

B25 NSW/ACT SYNOD

1. OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT

The NSW/ACT Synod covers approximately 811,802 km² supporting 13 Presbyteries and more than 400 Congregations, Faith Communities and Parish Missions. There are over 320 Ministers, Deacons, Chaplains and Pastors in active service across the Synod. The NSW/ACT Synod is culturally and linguistically diverse, and covers both rural, regional and urban environments responding to a variety of ministry and mission opportunities across NSW and the ACT.

Many, if not most, English speaking Congregations and some ethnic Congregations are smaller and older with fewer people and resources available for ministry and mission in their local communities. Partly thanks to the Royal Commission, the complexity and cost of compliance has increased significantly and the reality is that if the Church cannot give assurances about the safety and wellbeing of members and participants, particularly children and other vulnerable people, then it cannot be in mission at all.

We are not, and have not been for some time, reproducing ourselves – it is very hard to attract and keep new members. An enormous amount of energy is absorbed by a conciliar governance structure that was created in another time to respond to different circumstances. This reality probably means that there is less energy available for innovative mission engagement.

Early feedback from the Synod's Pathways project indicates that congregational members are committed to the future of the Church and looking for direction and insight which can lead to renewal, health and vitality.

2. LEADERSHIP AND SYNOD STANDING COMMITTEE (SSC) COMPOSITION

At the Synod meeting in 2017 Rev. Simon Hansford was installed as Moderator for a three-year term and Rev. Jane Fry was appointed and inducted as General Secretary. The 2017 Synod also voted to reduce the size of the Synod Standing Committee from 45 to 21 with greater emphasis given to the skills needed for effective governance. Meetings are held monthly. Synod meetings were held:

16-19 April 2016 **Come Holy Spirit Renew Our Hearts** (Moderator Rev. Myung Hwa Park)
30 Sept - 3 Oct 2017 **Telling Our Story**

The next Synod meeting will be 4 - 7 July 2019.

3. ROYAL COMMISSION INTO INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was established in 2013 to investigate how institutions, including schools, churches, sports clubs and government organisations have responded to child sexual abuse. The work of the Royal Commission has exposed significant shortcomings in governance and administration processes in all organisations. This Synod was closely involved in Case Study 23: Knox Grammar School. The Synod took immediate action to develop an Interim Redress Scheme to respond to the needs of survivors. The Synod's Uniting Redress has been operational since 2016.

Case Study 56: Royal Commission Public Hearing into the UCA was heard on 10 March 2017 and identified key outstanding issues still to be addressed.

- The adequacy of governance & oversight processes in the UCA
- The existence & effectiveness of audit & compliance systems across all UCA entities
- Implementation of the UCA National Child Safe Framework
- Implementation of the UCA National Interim Redress Framework
- Clarity around mandatory reporting expectations & procedures
- Civil Litigation – application of NSW/ACT Synod Model Litigant Guiding Principles
- Professional standards & discipline

The SSC in April 2017 (32/17SC) approved the increase in the redress scheme cap from \$100,000 to \$150,000 that brought it into line with other major faith-based denominations, as well as the proposed Commonwealth Government scheme (which will be commencing in 2018).

In addition, the Synod is working closely with the UCA Synod schools in relation to improving and strengthening governance arrangements. This includes consideration of separate incorporation for a number of schools and the creation of a Synod Schools Commission.

4. WHAT HAVE BEEN SOME OF THE MAJOR UNDERTAKINGS / ACHIEVEMENTS / DISAPPOINTMENTS CHANGES WITHIN THE LIFE OF YOUR SYNOD OVER THE LAST TRIENNIUM?

There are four major projects currently underway across the Synod.

1. Pathways – was initiated at Synod 2017 following a successful pilot program conducted in New England Northwest Presbytery and Parramatta-Nepean Presbytery. Pathways is a grassroots planning process that engages congregations and councils in the discernment of mission priorities for the next forty years and beyond. The process is designed to take seriously the inter-conciliar nature of the UCA and is now being rolled out in all the Presbyteries of the Synod. The project will conclude in time to report to Synod 2019.
2. Pulse – was also initiated by Synod 2017. Pulse seeks to grow vital Christian communities where emerging generations thrive, to develop a sustainable, vibrant movement where communities are strengthened and effective leadership is developed. The vision, under the oversight of Uniting Mission and Education (UME) envisages Pulse as a whole-of-church movement that recognises the importance of and invests in the development of emerging generations within the life of the church. The Pulse approach asserts that the current decline within the Uniting Church is not the final word and that ministry with emerging generations is central to regeneration and renewal.

Pulse has three core objectives:

- i. To strengthen existing communities with our distinctive Uniting Church ethos
- ii. To resource School & Tertiary ministry
- iii. To plant new communities

3. Saltbush - Synod 2016 and 2017 grappled with the realities and challenges faced by rural Congregations and Presbyteries. The Saltbush Project reaffirmed the need of rural communities and congregations, the place of the church in these communities and made a number of suggestions about the need to enable and support rural ministry placements.

Rev. Mark Faulkner has been appointed as the Director of Rural and Remote Ministries. Mark has the hope that Saltbush will be seen in terms of Uniting the Scattered Community and an expression of the whole Synod, rural and urban, as an encouragement of those smaller Christian communities irrespective of location, age, ability or resources. Mark's work will be founded in gathering and connecting smaller rural Christian communities, affirming them in the life of the wider Church and continuing discussion on the nature of further rural and remote Ministry placements. Mark hopes through his work, the support of a renewed Rural Ministry Unit and the practical encouragement of the wider Synod to enable diverse Christian communities to be affirmed in their own abilities to gather and worship, their own passions and faithfulness and their own missional opportunities within their local communities and the wider world. Saltbush will report to Synod 2019.

4. Future Horizons - In December 2017 the Uniting Board endorsed Uniting's Future Horizons Strategy - the newly integrated organisation's first comprehensive 10-year outlook articulating the consolidated Uniting vision for social outcomes. The strategy sets out the priorities for investment, innovation and action to make a positive impact for people and communities with the greatest needs. A key feature of this plan is the active collaboration of Uniting with the wider church, in particular as it relates to advocacy and local community engagement. Working together will be most evident in the new growth regions of Western and South-western Sydney.

Presbytery health, effectiveness and viability remains a major concern in this Synod. The 1996 Assembly Discussion paper, *Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils*, makes the following statement in relation to the minimum requirement to sustain a functioning presbytery:

...It is recognised that a uniform size of presbyteries is neither possible nor desirable given the diversity of the context for mission in Australia, but it is proposed that the UCA move towards recognising, as a rule of thumb, that for a presbytery to be able to faithfully and adequately fulfil its core functions, there should be a minimum of, say 20 placements and / or a regular worshipping attendance of approximately, say, 4,000 persons within the area...

Twenty plus years later, very few presbyteries in this Synod achieve the 'minimum' standard proposed in 1996 and it is clear that presbyteries variously struggle to cover their responsibilities in relation to the life and witness of Congregations and the oversight of Ministers. This has serious consequences for the faith and unity of the Church, especially in rural areas. Recent reviews of the Riverina Presbytery and the Korean Presbytery have raised a number of issues that are currently being addressed. There are currently 13 Presbyteries in the Synod.

However, some progress has been made. In 2016 the Presbyteries of Sydney North and Ku-ring-gai amalgamated to form the new Sydney Central Coast Presbytery. Presbytery Chairs meet on a regular basis to share information, resources and experience.

Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress: Synod 2017 resolved to explore the possibility and practicalities of giving the Congress Regional Committee some of the powers of a Presbytery. This process is currently underway.

5. THE WAY IN WHICH THE CONTEXT WITHIN WHICH THE MINISTRY OF CONGREGATIONS OCCURS HAS BEEN CHANGING

National Church Life Survey (NCLS) 2016 surveyed 10,183 adults and 392 children (8 to 14) from 275 local Churches across the Synod. Some of the 2016 NCLS data wasn't surprising and simply affirmed trends that had been apparent for some time. The average age of UCA members continues to rise (now 66) and there continues to be a higher proportion of women than men (63%/37%).

Data that was surprising and encouraging included:

- 72% of respondents agree their local church is ready to try something new. The proportion who *strongly* agreed, has increased from 12% in 2001 to 18% in 2016. Seven out of ten believe their local church leadership encourages innovation and creative thinking, and eight out of ten (82%) are ready to support new initiatives. While this is yet to be tested, it is heartening because it is apparent that the old familiar ways of doing and being church are not generating the growth needed to sustain the witness of the UCA into the future and it is time to think differently.
- approximately 22% of respondents are new to their church in the last five years — including 16% who have transferred from another Uniting Church Congregation or switched from a different denomination, but 5% who are new to any church.

6. WHAT IS THE CONTEXT WITHIN WHICH THE WORK OF THE SYNOD HAS TO BE UNDERTAKEN?

As the Church contracts, so does the capacity of the Synod to sustain the service and resource level needed to support the worship, witness and service of Congregations and Presbyteries. Over the last few years there has been a concerted endeavour to identify additional revenue streams to address the deteriorating budget position. This has included consideration of the underutilised or no longer fit-for-purpose property assets of the Church through the Synod Mission Property Project; the phasing out of the Living is Giving program which is being replaced with the Seeds of Growth (Stewardship Contribution); and the development of a Growth Fund to provide resources for innovative mission and ministry initiatives.

Alongside the search for additional revenue streams is a recognition that the financial position necessitates that the Synod identify and focus on strategic priorities. Although still a work in progress, the emerging strategic plan is crystallising around three priorities:

- Growing Healthy Churches
- Developing Vital Ministry
- Transformative Community engagement

Once this plan is approved, all Synod boards will be expected to review their current operations on this basis. Uniting Mission and Education (UME) has already begun the process of refining and focusing operations.

Over the last few years there has been a growing commitment to collaboration across Boards, Presbyteries and other entities across the Synod. This commitment has been most evident in the ongoing Synod projects – Pathways, Pulse, Saltbush and Future Horizons – which have deliberately worked from a whole-of-church perspective to discern and achieve shared missional outcomes.

7. WHAT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES DOES THIS CHANGING CONTEXT PRODUCE?

The Church is not the only institution facing challenges in the 21st Century. The social landscape has changed and is continuing to change faster than organisations can keep up. The level of complexity and the increasing burden of compliance makes it harder and harder to function effectively. Communities, clubs and societies are having to reimagine the ways in which they relate to the world around them and engage with the particular realities and needs of human beings. The church is an organisation with millennia of history and tradition and has weathered many storms of change over that time, but not always happily or peacefully. While it appears obvious to many people that traditional forms of church have less and less to offer, it is very hard for faithful people to let go of the known and familiar and respond to opportunities when the future is so hard to see or imagine.

The opportunity for the UCA lies in its commitment to the ongoing reconciling work of Christ - disciples are called and gathered into the Jesus story and then sent - individually and collectively - to work for the common good and to make a difference in the world. The fundamental task of the church (UCA style) is to participate in the reconciling work of Christ and to be a 'fellowship of reconciliation' through which Christ may work and witness.

In an increasingly polarised and polarising world, this is the call to create community across difference, and it has been reflected in many of the decisions and commitments made by the UCA over the last 40 or so years.

8. WHAT ARE THE HOPES/PLANS/MAJOR MATTERS REQUIRING ATTENTION THAT FACE THE SYNOD OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS?

The Synod will be seeking to continue and build on the collaborative whole-of-church approach to mission and ministry in addressing the budgetary and structural issues that are in front of it. In focusing the work of the Synod around clear priorities, and letting go of some unproductive activities, the hope is that Congregations across the Synod will be supported working for the common good in their particular contexts.