



Report from Presbytery of Central Queensland



Context

Since the 31st Synod in 2014, Central Queensland has continued to be affected by the mining downturn and mining employment practices, the severe drought, and other climate events. The lack of ministers in placement across the Presbytery was noted at that Synod in Session, but the Presbytery is pleased to be able to report that almost all viable placement positions have since been filled. For many places, lay leadership has been willingly provided and has been appreciated. Support from the wider church has been greatly appreciated as congregations have sought to provide a ministry of hope and comfort in difficult circumstances. In the midst of this, the work of meeting ongoing compliance requirements has been and is being addressed, but there is still a long way to go.

Ministry/congregational life data

Area covered (sq/kms)	850EW x 650NS between towns	No. of pastors (Stream A)	2
Population	No figures anywhere near accurate, because of rural and mining downturn. 350,000?	No. of pastors (Stream B)	3
No. of congregations recognised as such by Presbytery	30	No. of lay ministry teams	4
Faith communities	0	Placements No. of congregational placements FTE	F/T: 10 P/T: 4
Ecumenical communities	1	No. of non- congregational placements FTE	F/T: 4 P/T: 2
No. of 'cluster' arrangements	5	No. of joint placements FTE (i.e. ministry agents, support staff, total number of people)	F/T: 0 P/T: 2
Total weekly worship attendance across Presbytery	1020	Presbytery staffing FTE (i.e. ministry agents, support staff, total number of people)	2.2
Percentage of congregations in the Presbytery with Sunday children's and youth ministry with over 15 average attendance	<10%		

Report

As noted previously, Central Queensland has been through difficult times recently. Many rural communities have decreased in size as a result of drought, flood and/or cyclone. A lot of communities have had the benefit of very generous support from individuals, congregations and the wider church in their time of need. This is greatly appreciated and the practical support that has been offered has also lifted the spirits of those adversely affected by matters beyond their control.

The effects of cyclones are often more readily overcome than those caused by the drought, and many western communities will continue to suffer from drought and its effects for a long time to come. Some places have received rain, while others have not, and those that have will still need follow-up falls to enable recovery to be successful.

It should be pointed out that some assistance has not achieved the intended goal of the giver. Donations of goods transported into an area have meant that local businesses are not being used. These businesses have been struggling as much as property owners, and many have had to either put off staff or close completely, and have left town—further diminishing the viability of the community. Even bale donations have not proven beneficial all the time, as some property owners will tell of receiving poor quality hay from an unknown area which has caused loss of stock, either through mould in the bale or contamination by other weeds/plants. Central Queensland Presbytery would encourage any individual or group wishing to help disaster-affected areas to do so by working through local community contacts to see if there is a way that local businesses can also be assisted and not adversely affected by goods being provided from elsewhere.

The mining downturn has also been a major issue for many smaller towns. Even those towns near totally Fly In Fly Out or Drive In Drive Out mines have been affected. Some of these towns used to be where miners and their families actually lived, but the change in practice has meant businesses, schools, local services have all been drastically compromised. Cities on the coast providing support industries have also felt the effects of the closing of mines or the reduction of production.

Uniting Church communities have been affected as a consequence of all these changes in the wider communities. Many placements were vacant for significant periods, and if it wasn't for the dedication and proficiency of key lay people, would have closed. The people who "kept the doors open", often at personal cost, need to know that their ministry has been valued by the wider church. Some are accredited lay preachers, some lay presiders, and some have simply tried to help as they have been able and made the presence of Christ real in both word and action.

Most placements in the Presbytery are now filled. We are thankful for the experienced ministers who have come to this Presbytery, and also for the two exit students who have taken their first placements here.

There are some placements, as there are in every presbytery, which can no longer afford a full-time minister, and this will become a growing concern especially for rural areas. Finding someone willing to respond to a call to a 0.75, or a 0.8, or any part-time position in the west will be difficult, and in most cases there would be no opportunity for other employment possibilities to be utilised. How the wider church can respond to this issue will need to be a matter for consideration. Simply "user pays—they can't afford a minister, so they get no one" could mean there would be no Uniting Church presence off the coast. Some communities may well close down completely, but the church needs to minister to the people at this time, and to find a way of doing so if the next nearest church community is over 100 km away. Other denominations are facing similar issues, but ecumenical cooperation is not easy to establish or maintain.

Having stated all this, there are and have been some positive signs.

Key achievements/initiatives

- The Presbytery provided the resource *Spirited Generosity* for each congregation, with training by Caroline Kitto. Some congregations have used the resources already, and it is anticipated that those congregations that were without ministers in placement will be able to use them in the future.
- Three people from Central Queensland have either completed or are undertaking PODs. One is now a candidate and is at Trinity College.
- Lay preachers have been accredited, and there have been 13 people who have attended *Lay Presidency at the Sacraments* training, and over 20 people who have attended "refresher courses" for lay presidency.
- Lay Preacher CEM has been conducted, focusing on the Gospel of Luke.

- Training in worship has been conducted.
- Safe Church training has been conducted across the Presbytery, which is now able to state that the compliance requirements regarding this are gradually being met.
- There is life in the Presbytery. We can rejoice in the marriage of one of our ministers and another who is going to take maternity leave. (I am sure no other presbytery can claim that nearly 10 per cent of their ordained leadership are expecting a child!)

Challenges/risks as we progress

The major challenge for Central Queensland is maintaining a presence in the rural areas. Restricting ourselves to the models of ministry from the past will see a declining presence, as the presence of trained ministers/leaders becomes neither possible nor viable.

For this reason, lay leadership training has taken place and will continue, but with funding assistance from the Synod we are exploring ways to support communities, congregations and leaders across the Presbytery. For the next 18 months/two years, Rev Arthur Tutin will be working with congregations to explore future opportunities and possibilities for ministry, and how resources may be shared. Dealing with the problems associated with distance and remoteness, including communication via phone and/or internet, will be a part of this project. This exploration will have implications for the structure of the whole Presbytery, as it may well be that the “viable” congregations on the coast will be expected to take a greater role in the sharing and provision of worship and ministry resources. This “greater role” may have to extend beyond Presbytery boundaries as well. If we cannot do this, the risk is that the church’s presence will diminish, and the Gospel will not be heard—sometimes in places where the hope and promise that the Gospel proclaims is most needed.

Issues to be addressed

What priority does the Synod place on ministry for and within diminishing communities?

How can church property which is no longer being used be dispensed with, so that ongoing costs of rates, lease payments, insurance etc. do not use financial resources which could be used for ministry elsewhere?

Is it possible to re-assess the guidelines for the use of MDF money that is held by rural congregations, so that ministry may continue in these areas for a longer period?

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