



Report from

# Presbytery of The Downs



*This report has been updated as at 22 October 2020*

# Report

- Gratitude to God for the support from across the whole Synod as we face many natural disasters.
- BlueCare Grief and Loss Program continues to grow and benefit many within the presbytery and beyond.
- People and healthy living systems are our greatest resource for growing the mission of the church.
- Project Plenty highlighted the community needs surrounding issues of mental health and well-being.
- Ecumenical engagement across the presbytery is vital to future ministry.

## About our Presbytery

Presbytery of The Downs is located on the traditional lands of the Giabal, Jarowair, Gooragooby, Kambuwal, Banrungam, Kooma, Bigambul, Mandandanji, Gunggari, Kenja and Bidgari people.

The broad area for congregational and agency mission within the bounds of the presbytery include large regional towns: Toowoomba (approx. pop. 170,000), Warwick (approx. pop. 21,000), Stanthorpe (approx. pop. 5400), Chinchilla (approx. pop. 6,600), Dalby (approx. pop. 12,700), Oakey (approx. pop. 4500), Roma (approx. pop. 6800), Goondiwindi (approx. pop. 6300) and St George (approx. pop. 3000).

There are 28 Uniting Church congregations supported by seven lay lead ministry teams and 14 ministry agents. Surrounding these centers are many smaller towns and rural communities, these more lightly populated areas are supported by two patrol ministries: the Leichhardt Patrol, and the Cunnamulla Burke and Wills Patrol. The Leichhardt Patrol is based out of Chinchilla and runs north and south along the Leichhardt Highway. This patrol is funded by a combination of support from congregations both within and beyond the presbytery. The Cunnamulla Burke and Wills Patrol based out of Charleville covering most of the south west with funding support from Frontier Services. The presbytery also supports the ministry of three chaplains—one each at Scots PGC College in Warwick, Darling Downs Health Services and UnitingCare Blue Care in Toowoomba.

This presbytery has a passion and calling to be present with the community to see God amongst the many challenges faced. We have strong, healthy and growing ecumenical connections across the presbytery. Alongside this we are engaged in a vibrant Interfaith Network in Toowoomba which works well together to support the needs of the community.

## Focus since the last Synod

In a word, what has taken up most of our time since the last Synod is DISASTERS! The shires covered by this presbytery are still all fully drought declared, despite the recent welcome rainfall. Alongside the drought the presbytery has faced bushfires in Warwick, Ravensbourne, Pechey, Crows Nest and Millmerran; flooding rains in Dalby and surrounding areas; and like us all a global pandemic.

While this has been very confronting and a testing time, there have been many blessings and the clear movement of the Holy Spirit, which gives hope to us all. We have an amazing team of ministry agents and lay lead ministry teams (LLMT) effectively ministering within their local communities offering light in the midst of darkness. We are also extremely grateful to God for the support from beyond this presbytery from individual members of the church, congregations across the Synod, and the Synod Disaster Recovery Fund (DRF). People have reached out to congregations within our presbytery and offered their prayers and practical support.

This was able to bring much appreciated bottled water, even tanks of water, and other support to people in Stanthorpe and surrounding areas. A growing relationship between members from Chermside Kedron Community Church who travelled out to Goondiwindi Uniting Church to offer financial support to locals and encouragement to the congregation; and the people of Dalby received financial support from the DRF to support community members to rebuild after the floods.

Churches, communities and local regions are working together to support communities through the ongoing effects of the pandemic offering peer pastoral and prayer support. We also acknowledge the extra pressures to adapt quickly to the online format—people sharing their skills in technology and others learning new skills in 2020. For some the frustration of slow or no internet is a daily reality yet they still patiently continue to spend time ‘giving it a go’, getting connected, experiencing frozen screens, no audio, being disconnected and then linking into the meeting via phone, and sharing a laugh about it.

### Highlights:

- Strategic locations – as we reported at the 34th Synod, four congregations within Toowoomba were identified as pillar congregations of the presbytery (St Stephens Uniting Church, Middle Ridge Uniting Church, Highfields Community Church and Lifeworks Uniting Church) and strategically building up of these congregation was hoped to support and maintain congregations in more remote regional centres. This work has been significantly affected by the financial uncertainty of all congregations due to COVID-19. The presbytery is currently re-evaluating and developing, in consultation with congregations and with the support of the Synod, a Property Strategic Plan focusing on being more deliberate in our missional presence within communities.
- Highfields Community Church with support from the Combined Presbytery Mission Pool (CPMP) appointed a full-time ministry agent in January 2020 and is working towards being fully self-sufficient by the end of 2022.
- Organisational structures – a focus on developing healthy living systems within the presbytery focusing on people being our primary and most precious resource. This includes wanting the best for each person and supporting people to build healthy relationships with God, with each other and with their communities. We are continuing to learn what a healthy and effective team looks like and are intentionally spending time in each of our teams (Pastoral Relations Committee and Standing Committee) learning and growing together.
- The presbytery has joined the UCare platform as a way of being more effective in our organising of events, meetings, collecting helpful data and keeping key leaders and congregations up to date with information across the presbytery.
- Blue Care Grief and Loss Program – The presbytery provides financial and administrative support for Blue Care to run this program. We believe that the program is providing a

beneficial service to our community showing care and understanding while supporting and enabling healing. Since the last Synod, 63 participants have attended 11 programs in Warwick, Stanthorpe, Kingaroy, Toowoomba including the first program to be held in Roma. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 this program, and the training of facilitators has been suspended.

- Lay Lead Ministry Teams (LLMT) – the presbytery has identified that future ministry in regional and remote communities will be increasingly led by lay leaders in the community. Lay lead ministry teams were resourced up to 2019/2020 financial year with the support from the CPMP by a presbytery resource minister. From 2020/2021 this position is no longer being funded by the CPMP and the presbytery is looking at ways to further resource and develop new LLMT by using our newly learnt technological skills, sharing resources and online learning opportunities through Trinity College Queensland.
- The appointment of a new presbytery minister inducted in December 2019.
- Three people within our presbytery are participating in the Plentiful Leadership Program, growing their capacity to be more effective in their lives and roles within the church.
- Presbytery meetings have been focused on sharing stories of how God has been evident in our communities, what challenges are we facing, and how can we support each other in prayer during these challenging times.
- Presbytery Worship Collective has been a positive way to worship together online through the COVID-19 restrictions. This worship time included contributions from congregations and patrols across the presbytery and was particularly helpful for congregations that didn't have the capacity to produce full online worship options.
- Scripture 360 has been the combined work of the Toowoomba Interfaith Network. This resource outlines 360 key quotes from each of the scriptures/sacred writings of 10 different faiths. This resource is offered free for churches to distribute as a sign of a commitment to harmony, peace and unity.
- Ecumenical engagement and strong connections are vital for future ministry in the presbytery. Many of the congregations as well as the two patrols have positive relationships full of grace, generosity and friendship with other churches that continue to grow.
- Christian Leaders Network – Christian leaders across Toowoomba have created a space for community prayer, networking, learning opportunities and support amongst the growing number of independent churches in the region. Members of all denominations are encouraged to attend these weekly gatherings.
- Toowoomba Heads of Church – a monthly breakfast of the leaders of the Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church and Lutheran churches is held for prayer and sharing.
- In 2021 the Toowoomba Churches Together have offered support to the Regional Council to commemorate the 10th anniversary since the devastating floods in Toowoomba and surrounding areas, working alongside the local council to bring meaning and hope as people remember and reflect.
- Signing of the Pastoral Care Oversight Committee Covenant and Memorandum of Understanding between Toowoomba Heads of Churches (Catholic, Anglican, Uniting Church and Lutheran) and the Darling Downs Health Services to employ a pastoral care coordinator to support the ongoing pastoral care within the Toowoomba Base Hospital. The appointment of the coordinator has been delayed due to COVID-19 and funding restraints in Queensland Health.

- Decision of the Assembly regarding same gender marriage – the presbytery has been intentionally working with congregations to keep the focus on mission and unity; however, despite much prayer and discernment two congregations had significant loss of membership (one included the resignation of the minister). This resulted in a request for financial support to one congregation from the CPMP and for the other the presbytery continues to provide financial and operational support to the remaining members so that their focus can be on rebuilding and refocusing on the mission of the church in their local area.

## Project Plenty

The presbytery has engaged well in the Project Plenty process. In July 2019 we held the initial workshop with the Project Plenty team at our presbytery meeting in Roma and identified mental health issues across the presbytery as a significant community need. In subsequent presbytery meetings we have had updates from the Project Plenty team, and in June 2020 we had a positive response to the consultation and look forward to engaging further to implement the outcomes of the report into the life of the presbytery.

## Challenges/risks as we progress

- How best to provide continuing and effective ministry in the changing demographics, in small communities spread over a vast area and growing regional towns.
- Growing our financial capacity to maintain and grow ministry in places that have limited financial capacity.
- Equipping leaders and raising up new leaders to effectively lead communities in worship, witness and service in a COVID-19 and post-COVID world.
- Developing a culture of well-being and promoting healthy lifestyles amongst leaders.
- Being a church that offers a creative response to the growing mental health concerns within the community.
- Do our governance structures provide adequately for a church to think outside the box, take risks, reflect honestly, have difficult conversation and be courageously bold to bring the hope of the gospel to the most vulnerable in the community.
- Identifying people who are called and have the capacity to contribute their time and talents to roles within church councils and the presbytery.
- Transforming online connections with people to becoming life-long committed disciples of Jesus.
- Constantly re-evaluating our systems so that we are healthy, transparent and effective in the way we live out our call to discipleship.
- Doing more rather than being present and trusting that God is here in our communities.



## For consideration

The presbytery continues to be grateful for the resources provided to the presbytery and congregations by the Synod Support Team. It has been a challenge for small, remote and rural congregations to keep up with the increasing expectations of compliance; however, having staff willing to listen and to offer advice and support is vital to the work of the presbytery.

## Proposals to the 35th Synod

It is proposed that the 35th Synod receive this report.

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