.

The Uniting Communications research officers (1 FTE) contribute to this through:

- providing information about important social responsibility issues to church members for example through Uniting News, Facebook, *Journey*
- presenting to young people in the Uniting Church about the G20 Meeting and asylum seeker issues
- answering queries from church members about a variety of social justice issues, providing information and connecting them with others in the community
- the [ACT NOW](#) section on the [Social Responsibility](#) section of the Synod website gives people the opportunity to have their say about current social justice issues. In less than a minute someone can send an email letting the appropriate government minister know how they feel about an issue. They can change the letter to reflect their own words and thoughts, add a video or photograph and send a copy to themselves so they can also write to their local member. People can sign up to receive information about ACT NOW campaigns. The first two campaigns were to write to the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection asking the Federal Government not to pursue Cambodia as a destination for the resettlement of asylum seekers and to the Queensland Minister for Environment and Heritage Protection calling for an effective Queensland Container Deposit Legislation. 100 people used this facility in the first six weeks.

Participation in community networks and partnerships

The research officers have participated in the following networking opportunities:

- The Uniting Church is one of the coordinating agencies of the BRASS network (Brisbane Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support network), facilitating broad participation of and communication between community groups, church congregations, service providers and individuals. Membership of BRASS has increased from 100 to 250 members in the last 12 months.
- The Queensland Churches Environmental Network (QCEN) is part of Queensland Churches Together. The QCEN mission is to facilitate the church's call to love and care for creation as a vital expression of faith.
- facilitating Uniting Church participation in joint advocacy efforts with other churches and community agencies regarding youth justice reforms
- guest speaker at the initial meeting to consider developing a welcome hub for asylum seekers in the Redlands District; now a participant in and resource for the Redlands for Refugees Group
- participating in a Christian churches G20 working group
- developing partnerships and links between the Uniting Church and groups and agencies, particularly the church's agencies in areas such as supporting people with mental health issues

- maintaining close working relationships with social justice staff in other Australian Synods and Assembly, including co-badging relevant justice initiatives.

Supporting the Moderator to speak

The Moderator is assisted to speak to the media by the Uniting Communications Director as media liaison and advisor. Research officers have prepared briefs and information to assist the Moderator to engage with the community and to advocate on issues of concern, including:

- speaker at refugee rights rally
- joint appearance before State Government committee regarding youth justice reforms with Queensland Churches Together, Salvation Army and Queensland Churches Indigenous Peoples Partnership
- media interviews and press releases – radio and television on a range of topics
- submissions and letters to government inquiries, members of parliament and government ministers – for example submissions to Queensland Government regarding “[Red tape reduction and other reform proposals for regulation of liquor and gaming](#)”, and “[Inquiry into sexually explicit outdoor advertising](#)”; co-signatory to a letter to the Australian Government regarding racial vilification laws
- writing issues papers for the Queensland Synod, for example an [issues paper on youth justice](#)
- research issues/questions raised by Uniting Church members with the Moderator and providing information to inform her responses.

Uniting Church Foundation: Mission Possible

- The Uniting Church Foundation’s new mission categories rely on strategic projects that build and enhance authentic community connections. For mission projects in the areas of faith and families, Indigenous education, people in crisis and tomorrow’s church to be of most benefit, authentic community engagement and relationship building is essential.

Working towards our Priority Directions in the future

Stats have Faces

The goal is to provide congregations with a tool that will help them better understand their communities; those that live in them and how to engage with them. It is a tool to assist congregations to become sustainable and mission oriented. The challenge will be for congregations to invest the time required to engage purposefully with the *Stats have Faces* process. The statistics and research are valuable resources to help congregations but the process focusses on the fact that behind every statistic is a story and behind every number are real people with frustrations, feelings, hopes and dreams. The plan is to launch the process and resources at the 31st Synod meeting.

Social Responsibility Updates

In response to requests and feedback we are developing a resource similar to Uniting Green UPDATE that highlights news and information about other justice issues and networks people around broader social responsibility matters. This will be the fortnightly Reach Out Speak Out (named in line with Priority Direction 5) and will alternate weeks with the Uniting Green UPDATE, which will move to fortnightly.

Other activities:

- developing a network of Uniting Church congregations actively involved or interested in supporting asylum seekers and refugees – information sharing, mutual support, joint initiatives

- preparing a proposal for the 31st Synod relating to mental health
- identifying and developing mental health resources for the Uniting Church, for example a resource for ministers and those supporting families affected by suicide – to be launched in 2015
- facilitating the church's involvement in G20 events leading up to and during the G20 meeting in Brisbane in November
- preparing and running more Communications Road Shows with the potential to expand the concept to include other Synod office departments.

Key achievements/initiatives

- completing our work to a professional standard and meeting deadlines while dealing with significant staffing gaps, all done under our 2013/14 budget
- *Journey* magazine won four international awards at the 2014 Australasian Religious Press Association conference and two in 2013, proving that the magazine is consistently one of the highest quality Christian publications across Australia and New Zealand
- engaging young people in the Call and Vision and celebrating their talents through the Synod calendar and art competition; entries increase significantly each year
- making mission possible in four key areas through the fundraising strategy (2014–2016) for the Queensland Synod Foundation
- equipping congregations with the *Stats have Faces* process to explore their local area's needs
- rebranding Trinity College Queensland
- continued growth in engagement on social media, especially Facebook, developing an engaged online Uniting Church community
- launching the Communications Road Show, a strategic project which has generated positive feedback from participants.

Challenges/risks as we progress:

- The 2014 Easter campaign did not break even so next Easter only digital resources will be available.
- If the Queensland Synod is called to address the [Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse](#) there is a huge reputational risk for the Uniting Church. Media attention around the Royal Commission is intense and church leaders will need to be very careful about what they say in public spaces, always acknowledging the pain the church has caused people in the past and ensuring we don't inadvertently cause any more pain in this process.
- In terms of 'the year of ...': we are unaware if other parts of the church are embracing the annual theme, so the work we do may not compliment other work/projects as well as it could if we were all focused on the one theme.
- Synod office databases are in the process of being consolidated. At this point we still have multiple databases that don't necessarily talk to each other and a large amount of out-of-date information (particularly on Find a Church). Physical mail outs are also difficult.
- There was no donor database for the Uniting Church Foundation so we have had to create one from scratch, searching through old files. A lot of this information is out-of-date or has no details about donations or contacts. This is very time consuming and we are at risk of sending correspondence to people who have passed away or have previously said they don't want to hear from the Foundation.
- Rising print and postage costs are of concern, particularly for *Journey*, which relies on print advertising to cover those costs.
- Communications Road Shows are wonderful but take additional time in preparation and presentation (usually on weekends and including travel). The challenge will be maintaining these if we lose staff or there are other priorities that require focus.

- Staff are busy and have little down-time. Managing expectations, workflows and burnout will be important if we are to continue the current output. This also leads to little time for strategic planning.
- We can produce content but there is little point if people are not reading or engaging with the material. We need to ensure people know what is available to them and that we create things people actually need.
- While the majority of communications are digital, there are still people who are not online. We should be careful not to forget about these people. There is still a need for a printed magazine and for those who are online to share information in their congregational print newsletters / notice boards etc.
- To date the work of the research officers has been focused on social responsibility issues identified by themselves in consultation with the Moderator and Communications Director. By not having a reference group of some type, the risk is that some issues of importance could be missed, or emphasis might be inappropriately placed on certain issues. It would be helpful to have advice about the work we are doing, how we are communicating with members of the church and the wider community, and how best to use the resources of the position of research officer for maximum impact.

Recommendations/strategic decisions for Synod:

That the members of the 31st Synod receive the report.

That the Synod establish a Social Responsibility Reference Group, consisting of Uniting Church members, ministers and academics in relevant fields, including at least two people of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent. This group would assist in determining the social responsibility priorities for the Synod.

Issues to be addressed:

How will the whole Synod embrace 2015: the year of living the gospel?

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