

17th Assembly Report

SYNOD OF NSW AND ACT



Uniting Church
SYNOD OF NSW & ACT



A Reflection from the Moderator Rev. Mata Havea Hiliau

God's Kingdom is not like the world, it calls us to share our love generously, to forgive each other generously and to love and give hope to each other generously. That is the call of the Gospel and what led to the theme for my term as Moderator of the Uniting Church Synod of NSW and the ACT - Transforming Spirit.

I chose the theme of Transforming Spirit, because it speaks into our time and place as a Synod. We yearn for the Transforming Spirit to be working among us and breathing into our commitments as a Synod through Future Directions. God is leading us through his Spirit to transformation as a Church as we seek to live out our Future Directions commitments. God's moving Spirit leaves us ready for possibilities across our Synod, enacted through worship, witness and service.

Our call to action as a Uniting Church is this: How is it that we may transform each other's lives, to empower each other to go out and to tell the story of the good news of Jesus? Good news that says "we are transformed" in the love of Christ. I see hope and transformation across our Synod, hope for each other and the future as I read this report which I commend to the 17th Assembly.

Rev. Mata Havea Hiliau

SYNOD SNAPSHOT



23,000

people attend worship on a weekly basis across the Synod



44%

Churches in clusters



56%

Churches in single locations



72% born in Australia

28% born overseas

20% speak a language other than English at home

Uniting



Rev. **billcrews**
exodus foundation

The transformation of communities through agencies and schools

Biographical Introduction

The Synod of NSW and the ACT (the Synod) covers approximately 811,802 km² encompassing more than 500 places of worship, over 350 church councils and 12 Presbyteries. Numerous Faith Communities, Parish Missions, Schools and agencies strengthen our capacity to express the love and compassion of Christ through service to the vulnerable and marginalised in our communities.

The Synod is culturally and geographically diverse, covering rural, regional and metropolitan communities. Over 23,000 people worship across this Synod on a weekly basis (8% of our Congregations have more than 100 people attending), whilst thousands more serve in a myriad of ways in and through our ministries and agencies. Close to half (44%) of our Congregations are in rural and regional settings, attended by 23% of our overall worshipping community.

Approximately 255 Ministers of the Word and 15 Deacons are in active ordained ministry. In addition, there are currently 10 Chaplains, more than 50 people serving in a recognised Ministry of Pastor, more than 250 Accredited Lay Preachers, 18 Candidates (in Phase 2 of Formation) and 36 people involved in a period of discernment (PoD).

This is the broad context in which we currently seek to engage in and with our communities, in worship, witness and service across the Synod. We would also like to take this opportunity to express gratitude for our partnerships with NCLS and SGS, and the contemporary and longitudinal insights that these relationships enable and provide.

Numerous Faith Communities strengthen our capacity to express the love and compassion of Christ

Part I: Context for our work with Congregations and Congregational Ministry

The Synod seeks to encourage and strengthen worship, witness, and service within its bounds as an outworking of our recognition that Congregations are "... the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing, and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit of Christ." BoU 15. (a).

Rev. Glen Spencer

Director of Mission Synod Mission Resourcing

The Blended Ecology proposal, affirmed by Synod in 2023, calls for a renewed focus on Missional Innovation and Church Planting. It affirmed three core areas for our collective effort: Faith Communities, New Congregations and Parish Missions.

In particular, Synod endorsed a collaborative effort across the various councils of the church to plant 5 new strategic congregations in key growth areas within the Synod. It encouraged the formation of new faith communities through investing in lay leadership, developing simple and clear processes, providing practical support that eases the burden of compliance, growing support networks, funding, sharing stories and resources.

It also affirmed the important place that Parish Missions have within the life of the Uniting church and to be more intentional in cultivating the role of Parish Missions in ministry and mission across the church.

This Synod is future focused, working towards a contemporary, courageous and growing church.

Rev. Dr Peter Walker

Principal United Theological College

The changing mission contexts of the church call for creativity and flexibility in the form of the church's worship, witness, and service. Ministers and leaders must be capable of reading these tides and leading transformation among local mission communities.

The United Theological College and the Vital Leadership Team, is meeting these challenges through:

More field-based learning: Quality distance education, digital library resources, and earlier immersion in ministry under experienced supervisors are designed to ensure effective integration of education and formation 'in the field'.

More diversity: The institutions of theological education have been dominated by whiteness and more space is being made to learn from the stories, spiritualities, and theologies of First Peoples and our multicultural church.

More lay ministry: Artificial divisions have been long-kept between the academy and church, and lay and ordained ministry are real yet integrating our programs in the common cause of forming ministers and leaders is increasingly important to the mission of the church.

A contemporary church requires contemporary education, theology, and Formation pathways.

Luke Lee General Manager Treasury and Investment Services

In 2023, the Synod engaged SGS Economics and Planning to develop a more holistic and strategic understanding of significant property assets and opportunities in support of Future Directions and ministry needs. In so doing, SGS analysed current and future demographics of NSW and ACT. In no particular order, the report identified several opportunities for strategic church planting and/or intentional rejuvenation of existing Congregations:

- Sydenham - Bankstown Corridor
- Greater Parramatta
- South West Growth Corridor (Western Sydney Aerotropolis)
- Lower Hunter (Maitland)
- Molongolo Valley region (ACT)
- Warringah/Pittwater

A courageous, growing church seeks to bear witness and make a Jesus shaped difference in the world.



Recent census, NCLS and McCrindle data concerning faith and belief provide further contextual insights for contemporary ministry.



The church has seen those involved in **social justice double since the 1990's**. This reflects a faith that calls the Uniting Church into action for the **vulnerable and marginalised** in our communities.

69% of attenders rate inclusiveness as one of the top 3 aspects of a Uniting Church that they like. **Reconciliation with First People** and a focus on **discipleship** rounded out the top 3 at **23%** and **22%**, respectively



At least **75 (14%)** of our Congregations **have 10 or more youth and/or young adults**. We continue to explore what it looks like to reach and empower those in the first third of their lives in these Congregations and beyond.

67 Years is the average age of attenders over 15.

We have a wealth of faithful, lived experience to draw upon as we seek to be more intentional about growing meaningful relationships (and disciples) with those in their first third of life. Ensuring we **minister and engage, effectively**, with those in the last third of life is equally important.



A continuation of the rise in those who consider themselves to be **spiritual but not religious in our communities**. This presents both challenge and opportunity to respond, engage and **witness to communities** in diverse, meaningful and contemporary ways.

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Whilst there are many opportunities for Congregations, within the bounds of this Synod, to discern and express worship, witness and service in their local contexts the Synod acknowledges and is responding to the reality and the challenges of an ageing Church and diminishing capacity.

Hence, simplifying the way we work and liberating resources (both human and financial) is not only imperative for mission, but the well-being of those who serve. Whilst challenges exist for all Councils, in faith and active in our hope, we continue working with Presbyteries to enable and equip Congregations, within our bounds, through various means including:

Activating worship

- A missional grants program (of up to \$10,000 from our Growth Investment Fund)
- Launch of Uniting Creative (contemporary worship and music resourcing)
- Preachfest conference to encourage, challenge and sharpen the way in which we proclaim the word in our congregations
- Offer children, youth and young adult camps and retreats offering opportunities to explore faith, gifts, talents, practice leadership and followership

Transforming the way we serve in our communities

- A Strategic grants program (of up to \$500,000 from our Growth Investment Fund over 5 years)
- Strengthening partnerships with our agencies including Uniting, Wesley Mission and Schools
- Strengthening partnerships with UAICC and associated Congregations
- Several inter-conciliar, multi-centre development partnerships, including:
 - Re-imagining Parramatta Mission
 - Re-imagining Burwood Uniting Church
 - Developing regional hubs such as Coffs Harbour

Amplifying our witness

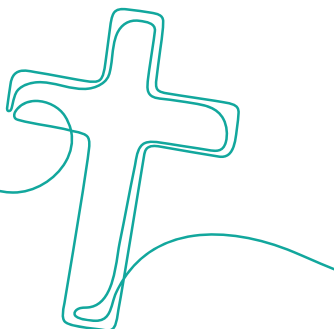
- An Innovation grants program (of up to \$100,000 from our Growth Investment Fund over 2-5 years)
- Continuing to develop and refine resources for fresh expressions of discipleship
- Strengthening relationships between agencies and Congregations as we speak up on matters of social justice, including reconciliation with First People, climate action, gambling and drug law reform
- Exploring how we might witness in communities that are increasingly “spiritual but not religious”

Simplifying compliance and administration

- Re-organising the Synod with a renewed focus on missional alignment, efficient administration and effective mission resourcing
- Roll out of a church relationship management (CRM) system - making it easier to find and connect with each other to get things done (thanks to the Synod of Vic/Tas for sharing what they have learnt in this regard)
- Expanding centralised HR and Payroll services
- Establishing centralised financial and book-keeping services, including the roll-out of simplified accounting solutions and automation of annual financial returns
- Centralised property management and property development services
- Access to on-line compliance training (anywhere, anytime) through a Learning Management System (LMS)

Resourcing Ministry

- A range of undergraduate, post graduate and higher tertiary degrees and certificates in partnership with Charles Sturt University.
- Various programs and short course opportunities for life long learning, personal development and formation for ordained and lay
- Mission Shaped Ministry
- Ethical Ministry
- Conferences
- Communities of Practice
- First third camps and retreats
- Women's Ministry Retreats
- First People's Conference
- Saltbush scattered community gatherings
- Disaster Recovery Chaplaincy Network (DRCN)
- School of Discipleship
- Mission Catalysts
- Church planting workshops
- Climate forums
- **Insights** (the collection, collation, and curation of stories of worship, witness and service throughout the Synod)
- Increasing digital communication
- Interfaith work with NSW ecumenical council



Part II: Highlights of our work with Presbyteries



Synod recognises that healthy Presbyteries are critical to a healthy eco-system within the Uniting Church, essential for overseeing, encouraging and revitalising existing Congregations as well as the fostering of church-planting and missional innovation. Outworkings of this recognition include:

Strategic Property Review

Working together to reimagine best missional use of property and resource several major missional (city and regional) property developments, concurrently. This initiative has included the development of analytical tools (using the PowerBI platform) to assist Presbyteries, in their work with Congregations, to discern best missional use of property.

The Presbytery Project - a collaborative response to resourcing oversight

Presbyteries, not unlike our Congregations, are not immune to the challenges associated with diminishing capacity (both human and financial). In response, the Synod Standing Committee, initiated **The Presbytery Project**. Accordingly, the Rev. Dr Robert McFarlane was appointed to the role of, Presbytery Relations Minister, and tasked with leading this work in recognition of his experience in Congregational and Presbytery Ministry roles in addition to his experience in Intentional Interim Ministry and understanding of systems change processes.

To date this intentional and collaborative process has resulted in:

Formation of the Regional Partnership - a crisis management response to resourcing Presbytery oversight

In response to an immediate and pressing crisis of capacity and at the request of Far North Coast and Riverina Presbyteries the Synod established the Regional Partnership as an interim arrangement.

Whilst this is a crisis management response (resourced by the Associate Secretary, Secretariat and Saltbush teams) it also serves as an experimental expression of collaborative governance between Synod and two critically under resourced Presbyteries. This model has ensured that both Presbyteries retain identity and agency, during a time of critical under resourcing, and surprisingly appears to have also rejuvenated capacity.

Under the guidance and direction of the General Secretary the Synod has initiated an independent review of the Regional Partnership to better understand:

- critical success factors that supported the rejuvenation of FNC Presbytery,
- learnings and recommendations for future models of sustainable presbyteries, which may have application for our own Presbytery Project and Assembly ACT2 process.

Three relationship building Stewardship Summits in 2023, between Synod and Presbyteries, resulting in:

- A better understanding of what we have in common and those things that are distinctive about our 12 Presbyteries
- Consensus to establish 3 common wealth funding pools to seed missional innovation in and through our congregations, to intentionally resource the function of Presbytery and to fund strategic church planting and development works.

A commitment to work closely together during a year of discernment (2024), inclusive of four Discernment Summits to discern the basic requirements and commensurate resourcing needs of a Presbytery:

- **Summit 1:** Financial and property resourcing
- **Summit 2:** Healthy Presbyteries Part A: Programs and processes
- **Summit 3:** Healthy Presbyteries Part B: People and placements
- **Summit 4:** Integrating radical resourcing



“For the first time ever we have a common vision and language that unifies everyone now and into the future.”

REV. JANE FRY
GENERAL SECRETARY

Part III: Highlights of Synod meetings

The Synod of NSW & ACT has immersed itself in responding to three landmark Synod meetings:

<p>SYNOD 2019</p> <p>LIVING CHURCH</p>	<p>We discerned and committed to be more intentional about growth in four key areas:</p> <p>RELATIONSHIP DISCIPLESHIP NUMBER IMPACT</p> <p>We also affirmed: A commitment to re-imagine theological education and Formation in the life of the church toward more flexible, contemporary, culturally and geographical accessible offerings and pathways.</p>
<p>SYNOD 2021</p> <p>WHERE THE WILD GOD IS</p>	<p>We responded more specifically to our growth intentions by affirming 5 direction setting Commitments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working with Presbyteries to grow healthy Congregations• Reaching and empowering people in the first third of their lives• Re-imagining ministry in rural and regional settings• Walking together with First People• Stewardship of the earth - acting for climate justice <p>We also affirmed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• a desire to activate, amplify, and transform growth initiatives with an emphasis on church planting, social justice advocacy and cross-cultural community engagement• a desire to simplify, liberate and unite our approach to resourcing the mission and administration of the Church• a supporting 4-pillar Resourcing Framework (People, Programs, Property and Finance)• the need for a renewal of our theology of common wealth as necessary underpinning for our Commitments to be advanced
<p>SYNOD 2023</p> <p>TRANSFORMING SPIRIT</p> 	<p>We responded to and expanded on our direction setting Commitments by:</p> <p>Sharing stories of Impact (in each Commitment) across the church (refer section IV of this report)</p> <p>Affirming several proposals which sharpen discernment of our direction and our response to resourcing challenges, including;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A 6th Commitment: To live cross-culturally, as a multi-cultural and inter-cultural church• Placements for a just church: continuing the work of mobilising, beyond city and metropolitan locales, those who have been called to serve the church• The Presbytery project: a year of discernment focusing on what is needed to make Presbyteries sustainable in the life of the church• Stewardship: a commitment to continue the process of discovery toward liberation of our resources (common wealth) for mission and ministry• Blended Ecology: a framework for missional innovation and church planting• Gambling reform: to agitate for reform to the Poker machine industry in NSW• Raising the age of criminality: campaigning to raise the age to 14• Walking Together Action Plan 2.0: the next steps in our response to reconciliation with First People, flowing on from our very first <i>Walking Together Action Plan in 2021</i>

Accordingly, Synod has re-organised itself as reflected in our new governance, mission support and mission resourcing structures.

Synod of NSW & ACT - New Synod Mission Services Structure



Under the leadership of Neil King, a flatter Mission Support structure is focusing on more efficient delivery of recurring administrative, compliance, financial and technology support functions.



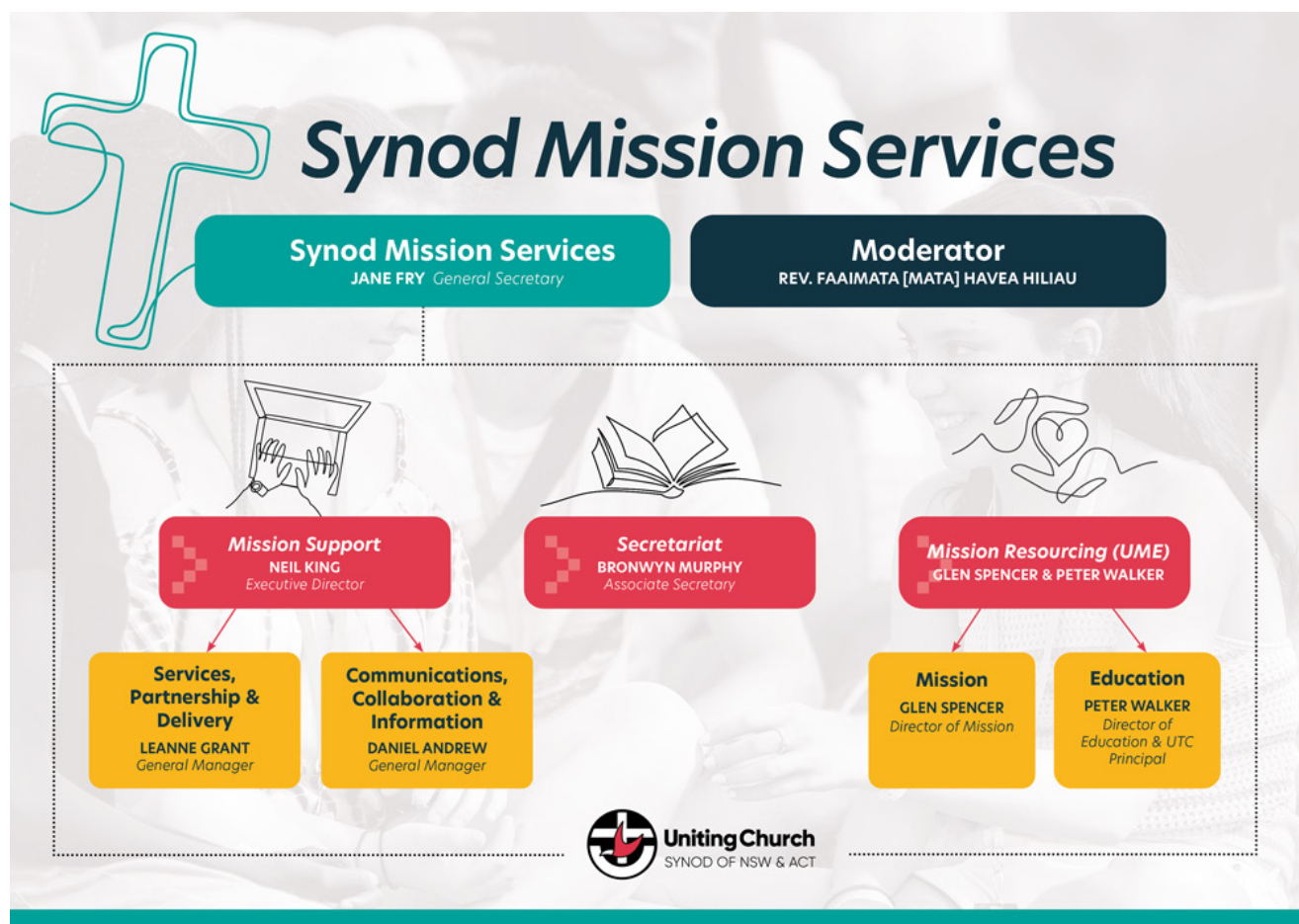
Under the leadership of Rev. Bronwyn Murphy, the Secretariat continues to resource ministry oversight, ACOMP and disciplinary functions (in addition to resourcing the Regional Partnership).



Under the leadership of the Synod's Director of Mission Rev. Glen Spencer, our Mission Resourcing structure has been directly aligned to lead and more intentionally engage with the wider church in each of our Future Directions Commitments - this is a testament to structure following strategy.



Under the leadership of Rev. Dr Peter Walker, we continue our journey toward provision of contemporary (i.e. flexible, culturally diverse and geographically accessible) theological education and Formation pathways.



A significant enhancement to our governance structure is the creation of a skills-based Synod Board, with responsibility for driving and overseeing the implementation of compliance requirements and resourcing objectives.

The addition of the Synod Board enables members of the elected Synod Standing Committee to focus on discerning the mission and ministry of the Church.

Part IV: Shared challenges, hopes & opportunities

Challenges

Grappling with revelation and resonance

"...why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" Grappling with this reality requires a rethink of the way in which we seek to make Christ known in our world today. (Rev. Dr Ockert Meyer - *Revelation and Resonance: A Call for a Theological Dynamics of Change in the Church*).

Community expectations

Our Congregations, Agencies (such as Uniting and Schools) and Parish Missions (such as Wesley) worship, witness and serve in a changing and complex policy environment including working with children reforms, safe church reforms, reports into Aged Care, Disability

and the NDIS. Such reports, and new legislative requirements provide a series of recommendations and expectations intended to create a safer and more inclusive society for children, aged, people with disability and to reform the delivery of mainstream and community services to improve outcomes for all Australians. Those serving and working to transform communities across our Synod, continue to drive, provide leadership and respond to such reforms.

Increasing complexity

Increasing complexity amidst diminishing capacity (human and financial) requires a rethink of the way in which we organise and steward, the common wealth (i.e. people, property, programs and financial resources), of the Church for mission and ministry.

Hopes, Opportunities and Next Steps:

Partnerships

Through the work and the strength of our partnership with **Uniting** we are hopeful of amplifying our impact. Every year, Uniting provides care and support services to over 100,000 people and delivers more than 36,000 hours of pastoral care (through 100 chaplaincy and pastoral care practitioners) in residential aged care, hospitals, prisons and the wider community.

In addition, Uniting's leadership on social justice campaigning for issues including climate change, drug law reform, First Nations People, young people in foster care and residential care provide opportunities for collaboration with our worshipping communities. Similarly we seek to grow in relationship with **Wesley Mission** through its leadership on gambling reform and our **Schools** as we seek to be more intentional in reaching and enabling people in their first third of life.

Future Directions

We are embracing the journey ahead, across all our Commitments, towards our vision of a contemporary, courageous and growing church.

Please watch and listen to stories of hope and possibility, already emerging, through the life and witness of our Congregations:



Watch the Future Directions Video
Scan the QR Code

Hope in Future Directions

1. Working with Presbyteries to grow healthy Congregations



2. Reaching and empowering people in the first third of life



3. Walking together with First Peoples



4. Re-imagining ministry in rural and regional settings



5. Stewardship of the Earth - Acting for climate justice



6. Living cross-culturally as a multi-cultural, inter-cultural church

Initial outworkings include:

- Formation of an advisory body to SSC
- A ministry position dedicated to the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility Scheme (PALMS)

To conclude this report, we have hope in the risen Christ and the promise that God's purpose prevails. So, we continue our journey as a pilgrim people, seeking to listen, discern and respond to God's call in and through our worship, witness, and service that we might be salt and light **making a Jesus shaped difference** in the world.