

Ministry Standards Committee

Report on Consultation with the South Australian Synod and Uniting College, Adelaide

10-12th March 2021 (via Zoom)

Consultation Team: Ross Chambers and Robyn Whitaker

Dates: 10-12 March 2021

Executive Summary

This is a report of the consultation conducted in the SA Synod under the Assembly Guidelines for Consultation with Synod MEB's, Theological Colleges and Educational Agencies. Due to Covid restrictions regarding travel, the consultation was initially delayed (from Dec 2020) and then undertaken via zoom over three days from 10-12 March 2021. The consultation team received outstanding support from Uniting College in preparation for the visit. We had access to the full range of documentation requested and to the people required under the Guidelines.

Some noteworthy features of the work of the Synod's MLD and Uniting College include:

- Excellent levels of trust and relationship between the College and the wider Synod
- Significant engagement with indigenous leaders and communities including the mandated "walking on country" for all candidates
- Excellent and stable leadership¹
- An integrated model of practice and reflection in phase 2 of ministry training
- VET pathways including an intern year, prison ministry, and sub-degrees
- Excellent and thorough training for SFE supervisors

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Consultation Team

The Consultation Team consisted of Rev Dr Robyn Whitaker, Coordinator of Studies – New Testament at Pilgrim Theological College, and Emeritus Professor Ross Chambers AM, a member of the MSC.

1.2 Process

Negotiating the complexities of travel in the Covid-era resulted in the consultation team having to complete the consultation via zoom. They were able to access all the necessary documentation and met all the relevant people at distance. Uniting

¹ We note that since completing the consultation Rev. Prof. Andrew Dutney has stepped down as Principal and EO. We had noted his strong, long-standing leadership within the Synod as well as the incredibly high levels of respect for him. We were aware he had played an integral role in much of the Synod's development of ministry education and had raised the question of succession planning, albeit without awareness of how soon that might be needed.

College's staff were especially helpful in setting up and coordinating a zoom schedule. A list of the full meeting schedule is attached as Appendix A.

2.0 Organisational Structures, Governance, Partnerships

2.1 Organisational structures

The educational activities of the SA Synod are provided primarily through Uniting College which is responsible for discipleship and ministry training in SA. The Principal of the College is also the Executive Officer of the Adelaide College of Divinity, a consortium of theological colleges of which Uniting College is one. Theological degrees from VET through to postgraduate level are offered through the Adelaide College of Divinity in partnership with Flinders University.

Uniting College provides the educational opportunities for Phase 2 of ordination training, as well as various program aimed at lay education, and oversight of formation panels into phase 3.

2.2 Governance

Governance of education for ministry is undertaken by the Mission and Leadership Development Board (MLD). This Board oversees the work of Uniting College as well as Mission Resourcing.

There are several subcommittees of the MLD that relate to education for ministry including :

- Operations
- Formation, Education and Discipleship (oversees formation panels)
- Leadership Development (oversees SFE)
- Public Theology and Mission

Each of these subcommittees include at least one faculty member from Uniting College as well as a range of other Presbytery and Synod representatives. The MLD also has a covenanting relationship with the Centre for Aboriginal Spirituality.

2.3 Accreditation of awards

The academic awards offered by the College are awards of either ACD or Flinders University. The ACD is a registered higher education provider offering degrees in leadership and ministry studies from undergraduate through to DMin. ACD is also a registered RTO and offers accredited VET courses.

Flinders University is a self-accrediting university within the Australian university system and a registered higher education provider. They accredit the BA, MThSt, and the PhD degrees offered by Uniting College.

2.4 Synod support

The structures and processes involve high levels of support from the Synod. Formation panels for candidates are coordinated by College staff under the FED subcommittee and involve ordained and lay leaders from around the Synod. Similarly, Supervised Field Education structures clearly involved a number of trained supervisors working closely with the College to form candidates for ministry.

The consultation team was impressed with the level of “buy in” from the Synod and the positive manner in which they spoke of Uniting College. We were also impressed with the supervision training offered by the College and the strong sense of working with the wider church to form theological leaders. There is no doubt that the single presbytery structure aided the forging of such relationships and the new presbytery structures are presenting some challenges, particularly as they take up responsibility for phase 4.

3.0 Ministerial and Lay Education

3.1 Period of Discernment

The period of discernment is supported by good and accessible documentation and support materials. Resources and training to support PoD in presbyteries may be needed in the new structures. Uniting College also provides a number of VET certificates and diploma level courses as pathways into theological education and ministry.

3.2 Phase 2 formation

Phase 2 training appears to be the real strength of the SA system. All candidates undertake a range of core units, a CPE, walking on country, placements, and 24 leadership days. Most, but not all, complete a bachelor level degree by the time they move into phase 3. One of the notable aspects of the SA model is its flexibility that allows candidates for ministry to train part-time, while employed, or at distance.

Historically, the transition to a more flexible training program that included part-time options was a radical shift. Several Synod leaders noted that the church had adjusted well to the different model of training and credited the Principal and staff for much of that success.

Candidates and phase 3 ministers reflected that they appreciated the flexibility offered in training. This allowed some to do the bulk of their theological education while in a part-time placement or living outside Adelaide due to family or other commitments. One of the downsides of this flexibility meant that community was lacking for some because of the rarity of time all together.

SFE supervision and formation panels are key to the success of phase 2 training. We were impressed with the supervision training provided both in terms of the clarity of the handbook which outlines the role and expectations, and in terms of the commitment to several training days a year. This is the kind of training that could be a

model for the rest of the country. Similarly, the Candidate Handbook is excellent and centrally positions the assembly standards and expectations for phase 2.

Recent graduates reported feeling equipped for ministry and appreciating the blend of academic and practical placements that encouraged constant integration.

3.3 Phases 3 and 4 of ministry formation

If there is a weakness in the SA system it is possibly phase 3 to 4. Recently ordained ministers reported that there was no cohort for continuing education and they missed the collegiality of formation days in phase 3. Some expressed that they would like a clear phase 3 program of professional development.

Formation panels from phase 2 continue in phase 3. Most recent exit students reported that this was a positive and that the continued relationship allowed for continuing reflection. For some being stuck in a less than ideal panel was not a positive.

3.4. Lay Education

Despite lay education not being one of the strongest foci of the Synod (by their own admission), one of the notable aspects of Uniting College (ACD) is its VET program which aims to create pathways into ministry, theology, and leadership. This program offers units to lay preachers, serves the prison ministry, and is part of the intern year for school leavers. Much of the lay education focusses on the pastor roles and how presbyteries manage that is an ongoing challenge.

4.0 Uniting College Curriculum, Pedagogy and Research

Uniting College offers a broad curriculum taught creatively in various modes (intensives, face to face, and online). They have created links with other colleges around the UCA and have a great faculty, several of whom operate at an internationally recognised level of scholarship and others who maintain ministry positions in the church.

One theme that emerged in speaking with faculty was the broad range of subjects many were expected to teach, often outside or adjacent to their main research area. Lack of research time was another common theme. It seems that a couple of the senior academics are producing the bulk of the research. We also noted that a high proportion of faculty are on part-time contracts, which also has implications for research.

More attention could be given to academic pathways in terms of training future scholars for the church (e.g. internships, postdocs, doctoral support). While the strength of the current phase 2 training is on practical ministry skills, there seemed to be less attention given to proactively mentoring potential scholars.

5.0 Resources and Facilities

The library, teaching spaces, and online learning platforms are all adequate and suitable for the task. We saw no issues to report.

6.0 Future Directions

There is much that the consultation team wants to affirm about Uniting College and theological education in SA Synod. However, we do note both potential opportunities and challenges lie ahead:

- The high cost of theological education remains an issue in the Synod and there are questions of sustainability long term. Greater theological collaboration across Synods could be worth exploring as well as attention to sustainability.
- We noted that many of the successes of the SA model relied heavily on the leadership of the current (at the time of the consultation) Principal and that several Synod leaders were aware of the need for more focussed succession planning.
- The shift from one Presbytery to several continues to be a challenge as Presbyteries start to learn what each is responsible for in terms of Period of Discernment and Phases 3-4. How Uniting College and the MLD can resource and train presbyteries requires some attention in this period of transition.
- The recent appointment of Aunty Denise Champion as Indigenous Theologian in Residence is to be affirmed and the consultation team felt that continued attention to relationships with indigenous Australians will only improve the already significant work in this area.
- The relationship with Flinders University brings strengths and weaknesses. There was some discussion of ACD pursuing its own accreditation for a BTheol degree. Review of provider (accreditation) relationships in light of wider UCA collaboration needs to be part of the ongoing assessment of that relationship.

Recommendations

- 1) That the MLD Board and Faculty of Uniting College be highly commended for the quality of their education for ministry and leadership programs as well as their relationship with the Synod, and,
- 2) That the Reverend Professor Andrew Dutney be thanked and recognised for the outstanding leadership he has offered the SA Synod and the Uniting Church in the area of theological education.

2nd July 2021

Appendix A: Timetable.

Wednesday 10th	1pm	Principal UCLT	Rev Prof Andrew Dutney
	2pm		
	3pm	Presbytery Reps /office bearers	Names to be confirmed.
	3.30pm	Chair of the MLD Board	Mrs Jan Trengove
Thursday 11th	9am	Faculty	Assoc Prof Tanya Wittwer (Lecturer in Pastoral Care)
	9.20	Faculty	Rev Dr Sean Gilbert (Lecturer in Ministry Practice)
	9.40	Faculty –Post Grad Coordinator	Dr Mauro Meruzzi
	10	break	
	10.20	Faculty	Rev Dr Tim Hein (Director of Discipleship)
	10.40	Faculty – VET Coordinator	Ms Jessie Sanders
	11.00	Faculty – Vice Principal	Rev Dr Christy Capper – VP/Director of Missiology
	11.20	break	
	12.00	Faculty	Rev Dr Vicky Balabanski (Director of Biblical Studies)
	12.20	Lunch	
	1.30pm	Formation, Education and Discipleship	Rev Dr Tim Hein (Director Discipleship, FED Committee) Mrs Steph Tai (FED Committee, Presbytery Secretary)
	2.00pm	Executive Officer Placements	Rev Philip Gardner
	2.30	Break	
	3.00pm	Phase 3 Ministers	Rev Mark Schultz, Rev Lynne Aird, Rev Cyrus Kung
	3.30pm	FP Chairpersons	Rev Sandy Webb, Rev Lyn Leane, Rev Eric Densley
Friday 12th	9am	SFE Supervisors	Rev Helen Dick and Rev Rob Stoner
	9.30	General Secretary	Rev Felicity Amery
	10am	break	
	10.30am	Students (candidates current)	Nola Branson, Ann Phillips, Olly Ponsonby

	11.00am	Students (on line)	Jenny Esots, Jesse Size, Emily Hayes, Sonja Groenewald
	11.30am	Students (recent exit)	Liz Dyson, Rachel Litchfield, Josh Scherer, Kristen Treadrea
	12.00	Break	
	4.00pm	Debrief - Principal	Andrew Dutney