



Report from

# Presbytery of South Moreton



# Report

COVID19 has been a game-changer for Congregations in their operations and their missional thinking. Each context has its own opportunities, capacities and limitations in responding to these challenges. In each place, the question we face is not, 'When will this end?' but rather, 'Where might this lead?' and 'What does faithfulness to the gospel require of us?' We celebrate significant mission initiatives at Flagstone, Southside UC, NewLife Coolangatta and emerging in Redland City, and face big challenges in having a strong missional presence, in the burgeoning northern Gold Coast corridor and through Congregation revitalisation in other places.

We lost three multicultural church communities since the 34<sup>th</sup> Synod over same-gender marriage. In the wake of budget cuts which have seen the equivalent of one ministry position lost, Presbytery is reviewing its life and strategic priorities which will also inform decisions about future resourcing needs.

## COVID

The coronavirus pandemic has become the defining overlay of the context of Christian mission and presence throughout the world over the past 10 months. The economic, political and social impacts, though not yet fully revealed, are profound and doubtless long-lasting. Every household and community is feeling the impact of pervasive public health restrictions, economic turmoil, workplace disruption, social unrest, personal vulnerabilities, and tides of loss and grief.

This is the new context for our worship, mission and care. And while we have had to address huge operational shifts, the biggest challenges lie in the deeper questions – not the how, but the what and the why of 'being church.' In needing to do things differently, we've had to ask why we do them at all and consider in what new ways might our communities need to experience the compassion and hope of the gospel. This is a context of disruption, learning, reviewing and refocusing.

## About our Presbytery

South Moreton encompasses 33 Congregations and four Faith Communities across 1750 sq.km, serving some two million people from Brisbane's southern suburbs through Redland and Logan, Gold Coast and west to Beaudesert. Three UCA schools, the significant presence of UnitingCare and Wesley Mission Queensland services, and a range of chaplaincies contribute to our missional footprint. We have oversight of 60 active ministry agents (ordained and pastors), serving in Congregations, schools, hospitals, UnitingCare and other contexts.

Diversity is a hallmark, including the size of our Congregations, their demographic and geographic contexts, and their cultural background. At least seven of our Congregations and Faith Communities are migrant/refugee based or significantly multicultural. Broader demographic trends of population growth and urban sprawl and renewal constitute a significant challenge in maintaining inherited

patterns of church life and resourcing new mission in new spaces. Consistent with the UCA national demographic profile, most Congregations in the Presbytery comprise mainly middle to upper age groups. NewLife Church Robina (Gold Coast) remains Australia's largest UCA Congregation with up to 1900 attending worship each week.

### **Focus since the last Synod**

#### **COVID CHALLENGES**

This period has been incredibly disruptive and intense, but also galvanising, creative and relationship-building.

We celebrate the resilience, energy, creativity and commitment with which ministry agents and lay leaders in our Congregations have engaged the steep learning curve of adaptive change. Especially, but not only, in shifting worship and other parts of church life to online platforms. The journeys and possibilities have been different for each context. But in every place, the resourcefulness, skills, opportunities and innovations may be one of the Spirit's enduring gifts to the church through this traumatic time.

We have discovered a capacity and willingness to change. Resilience, patience and generosity of spirit have been well displayed across our Congregations as people have adapted to worship and church life in new ways. Theological and missional challenges face us as we consider how our church life may be transformed beyond the pandemic. Rather than wait for a 'return to normal,' we are challenged to discern the new life to which God is drawing us through this suspension of our previous patterns and assumptions. As disciples of Jesus, the question we face is not, 'When will this end?' but rather, 'Where might this lead?' and 'What does faithfulness to the gospel require of us?'

COVID has also profoundly disrupted Presbytery's life and plans. A slew of Presbytery events and training programs (including Lab 1, Church Councils and Mission Shaped Ministry) have been deferred or radically changed. The urgency and intensity of local adaptation has, for the time being, reduced the time and heart of ministry agents and lay leaders for engaging with Presbytery matters.

Presbytery instead has focused its energies on providing pastoral and prayer support, creating space for conversation and sharing, responding to enquiries and needs, maintaining regular communication including weekly emails and Zoom Room chats for ministry agents, facilitating collaborations, offering resources, and building people in faith and hope. We held two online Presbytery meetings in May and August. Our messages have focused on solidarity, encouragement, being intentional, self-care and hope. We have sought to affirm and support the work of our chaplains in health, aged care, schools and prisons, who are on their unique COVID 'front line'. The sustained diligence and care of our Presbytery staff team – Rev. Beth Nicholls, Ps Levon Kardashian, Michele Cochrane and Greg Seymour – are deeply appreciated.

Some of what South Moreton has done has resourced the wider UCA, including producing Code of Ethics refresher for ministry agents by Sue Crittall as an online course, a video and booklet self-guided retreat for ministry agents, a service for Pentecost Sunday with segments available for use in

local services, use-at-home Messy Church and online day camp resources, and hosting several Zoom forums on COVID operational and missional themes.

## **STRATEGIC MISSION**

**Flagstone:** This is a whole-of-church initiative, led and coordinated by the Presbytery, to embed a meaningful church presence in this nascent urban development near Jimboomba, planned to become one of the largest regional centres in Qld. Working with UnitingCare, Wesley Mission Qld, and Real Life Christian Church (Calvary Christian College), Presbytery funded a professional consultancy and based on its findings, in 2019 appointed a Community Development Officer, Susan Hawke. Susan has engaged this role with great passion, skill, vision and commitment. In May 2020, we launched the Flagstone Community Centre in leased premises. It is rapidly becoming an active hub for community services, groups and food bank. Expansion plans are already being considered.

**Destiny Together / Southside Uniting Church:** A two-year guided discernment journey by six Congregations in Brisbane's southern suburbs, called Destiny Together bore fruit when four of the Congregations voted in October 2018 to amalgamate from 1 January 2020 to become Southside UC. A vision for new mission opportunities and capacities propelled this journey. Presbytery funded Bruce Mullan as Destiny Together coordinator for 18 months and is funding the placement of Rev. David Fender as ministry team leader until end-2021. One of the team ministry placements has a focus on developing new mission initiatives.

**Visioning the Redlands:** The closure of Thorneside UC in October 2018 underlined the urgency of the remaining five Congregations in Redland City to review their viability and mission effectiveness in serving the region. Presbytery is supporting a Visioning the Redlands process, including funding a part-time leader. An elected steering committee is actively pursuing a regional UCA model bringing together placements, Church Councils and resources to generate cohesion and capacity for mission and service. COVID has delayed decision-making and implementation, but threshold decisions are intended to be made by end-2020.

**NewLife Coolangatta:** The closure of Twin Towns UC Congregation and inauguration of NewLife Coolangatta Faith Community, on the same site in February 2020, concluded a 14-month journey of prayer, conversation and discernment to offer a revitalised missional presence at the bottom of the Gold Coast. The grace, generosity and vision of the declining, older Congregation, and the grace, respect and care of the NewLife church plant team led by Ps Scott Wrigley, have laid the foundation for a new, vibrant, all-age Christian community – a regional anchor for NewLife's evangelism, disciple-formation and community services.

## **CONGREGATIONS LEAVING**

Three of our culturally diverse communities, Gold Coast Korean UC at Robina, Southport Korean Faith Community and the Matu UC (Chin, from Myanmar) each closed after most of their members chose to leave the UCA because of its openness to same gender marriage. Other local factors were also present in each case, and some members have maintained a link with the UCA Leaders expressed their deep appreciation to the UCA and the Presbytery for years of good relationships and support. Presbytery leaders attended closing services for each group in 2019, thanking and blessing them.

## **STAFF AND STAFF REDUCTIONS**

As Project Officer Mission, Rev. Beth Nicholls' wide-ranging ministry has continued to resource the Presbytery in Congregation mission planning and implementation, Fresh Expressions (including Messy Church, Mainly Music and Pioneering), children's and inter-generational ministries, Mission Shaped Ministry and other training. Key events such as Kids Camp Out, Discoveries Camp, day camps and Easter Madness, Safe Ministry with Children training for Presbytery and Congregations, and leading the Flagstone project.

Ps Levon Kardashian, the Project Officer Multicultural, has offered valuable ministry in building relationships with the various multicultural Congregations and Faith Communities and their leaders. Supporting these churches through the many issues of governance, UCA understanding and practice which inevitably arise, exploring new initiatives (e.g., a revitalised Korean ministry on the Gold Coast), training and capacity building for Church Councils, and engaging with the wider range of Congregations in cross-cultural awareness and ministry. Levon has also made a significant contribution to the Synod's Multi Cross Cultural Reference Group, Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention project, and the Synod's interfaith involvements.

Due to a significant budget crisis facing the Combined Presbyteries Mission Pool (CPMP) for 2020-21, South Moreton lost the funding equivalent of one of these two ministry positions. Both have been retained but reduced to part-time while Presbytery reviews its life and identifies priorities for the next few years. This will inform new decisions about future resourcing priorities, including staff positions. A Presbytery strategic review was timely and anticipated, but the urgency brought on by the funding cut and the limitations under COVID of engaging in consultation has made this a more challenging process. Project Plenty provides a helpful wider-church context for these considerations.

Beth and Levon have contributed substantially to the life and work of the Presbytery – and the wider church – in their ministry roles since 2013 and 2018 respectively. We pray their gifts and experience will continue to bless the church in whatever form their future ministries take, in Presbytery or other roles.

## **Highlights:**

### **ACHIEVEMENTS INCLUDE:**

- Flagstone Community Development Officer, Community Centre, expanding community profile, networks and partnerships.
- Support for journeys of local mission collaboration among Congregations (Destiny Together/Southside; Visioning the Redlands; coming together of Twins Towns UC and NewLife church plant to form NewLife Coolangatta).
- Navigating through the COVID context as a Presbytery and in supporting Congregations and ministry agents.
- Continuing to foster a culture of peer support among ministry colleagues (e.g., Healthy Ministry Breakfasts, ministers' convocation, weekly Zoom Room chats, Pastors in the Park, retreat resources).

- Support for 5 Candidates for ordination, 6 new applicants and 11 Period of Discernment participants.

#### **LEARNINGS INCLUDE:**

- External partners have a lot to offer – expertise, goodwill, networks. *We may not know what we don't know – but other people will!*
- Things aren't fully formed at the start. At some point you need to commit, get in, start the work, and allow the work to grow the vision and the resources. Be prepared for the Holy Spirit to take us on a journey that we could not have imagined while planning.
- We are resilient, creative, capable and adaptive. We also get tired and need to take care of ourselves and each other.
- Good governance is our friend, reminding us of hard realities and harder consequences.
- The church's survival depends on the church not being preoccupied with its survival.

## **Project Plenty**

South Moreton has hosted face to face and online sessions as part of the Project Plenty consultations phases, and Scott Guyatt has visited Presbytery meetings to bring updates and run workshop sessions. Presbytery's review of its life and priorities welcomes the guidance and insights of the Project Plenty journey.

## **Challenges/risks as we progress**

#### **STRATEGIC LOCATIONS**

By mid-2030s, Gold Coast will have one million residents and Logan City half a million. The northern Gold Coast corridor through Helensvale, Oxenford, Ormeau, Coomera and Pimpama is one of Australia's fastest-developing areas, with a predicted 220,000 residents by 2030. The growing challenges of evangelism, discipleship, pastoral care and community service in this region are before us, needing much more than our current UCA presence and assets.

There are other places where Congregations are revitalising their purpose by applying energy, imagination and capacity for new missional purposes. Congregations are recognising that the best way to move into an unknown future is to build a pathway into it. But in many cases, the window of opportunity for strategic choices and action is limited. In a few places, Presbytery has been a catalyst for Church Council discussions about a reimagined future, but this can be too difficult a mind-shift or journey for some Congregations to undertake alone. Collaboration in clusters or regions, new models of training and mentoring, strategic capacity-building, Intentional Interim Ministries, and embedded support from Presbytery will assist.

#### **CHURCH COUNCIL TRAINING**

Building capacity for effective Church Council governance and leadership is a priority need, to equip them in conflict management, dealing with difference, good governance practices, good communication and healthy cultures of leadership. This concern is shared across Presbyteries, and

we look to working with them in developing materials and models of training and support to invest in effective leadership teams.

### **FINANCIAL AND MISSIONAL CHALLENGES**

COVID has amplified and accelerated challenges that were more latent for our Congregations, not least in financial and missional capacity. Income losses from offerings, property rentals and Op Shops have impacted Congregations to varying extents. JobKeeper subsidies for placements or staff is mitigating this impact for a time. After an initial dip, offerings in many Congregations have remained quite steady or returned to pre-COVID levels, it is heartening to experience the faithfulness of our people in their sustained giving through such disruption. However, the capacity for Congregations to meet their core placement, property and operating costs, let alone consider possible new ventures, will be tested.

More important than financial survival will be how Congregations reset their life and mission. How might our identity and purpose in each place need to be reviewed and embodied in new ways in a society being permanently reshaped by COVID? How do we incorporate both digital (online) and analogue (physical) channels to engage people in worship, discipleship, pastoral care and community care? Who are our pastoral and missional communities these days? What assumptions or complacencies in our previous settled patterns have been exposed and need deeper interrogation? Similar questions arise for Presbytery as well.

The risk in both these areas is that we travel alone, become discouraged or overwhelmed, or live in denial. Project Plenty has much to offer here in inspiring and guiding our life together around key priorities for a flourishing future. May we face these challenges without panic but with purpose and perseverance, allowing ourselves to be drawn towards God's future in God's power and faithfulness.

## **For consideration**

We want to honour and appreciate the incredible work done by COVID wardens in each place and those who have picked up extraordinary new burdens of responsibility and learning during the pandemic. We owe a particular debt of gratitude to the Synod's COVID response team, especially Val King, Peter Rose and Mike Huxley.

We identify more work needs to be done in relation to the CPMP and its funding, oversight and operating principles as the basis for financing Presbyteries. We note that these conversations are beginning.

Rev. Dr Marian Zaunbrecher stepped down in July 2020 after two years as Presbytery Chairperson. We thank her for her service to the Presbytery in this role. Elaine Rae has been appointed Acting Chairperson, September-December 2020, to allow time for a new election.

## **Proposals to the 35th Synod**

It is proposed that the 35th Synod receive this report.

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## Contact for report questions

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