



34 SYNOD 2019

Report from

PRESBYTERY OF THE DOWNS



The extensive area which is the focus for mission and ministry for congregations and agencies within the bounds of the Presbytery includes regional towns such as Toowoomba (164,500), Warwick (12,000), Stanthorpe (5500), Dalby (13,000), Roma (7000) and St George (2400) along with many smaller towns and rural communities. The more sparsely populated areas are served by two patrol ministries; the Leichhardt Patrol which is based out of Chinchilla and runs north and south along the Leichhardt Highway, and the Cunnamulla Burke and Wills Patrol now based in Charleville which covers most of the south west.

Last Synod it was reported that many of the rural and remote communities are having to deal with patterns of population decline, large-scale changes in agricultural business, the severe and ongoing drought and the ongoing impact of the mining industry developing in the Surat Basin. During the last 18 months little has changed except the impact of drought is now felt across the whole of the Presbytery.

Focus since the last Synod

The work of the Mission Task Group as referred to in our report to the 33rd Synod is now complete, and the Presbytery is working to implement goals as identified by the task group. To date, a Technology Task Group has been formed and is assisting congregations and groups within the Presbytery to have an up-to-date social media presence. It is assisting the Presbytery in the use of technology for meetings, enabling a greater number of people to participate and reducing travel time.

The focus on supporting rural congregations, many of them lay-led, continues, but with the additional emphasis on building strong resource congregations on the eastern edge of the Presbytery to assist with this supporting role.

Highfields Community Church which started as a church plant has continued to grow to the point where it will soon be seeking a full-time ministry placement.

Two of the smaller rural congregations have requested to be recognised as a faith community. One of these continues to be actively engaged in discerning how their new identity can be used in support of the wider church.

A significant changeover of ministry agents, the retirement of the Presbytery Minister and the Assembly decision in relation to same gender marriage have all contributed to an interruption to the Presbytery's impetus and ministry momentum. It has and continues to be a painful time and Presbytery members are to be commended for the respectful and prayerful way in which they engaged with the conversation over same gender marriage and are now seeking to re-engage with the church's mission.

A change in mission opportunities and less-than-hoped-for financial support has led to the difficult decision to sell the Old Birdsville Hospital building. The need to maintain the history of the building along with links to the Rev John Flynn has been at the forefront of negotiations with prospective buyers.

Presbytery has taken on the responsibility of fully supporting the Leichhardt Patrol and is currently discerning ways in which to support this patrol and other forms of rural and remote ministry. The Presbytery is grateful for the support of the wider church in Queensland in the past and hopefully, it will continue in to the future. Some supporters are using the 'Containers for Change' as an ongoing fundraiser for the patrol.

Highlights:

- The filling of the Cunnamulla Burke and Wills Patrol placement.
- The appointment of a pastor into the Maranoa Congregations after 18 months of being vacant.
- The respectful manner in which the Presbytery in session addressed the discussion relating to 39b.
- The manner in which congregations are responding to the impact of the drought in their areas.
- Intentional linking of congregations with their communities.
- Celebration of the life of Pastor Pauline Denning and the influence she had as hospital chaplain for 11 years.
- The ongoing and closer ecumenical cooperation in the Pastoral Care Oversight Committee at the Toowoomba Hospital with trained voluntary pastoral carers and voluntary carers.
- The worship and sharing of congregational life at Presbytery meetings.
- The Camino Stanthorpe Retreat Walk weekend in the Granite Belt.
- Visitors from Amritsar Diocese, Church of North India.
- Patrol Appreciation Tours run by Middle Ridge Uniting Church each year.
- Ministry agents retreat held annually on the Sunshine Coast.
- Lay preachers and worship leaders' seminars/workshops held twice a year.

Priority Directions

The Presbytery of The Downs has intentionally focused on developing a stronger and more corporate understanding of mission within its bounds to the extent the Presbytery has three graduates from the Synod Leadership Course.

The visit by the Amritsar people was a significant event in the life of the Presbytery in developing further multicultural ties. A number of people from The Downs have been invited to reciprocate the visit this coming September to further strengthen ties.

Challenges/risks as we progress

- How best to provide continuing and effective ministry in areas of declining population. One option the Presbytery is considering is how best to re-organise ministry models to ensure ministry can be sustained.
- Enabling congregations to manage and cope with the continuing drought.
- Discerning the right person to fill the current vacant Presbytery Minister placement.
- The challenge of refocusing those who have been adversely impacted by the same gender marriage decision and continuing to live and serve together in Christ's mission.
- Finding ways to continue to work together given the variety of perspectives.
- Maintaining capacity to fulfil presbytery responsibilities of the Pastoral Relations Committee and Standing Committee and mentoring emerging leaders with only 12 ordained ministers, five pastors in placements and three active retired ministers.

Proposal

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

Contact for report questions

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