



B20 SYNOD OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

1. INTRODUCTION

The Synod of WA gives thanks to God for all those who work tirelessly for the sake of Christ's Church, for the sustaining Spirit who has been with us in difficult times and for the guidance of God which leads us forward in the journey which lies before us.

The last two triennia have seen many significant changes in governance and leadership in the Synod of Western Australia intended to overcome the challenges faced since early 2013. As noted in our last report to the 15th Assembly the time and energy required by these challenges had impeded our progress as a church and severely impacted those serving in Synod and Presbytery roles. These challenges are now behind us.

Rev David de Kock having served the initial five years as General Secretary from 1st March 2016 was granted an 18-month extension but chose instead to retire at the end of May 2021 for family reasons. Rev Andrew Syme was appointed as Interim General Secretary by the Synod Standing Committee until the Synod meeting in September 2021. A search for a new General Secretary commenced in May 2021.

Rev Steve Francis concluded a second term as Moderator in September 2020. Ms Susy Thomas was elected as Moderator in September 2019 and took up the role of Moderator in September 2020.

The Synod continues with only one Presbytery, given the delay in forming a Congress Presbytery. The delay was at the request of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. Operating with a single Presbytery presents a unique set of challenges. There are currently 104 congregations and/or Faith Communities in the Presbytery of WA. Only a third have ministers in placement.

There are 7 schools and one University Residential College. Each of these is separately incorporated under the Uniting Church in Australia (WA) Act (a unique arrangement in the WA Synod). Five of the schools would be considered as elite schools while two are low-fee-paying schools. One of these, St Stephen's is the largest school in WA.

There are four caring agencies, also separately incorporated under the Act. These are Juniper – A Uniting Church Community (Aged Care), Uniting WA (broad range of services, including homelessness, financial services, out-of-home care, substance abuse etc), Good Sammy Enterprises (Opportunities for Disability Care) and Beanangring Kwuurt Institute (First Peoples).

Two Executive Officers have been appointed to liaise between the schools and caring agencies, and the Synod. This has been particularly helpful in forming common values and working towards a common purpose.

2. DEALING WITH THE CHALLENGES

2.1 COVID-19

The COVID pandemic struck in March 2020 and has impacted the world significantly since then. The isolation of Western Australia did provide significant protection and for the most part, the infection rate was low and people were able to move about freely within the State. In Perth however, city centre office, retail and food outlets were affected in line with the shift to work-from-home. It is unclear whether this is a permanent shift in working style but it is probably the way of the future. Mining and agriculture continued to boom and the WA economy has gone from strength to strength

In a few brief lockdown periods and times of other preventative restrictions, the churches were closed or had limitations on attendance but generally worship services have been offered as usual. New learnings in media have enabled many congregations to broadcast their services during times of restriction and most continue to do so. Many congregations have reported an increase in attendance and financial contributions during this time.

Schools and Care Agencies have been affected to some extent, mainly in the aged care and homelessness space but have continued to deliver services at the highest level.

3. MOVING FORWARD IN MISSION

The Synod Strategic Plan 2018-2021 was introduced in 2017 and is presently undergoing an update and review.

An Associate General Secretary (Strategy) has been appointed to develop the renewed Strategic Plan 2022-2025.

The main components of the current Strategic Plan are noted below:

Vision Statement

- A Christian Community for Everyone

Purpose Statement

- Uniting in God's Mission to the World
- Growing Communities of Christ-Followers
- Grounded in Worship, Witness and Service

Values Statement

- To preach Christ the risen crucified one and confess him as Lord;
- To bear witness to the unity of faith and life in Christ, rising above cultural, economic, national and racial boundaries;
- To engage in fearless prophetic ministry in relation to matters which deny God's active will for justice and peace;
- To act with God alongside the oppressed, the hurt and the poor;
- To accept responsibility for the wise use and conservation of the finite resources of this earth for the benefit of all;
- To recognise, treasure and use the gifts of the Spirit given to all God's people for ministering; and
- To live a creative, adventurous life of faith, characterised by openness, flexibility, hope and joy

From *The Inaugural Statement to the Nation – June 22, 1977*

Strategic Directions

1. Developing a culture of open communication
2. Increasing the church's capacity for community engagement
3. Developing relevant education, training and leadership development resources, programmes and projects
4. Promoting a culture of faith formation and sharing

The Synod continues to hold to the Vision Statement – "A Christian Community for Everyone." The embryonic detail of the renewed Strategic Plan suggests that this statement will be teased out to provide guidelines in Values and Purpose for the whole Synod, including congregations, schools and care agencies.

New data from the National Church Life Survey process is expected in early 2022. All congregations will participate in the survey at Synod expense to gain data which is considered essential for the renewed Strategic Plan.

4. NEW SHAPES OF MISSION

The Synod and Presbytery have embraced the Fresh Expression movement and committed to Mission-Shaped Ministry programs being rolled out across our congregations. Words like “Fresh Expressions”, “Mission-Shaped Ministry” and “Messy Church” are now an essential part of our vocabulary. The Presbytery of WA Thrive Mission Committee is the driver for congregation mission activities

We continue to reach across generations through the Uniting Generations Ministry which replaced the former First Third approach. We continue to find a source of hope in our Multi-Cultural ministry with many ethnic groups seeking a relationship with the Uniting Church, and undertaking training in the Basis of Union and Uniting Church practices.

CEDAL (Commission for Education, Discipleship and Leadership) which incorporates the Ministry Education Board operates within the Presbytery and significant steps have been taken to develop and expand the education and training for missional discipleship. The number of people undertaking a Period of Discernment has increased substantially and this has translated into an increase in the number of students and Candidates for Ministry, including those from CALD backgrounds.

5. FUNDING THE MISSION

The Synod has committed to break-even financially on an annual basis and has consistently been able to achieve this over the past three years through careful financial management and the introduction of new accounting systems and financial monitoring mechanisms.

This has not impeded the contribution to missional funding which continues to grow in interesting ways.

The UC Foundation (WA) Trust has been re-established as funding source for major missional projects and has contributed to several projects including work amongst First People in the Kimberley, an Early Childhood Learning Centre and a Poverty Alleviation service. In addition, loans to congregations previously granted to congregations for building development were converted to grants, to free their financial resources for mission.

The Presbytery of WA Thrive Mission Committee also make grants to congregations for smaller projects

6. WORKING WITH CONGRESS

The WA Regional Committee of Congress had been developing plans to become a separate Presbytery but these were forestalled by a review by the National Committee of Congress. The Synod works closely with Congress in the development of plans and budgets, including the revitalisation of Beananing Kwuurt Institute (BKI).

The Executive Officer: Caring Agencies, working with a Past Moderator are working closely with BKI, National Congress and the Regional Committee of Congress to develop a way forward for BKI to become an effective caring agency for First People in WA.

The Covenanting Commission continues to meet on a regular basis under the co-chairing of the Moderator and Chair of the Regional Committee of Congress.

7. RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The Synod has established a Safe Church Unit to provide training and policy guidance to the Synod and responses to survivors seeking records and/or redress.

This team also monitors professional standards and compliance with the Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct policies. Regular Safe Church Awareness Training Workshops are held across the Synod. To ensure an effective rollout, the Standing Committee has approved a consequence policy

for non-compliance with the training standards for the Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice, and Safe Church Awareness Training.

The Safe Church Unit also handles all Redress claims and Civil Litigation claims related to historical child sexual abuse, under the direction of the General Secretary.

8. DISABILITY ROYAL COMMISSION

The Synod has established a Task Group to consider the requests and eventual outcome of this Royal Commission, under the leadership of the CEO of Good Sammy Enterprises. The Task group includes members who are disabled.

9. AGED CARE ROYAL COMMISSION

The Juniper Board has kept a close watch on the developments of this Commission and have welcomed the proposals, and the response of government through the 2021 Budget.

10. CONCLUSION

Finally, we pray with Paul, that “being rooted and established in love, we may grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ”. We seek to remind ourselves that God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations”. (Ephesians 3)

Rev David de Kock
General Secretary