



34 SYNOD 2019

Report from

North Queensland Presbytery



Covering almost one third of the geographical area of Queensland, the North Queensland Presbytery is not just a large rural Presbytery. With major cities like Townsville, Cairns and Mount Isa, the North Queensland Presbytery contains within its bounds a large range of varying contexts of ministries i.e. urban, rural and remote.

The North Queensland Presbytery is also subject to major disruptive weather events with seasonal floods and multiple year-long droughts. All of which often dictate the effectiveness and timeliness of ministries within its bounds.

Focus since the last Synod

Our focus since the last Synod can be divided into three sections.

1. From November 2017 to April 2018: continuing the focus on growing effective congregations and equipping ministers and lay people in facing the challenges of faith in modern Australia.
2. From April 2018 to January 2019: **DAMAGE CONTROL!** The impact of the Assembly's decision on same gender marriage dominated the Presbytery in this time. The Presbytery responded by pre-empting the decision by making a strong stand to adhere to the orthodoxy of marriage and to stand firmly by the *Basis of Union*.
Post-Assembly this focus included extra resourcing and education within the church, with our ecumenical partners and within our local communities.
3. From January 2019 to present: A renewed focus on our core business of making and growing disciples. This has occurred in a fragile environment where deep suspicion permeates much of the church laity.

Highlights:

We are proud of the fact that the actions of the Presbytery have managed to halt a large exodus from the church. A number of church councils threatened to resign en masse, and many high-profile leaders made decisions to leave the Uniting Church. The developed relationships across the Presbytery enabled effective intervention and a trust that the Presbytery had the congregations and church councils' backs.

The response to the flooding crisis in Townsville and northwest Queensland was well coordinated by the ministry agents in these areas and ongoing support has been timely and effective. Strong local church interaction and relationships have enabled effective pastoral care for the ministry agents involved and many are reporting that this support was both crucial and life-giving.

Priority Directions

1. To be Christ-centred, at prayer, and listening.

The Assembly decision on same gender marriage, while hitting the Presbytery and its people like an atom bomb, has driven many congregations into a deeper relationship with Christ as they come to terms with how to live in a church they fundamentally disagree with on this issue, and trying to come to terms with what the Uniting Church has become over the past 40 years.

As one church council chair said, "The Uniting Church has lost its way, but the light of Christ will still guide us".

2. Discipleship

In some parts of the Presbytery, particularly in the Cairns area, discipleship has been replaced with trying to find a new way of being, in the light of many leaders who have left the Uniting Church. This has been particularly pronounced with our PNG people, most of whom have left the church, and our Indigenous people who have either left already or are contemplating how they can stay. It is estimated that over 50 PNG people have left the church since the Assembly decision. A number of faith communities have also severed their links with the Uniting Church.

3. Leadership

We commend the Moderator, David Baker, for his creation of the Graduate Certificate in Christian Leadership. Those in our Presbytery who have undertaken this course have been among those who have shown strong and compassionate leadership across the Presbytery, both in relation to the Assembly decision and in refocusing the Presbytery to be seeking a brighter future.

4. Connecting with communities

North Queensland congregations, on the whole, have traditionally been very well connected to their communities. While this has been sorely tested over the life of the last Synod, the work of the Presbytery and strength of these relationships have enabled respectful and fruitful dialogue to occur between our congregations and local community representatives.

The ongoing development of relationships between the congregational life and the service arms of the Uniting Church has had both challenges and successes in different areas.

North Queensland is committed to UnitingCare and the Synod's understanding of being "One church" and as such is seeking to further develop relationships into the future.

5. Youth, children and families

While there are ongoing logistical difficulties in maintaining youth and children's camps and events, a number of congregations are targeting families in their mission plans. This has come with varying degrees of success. Many rural communities have an "age gap" between 17 and 35 years as young people move to larger regional centres for training and employment.

Challenges/risks as we progress

Restoring trust in the wider Uniting Church, especially the Assembly, is now our greatest challenge. While many North Queenslanders, both within the church and across the wider community, have an inbuilt deep suspicion of "those people down south", recent events in the Uniting Church have deepened distrust and even angered councils of the church. Their perception of the Uniting Church is that either they have no understanding of, or care for, the people of North Queensland.

While changing such feelings may be a near-impossible task given the culture of North Queensland, the challenge for the Presbytery is to help congregations and ministry agents to re-engage in the core business of the church in making and growing disciples and speaking Christ in our local communities.

Calls by some elements within the church to no longer recognise the Assembly as legitimate have created some deep divisions in some congregations, and many are asking "How can we stay when we feel unable to leave?"

Some congregations have reported a significant drop in offerings and this, unless reversed, will have a detrimental effect on medium to long-term viability of these placements. If reflected across the Synod this will

also put pressure on future support for remote location ministries such as the McKay Patrol, Weipa and Thursday Island which depend heavily upon support from the Presbytery pool funding.

Having said this, there appears to be high levels of trust in the Presbytery leadership and many are looking to the Presbytery to recast a vision for the future.

We live in hope.

For consideration

Despite the storm, we avoided the reefs and rocks and are setting full sail into the future.

Proposal

It is proposed that the 34th Synod receive this report.

Contact for report questions

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