



Report from The Downs Presbytery

Context

Our mission is to share and to be the Gospel across this large and diverse part of Queensland.

The area continues to be impacted by the factors that influence rural decline, particularly the rapid effects of the economic downturn in the Surat Basin development.

Along with the viability of congregations themselves, the viability of many small communities continues to consume energy and attention. This sense of 'survival', coupled with confrontations over coal seam gas, has exacerbated health and social problems in the area.

The work of UnitingCare Queensland through initiatives in supporting community health and addressing drug problems is welcome. Congregations are also identifying potential or currently experiencing increasing needs within communities for support in a range of areas such as homelessness, physical and mental wellbeing, and family dysfunction.

Factors such as aging and diminution of experience make our congregations more dependent upon the very small influx of younger professionals and workers to provide strength and leadership.

Ministry/congregational life data

Area covered (sq/kms)	400,000	No. of pastors (Stream A)	2
Population	260,000	No. of pastors (Stream B)	4
No. of congregations	33	No. of lay ministry teams	7

recognised as such by Presbytery	+ 2 patrols (Leichhardt, and Cunnamulla/Burke and Wills)		
Faith communities	0	Placements No. of congregational placements FTE	F/T: 11 P/T: 3
Ecumenical communities	2	No. of non-congregational placements FTE	F/T: 1 P/T: 4
No. of 'cluster' arrangements	8	No. of joint placements FTE (i.e. ministry agents, support staff, total number of people)	F/T: 0 P/T: 0
Total weekly worship attendance across Presbytery	1043 (noting that some congregations do not worship on a weekly basis)	Presbytery staffing FTE (i.e. ministry agents, support staff, total number of people)	2.0 (1.5 ministry agents and 0.5 support staff)
Percentage of congregations in the Presbytery with Sunday children's and youth ministry with over 15 average attendance	17% (note that this figure would increase if children/youth ministry also takes place on other days)		

Report

We are grateful to God for continued opportunities for worship, witness and service in our widespread communities. Growth has occurred across the Presbytery, mostly in small ways, in the context of increasing rural decline.

Since the last Synod, this Presbytery has faced significant challenges in responding, with limited resources, to agricultural (drought and other severe climate impacts) and mining issues, and sustaining and/or providing ministry in remote areas.

Key achievements/initiatives

Highfields Community Church continues as a church plant. It has progressed from a faith community to a recognised congregation within the Uniting Church Queensland Synod. There are ambitious hopes for a community building as a basis for their ministry.

The Leichhardt Patrol has continued to develop and increase its influence in the Wandoan-Goondiwindi axis. This patrol has significant involvement with the Surat Basin development and provides compassionate ministry to those impacted by the coal seam gas situation. It is serviced by a capable, experienced minister who has much to offer in responding to the demands of this ministry.

The Presbytery has accepted the challenge of managing and supporting the former Frontier Services patrols of Cunnamulla and Burke and Wills through amalgamating them for the time being.

This patrol is well serviced by a young couple whose enthusiasm and acceptance by the communities is a positive sign for the future.

Within the existing congregations and the Presbytery we celebrate:

- The completion of the refurbishment of the Blue Care building at Goondiwindi into a worship and ministry centre.
- The continuation of school chaplaincy, part-time, at Scots PGC College with the appointment of Rev Willie Liebenberg.
- The inductions of Revs Kaye Ronalds and Ansie Liebenberg to the Granite Belt and Warwick/Killarney respectively.
- The retirement of Sharon Kirk after eight years of significant ministry as Presbytery minister and the commissioning of Neil Thorpe as the new Presbytery minister.
- Lifeworks' progress towards building a new ministry centre on its property at Glenvale.
- Renewal of a Presbytery focus on the ministry of lay preacher through appointment of a Presbytery coordinator.

An inter-faith working group has been formed. One of its aims is to make the Toowoomba region a model region of peace. To achieve this, the different faiths will aim to demonstrate to the community that they respect each other and can live in peace and harmony. We are in the early stages of planning an international summit on peace and harmony in Toowoomba in December 2016 with contact having been made with UNESCO.

Challenges/risks as we progress

The Presbytery continues to work with congregations to identify ways in which a sustainable remunerated ministry can be supported in local contexts. Increasingly, congregations are finding it a challenge to provide full-time opportunities for ministry.

Congregations in rural and remote settings that cannot provide full-time remunerated placements are at a clear disadvantage when seeking to attract experienced, capable ministers.

Rural and remote ministry requires a blend of enthusiasm, experience and commitment. The context of this type of ministry should be attractive to ministers and pastors who have considerable experience of life and are interested in working with communities on different ways of being church. For this to happen, the church as a whole will need to provide a more creative and sustainable way of supporting these ministries.

The Presbytery continues to discern ways in which it can support congregations and patrol ministry in dealing with the human costs of large scale development in the Surat Basin.

Issues to be addressed

The burden of living in rural and remote areas is not necessarily being lessened by advancements in digital communications and improvements in transportation. Demands relating to the lack of meaningful long-term employment, increases in physical ailments and mental health issues, declining populations particularly amongst youth and young adults, and the dissipation of strong community relationships are challenges to maintaining the community spirit and human fabric of these communities.

The costs of supporting isolated and small communities in rural and remote locations need to be borne by a combination of local, presbytery and wider-church resourcing. This is a continuing issue

for this and other presbyteries and creative ways of addressing this need to be identified, such as patrol ministry, resource ministry, and other forms.

Proposal to the 32nd Synod

Rural and remote ministry proposal:

That this Synod:

1. Appoint a Rural and Remote Ministry task group under the supervision of Synod Standing Committee (SSC) to:
 - a) define “rural” and “remote” as it will apply to this ministry setting
 - b) identify the needs and the opportunities in rural and remote locations
 - c) review current resourcing for ministry in rural and remote locations
 - d) identify future forms of ministry that are appropriate
 - e) provide progress reports to SSC meetings
 - f) make recommendations to SSC to secure long-term, sustainable resourcing of rural and remote ministry in this Synod.
 2. The Rural and Remote Ministry task group to finalise its work by the end of May 2017.
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