



34 SYNOD 2019

Report from

The Moderator



Heads of churches and leaders of Baha'i, Buddhist, Islamic and Jewish faiths at the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding to establish a Multi-Faiths Religious Instruction Peak Body.

Report

The life of the Uniting Church in Queensland since last Synod has been anything but dull. As I look back on our time together, we've set our face to deal with what is emerging directly, openly, and honestly. We do this because the God revealed in Jesus Christ gives us confidence and hope, that no matter how things may look, God is faithful; that God is working things together for the new, promised creation; revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and by a mystery of grace, we are caught up in that work.

We have been richly blessed; those who handed the baton onto us have gifted us tremendously; and when we have stepped out in faith to new endeavours of the Kingdom, others have come to help. It was ever thus, "the resources for the mission are found as we do the mission".

The reports to the 34th Synod will address our life in detail.

In this report, I want to touch on some themes and activities that have encouraged and challenged us.

I'll do it in three categories:

- Our life together
- Our life in the wider church
- Our life in the Queensland community.

Our Life Together in the Synod

Covenant Action Plan

We have broken new ground in exploring what the covenant with First Peoples can mean for us. This promises to be a rich and rewarding space for our life; an invitation to grow our mutual understandings; to be engaged in encounters with First Peoples that will deepen our appreciation and desire for a deeper reconciliation. We can play a part in building this. The Covenant Action Plan outlines ways we can engage, wherever we are. Queensland and the Northern Territory are unique in having substantial indigenous communities – places where our uniting churches were foundational in their establishment. Our commitment to those communities remains unshaken; we want to see how that commitment can be the most fruitful.

Diversity

After being challenged by speakers at the last Synod in Session, the Synod Standing Committee (SSC) developed a matrix to help us appreciate the value that the diversity of our life brings and achieve greater diversity in positions of influence. This will be ongoing work; particularly the ground work that needs to be done to see results in our boards and committees.

Schools and residential colleges

The investment by the church in relationships between the Synod and the schools and residential colleges that either come directly under our oversight, or with which we are associated is bearing fruit. I've had opportunity to visit many of our educational institutions. They appreciate the wider church's support; at times there have been pastoral opportunities to respond to when some have found the

going tough. At other times it's been the celebrations of the life of the community. Schools and residential colleges are facing increasing competition and difficulties with their business model. These are not easy times to run such institutions, but the leadership has a commitment to this ministry of the gospel, and I am sure they will flourish. The Synod worked in collaboration with the Presbyterian Church in Queensland to support the Presbyterian and Methodist Schools Association in their management of issues that entered the public sphere. The decision to exit from Shalom Christian College in Townsville was a particularly confronting and difficult one. The SSC was well resourced by excellent consultants and a thorough process. I was heartened when Carinity, a Baptist institution with experience in this field, bought the school for further development.

UnitingCare

The commitment of the board of UnitingCare to the mission of the church is evident in the discussions around the table, in the structure of the Directors of Mission team, and the way in which this institution is helping make the lives of so many Queenslanders (and Northern Territorians) better. They are facing significant challenges right across their diverse ministry, but their commitment to the care of the vulnerable is unwavering. During the past 18 months, I've had opportunity to visit rural and regional expressions of UnitingCare with Rev Peter Armstrong; we have been encouraging congregational leaders and UnitingCare leaders to explore how they can support each other in the ministry of the church in their locality. Probably the most enjoyable part of my engagement with UnitingCare has been to present the story of the church to executive orientation days. We have been blessed by the appointment of the new CEO and a new Chair; who both bring a deep commitment to the gospel to their leadership.

Young adults

Across the life of the church, it's exciting to see young adults stepping up and taking the initiative in new ministry expressions; Next Gen Arise, the new Christian communities planted by Newlife at Robina are encouraging new expressions of the church of the Basis of Union. I attended the National Young Adults Leaders' Conference and will be encouraging those attendees in their life in ministry.

Board for Christian Formation (BCF)

The BCF's commitment to a new future for Trinity College Queensland is seeing results; more young people are engaging in theological and biblical reflection and study.

Congregational and Presbytery Life

While there can be no underestimation of the challenges of forming and sustaining Christian communities, I've visited congregations across the state, of all kinds of liturgical and theological flavour, and I am seeing new life emerging and new hope being experienced. This is so where local and presbytery leadership take deep responsibility for discipleship, for ministry into their contexts, The Basis of Union and the organisational structure of the church, when used wisely, offers tremendous resourcing to do quality ministry. The presbyteries are deepening their collaboration in ministry and mission. The Combined Presbyteries Mission Pool has seen the church offer extensive support to the covenant with First Peoples, and to new expressions of the church's mission. We have challenges ahead in terms of ensuring our compliance to community expectations and the law of the land, but if we have a strongly articulated purpose, expressed in concrete missional objectives, we can see this work as part of our expression of the gospel; to care for others, to offer quality hospitality.

The stated appetite among the presbytery chairs and the presbytery ministers is for transformation that will release energy and initiative.

15th Assembly decision on marriage

The presbytery ministers spent a lot of time before the Assembly seeking to prepare congregations for the Assembly discernment. This was before the Assembly Standing Committee's position was revealed. In my visits to congregations around the state after the Assembly, I heard that many people felt bewildered and confused; they felt they had not been engaged adequately on a matter that was important to them. I'm sorry that I didn't do more to influence the appropriate bodies to engage with the church more deeply between the 14th and 15th Assembly. If that had happened, at least members would have felt that they could more clearly understand the decision the 15th Assembly made to include same sex couples into the definition of marriage. The decision of the Assembly to recognise two different liturgies in the life of the church has put obligations on communities of faith to discern for themselves the use of their venues. I've been deeply impressed by the gracious and respectful way many congregations – where views of same sex marriage are diametrically opposed – have exercised their discernment on this matter; it's been deeply encouraging to me.

Chaplaincy

There is significant opportunity for the extension of chaplaincy-style ministry in the contexts where people work, play, and form community. It only takes imagination, and a belief that we have something to offer. Chaplaincy has the capacity to provide the relationships where the hope of our hearts can be voiced; where people can find grace and reconciliation.

Funerals

The stories of the life of faithful disciples of Jesus have never ceased to encourage and inspire me. It's been a privilege to represent the church at those times of both mourning and thanksgiving.

Our Life in the Wider Church

Assembly

The 15th Assembly was a remarkable time for a number of reasons; we saw younger people engage and lead with confidence and hope. We also saw the Assembly exercise considerable discernment about recognition of first people's sovereignty; it rejected an unqualified and somewhat ambiguous statement for something that is more consistent with the aspirations of First Peoples themselves, as stated in the Uluru Statement. We also participated in a discernment on marriage. I believe the decision recognises the diversity that exists in the church on this. The Assembly's decision gives same sex couples the dignity of recognition of their covenantal commitments.

International Connections

Two groups I've encountered are doing wonderful work in making connections between the Uniting Church in Queensland and churches overseas. Glebe Road Ipswich Uniting Church has established a significant relationship with the protestant church in Timor Leste. It has seen a number of visits by both parties to their respective communities, and also significant commitment to supporting schooling and dental health in Timor Leste. The other group is the Dostana group, which is the vehicle for an ongoing relationship with the Amritsar diocese of the Church of North India. At their invitation, I visited

Amritsar in 2017, and we welcomed the Bishop, Rev Dr. “Bunu” Samantaroy, and some lay leaders and presbyters in 2018. This has been an encouraging and inspiring relationship.

We continue to be encouraged by the ministry of UnitingWorld.

Our Life in Queensland

Ecumenical relations

It’s apparent that the Christian denominations in Queensland need to grow in collaborating together – generally, and in particular activities. Over the past 18 months, under the oversight of the Heads of Churches group, a new body is being formed to give oversight to the ministry of religious instruction in state schools. This is an important development. Consider these figures; 6 per cent - that’s the proportion of Australian children who will participate in a Christian community on any given month. 140,000 – that’s the number children who participate in religious instruction in state schools; 3500- that’s roughly the number of volunteer religious instruction instructors. This is a substantial ministry of the church. The instructors came to the churches, articulated the problems they were having in this space, and sought the leadership of the churches. This is being provided, particularly around instructor training, curricula oversight, and stakeholder management. The Christian RI Alliance will fit under a new Multi-Faiths RI Peak Body that includes the religious instruction providers from the Islamic, Buddhist, Jewish, and Baha’i faiths.

One initiative from the Lutheran and Catholic churches, supported by the Heads of Churches, was an Ecumenical Youth Summit. This was attended by five denominational representatives. It was deemed so successful that another is being planned. The big learnings for the churches were that young adults are interested in this, and that many don’t know the founding narratives of their own denominations.

Across the state, I hear of local collaborations of churches that are happening in an as-needs, self-organising way; while in many ways the institutional area of ecumenical relations is struggling, local expressions are finding ways where the institutions are struggling to provide leadership. The Spirit will always find a way. This is what we trust. I hope that in the new year a Church Leaders’ gathering can be organised to give voice to the church’s hopes for the life of Queensland. The Synod Ecumenical Relations Committee commends to the church that congregations commit to pray regularly for the other expressions of the Christian church in their community; that our prayers may open our hearts to new possibilities of demonstrating the unity which is Christ’s gift and his will.

Interfaith Relations

Of significant achievement is the formation of the Queensland Faith Communities Council. This networking body, of which the Uniting Church in Queensland was the first member, provides a space for the faiths to dialogue and collaborate. I’ve had the opportunity of establishing relationships with leaders of the Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, and Baha’i faiths in my work; this has given opportunity in challenging times to express our support and encouragement. The Synod Interfaith Relations Committee has supported local endeavours of interfaith engagement – particularly in Toowoomba and the Gold Coast – and has run a yearly Iftar dinner during the Muslim time of Ramadan.

Redress to those with lived experience of sexual abuse while in institutional care

This aspect of our life has been particularly disturbing. We are coming to terms with what happened to the most vulnerable while in our care; our inadequacy to protect them from harm; our failure to bear witness to the gospel.

Through the Synod's Interim Redress Programme, I offered some 17 face to face apologies to those who had suffered sexual abuse while under the care of the church.

Saying sorry, and bearing fruit of repentance, is core to our understanding of the gospel; how we are called to live together and with God. It is meant to offer new beginnings to all the parties; to give us the energy and power to live a new life; to learn from the past, to give ourselves to a new future, based on reconciliation of things of the past. This is our prayer for the survivors. That is what the work we are doing in Safe Ministry with Children is about; building a new future, where vulnerable people in our care will be safe from harm.

Late last year, the Heads of Churches nominated me as their representative on the State Government's Truth, Healing, and Reconciliation Task Group.

Social Justice

During this term, I have addressed with government, and in public, in various ways the issues of abortion, aged care, palliative care, assisted dying, asylum seekers, modern slavery, guest worker issues, the state government's *Human Rights Act*, domestic violence and family violence. I have continued to support the church's participation in the Queensland Community Alliance. This body provides avenues for congregations to do the work of social justice in concrete ways. Members are trained in community engagement, to collaborate with other community-based organisations, and to be strengthened in their own life and witness.

Challenges/Risks as we progress

The greatest challenge we face is that we worry about ourselves; that we seek to shape our life in a way that addresses only our concerns and fears about our life.

To be the church here is to be a people who have confidence and hope for the life of the world; to believe that we have to offer the promise and the challenge of the kingdom of God to the life of Queensland.

That is what we will explore in our discernment journey together between now and the 35th Synod; What are the issues and challenges in the life of Queensland that we are being called to address? What blessing will we bring to the contexts in which we are called to worship, witness and serve? How will we collaborate together?

This kind of discernment will always involve dying and rising; being in some chaos (others call it “liminal space”, or “ambiguity”) for a time as we discover others have different ideas; it will also involve letting go of our need for our solution to win; it is the heart of collaboration, and the heart of the story of the church.

I have every confidence in the Spirit’s desire to lead us and empower us in this journey. It’s going to be energising!

Proposal

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

Contact for report questions

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