



SYNOD OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

1. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The work of the Synod of South Australia is mostly done through local congregations. They include small rural congregations seeking to witness in their communities through their presence to the faithfulness and continuing presence of God. There are congregations committed to living out the implications of the reign of God for issues of peace and justice. Others who work to raise leaders who will plant new congregations so that more people might be given a chance to respond to the good news. There are of course the many who focus their lives around gathering for worship, hearing the Word, and building community, who in their quiet way are a blessing to their neighbourhood.

Writing that congregationally focussed paragraph reminds me that we do have organisations associated with the Uniting Church, although they were separately incorporated at the time of Union. This means that as a Synod we seek to continue to be in relationship with our schools, aged care entities, hospitals and welfare organisations, to learn from them and celebrate their life.

We continue to seek ways to live out the Covenant with the United Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress. There is growing excitement as the new building at Oodnadatta nears completion. We congratulate Rev Mark Kickett on becoming Chair of National Congress, having served us here in our Synod very well. We are grateful for the work of Rev Ken Sumner as he been in the acting role of the Development and Outreach Officer for Regional Congress.

This is my first report as General Secretary and I would like to thank the team at the Synod Office for their support and collaboration. I would also note my gratitude for the welcome and collegiality of the General Secretaries. The focus of this report will mainly be on the work of the Synod.

2. CHANGING CONTEXT FOR CONGREGATIONS

2.1 COVID-19

We are clearly in a different space to which we were regarding COVID. No longer subject to snap lockdowns, QR Codes on entering shops or worrying about face masks all the time. We still, however, live its shadow.

The speed with which congregations, leaders and ministers adjusted to a changed landscape was impressive. The new skills learnt, the new patterns of worship, communication and pastoral care instigated was mind boggling at times. It was exhausting. There was deep grief, significant uncertainty and serious wrestling with theology and methods of connecting with the community. COVID also caused significant interruption for the work of Uniting Venues, our campsites, and I would like to acknowledge the resilience of the Venues Team.

This appears, at least for the foreseeable future, to have left a mark on the church. As I am sure is the case for other synods, some congregations have not returned to their pre-pandemic numbers, others are tired, there is anxiety about the future. Some congregations it is true are thriving, experiencing unexpected numbers in mission and in programmes. So, the pandemic remains a factor in the life of our Synod.¹

3. RESTRUCTURE

¹ The Podcast 'Leading and Thriving in the Church' which is a programme from Alban at Duke Divinity often has guests comment on the impact of Covid, even though it started streaming late in 2023. They talk about the Pandemic revealing issues that were already there or hastening changes that were coming. It is a worthwhile podcast most of the time.



In late 2018 we voted to go from a single Presbytery/Synod to three presbyteries. This transition took twelve months to complete and meant that some of those presbyteries had managed only one full meeting before the COVID closures occurred. This has meant that as a Synod we are still working through the implications of the restructure. Also, it has meant that some presbyteries have taken longer to find their feet. At least for some of the leaders of the church, it still feels like we are still trying to find our new equilibrium.

4. LEADERSHIP MATTERS – MINISTRY AND VOLUNTEERS

A recent piece of research by one of our presbytery leaders Rev Steph Tai has confirmed with new urgency the concerns regarding adequate numbers of ministers to serve the church in the future. We are in the early stages of thinking through our strategies in relation to this issue. Some of them are part of the Missional Framework guiding the Mission Resourcing Team, that is explained later in this report. The responses will include a renewed focus on Christian Education across the Synod, a focus on encouraging people to explore ministry as their vocation, and developing pathways to help people move into ministry. Generate Presbytery have had success with their 'Leadership Pipeline' which intentionally works to provide mentoring and pathways for people to develop their leadership gifts, including the Period of Discernment Ministry of Pastor Competencies, and candidate support. We continue conversations at Placements on how to strengthen the expectations for the Ministry of Pastor and people engaging in the Admission of Ministers Process. This has included participation of pastors and ministers from other denominations in Leadership Formation Days at the College. In addition, the ministers seeking admission are allocated a Formation Panel. We have received encouraging feedback in relation to both these changes. There is still much work to do to ensure a continuing supply of suitably equipped and formed leaders, requiring engagement with a number of councils and groups within the Synod.

We have similar issues facing the Synod regarding a dwindling pool of volunteers, especially appropriately qualified church members for boards and committees. Some of the strategies mentioned above maybe of some value.

5. GREAT RESIGNATION

Following the Pandemic, like many other organisations, we experienced our own version of the 'Great Resignation'. Several long-term employees chose to have a change of direction in their careers, others were sought by larger businesses. This created a massive workload for our Human Resources Team, especially when one of those resignations was a member of the HR Team! For a time, the number of resignations and the follow up recruiting felt overwhelming, especially in what was a very competitive market.

Since that time, we are grateful for excellent people joining the team, a time of relative stability and even some staff returning.

6. HOPES, PLANS AND MAJOR MATTERS

6.1 Property and Mission

One of the major pieces of work over the last years is our ongoing work on property and mission. In 2018, the Property Trust commissioned a review of all of the Synod's Church properties. This took close to three years. It became clear that the Synod was facing a significant bill to ensure that all our properties met safety standards, let alone be fit for purpose.

In response, over the last five years we had several iterations of a process to work on the issues related to property, mission and safety. We continue to work towards having a map of Uniting Church



Congregations in SA, their life and the state of their buildings, so that we can ensure that we have missionally vital congregations, in safe buildings that are fit for purpose, or as fit for purpose as they can be!

One of the tasks we undertook was to ask each congregation questions about their 'missional vitality'. The work of thinking through the variety of ways in which congregations might express their worship, witness and service led to some interesting conversations. Seeking then to ask questions that could give us a sense of the congregation's life was hard work. We are grateful for the skills of data analyst Darcy Pullman who joined our team to design the questionnaire. As with any self-reporting activity, at least some of the responses will be flawed, and the next step has been undertaken by the presbyteries as they compare the self-reporting of congregations with their own perceptions and knowledge of them. This work is continuing. We still have a long way to go on this matter. Next comes the challenging pastoral work of having conversations with our congregations about their missional vitality and state of their buildings to discern the future shape of the church in SA.

We continue to seek to find new ways to resource congregational renewal, new missional initiatives and church planting. Since the last Assembly we have seen an increased number of church plants for which we are grateful.

7. RENEWAL OF THE COLLEGE

We have had major changes at Uniting College for Leadership and Theology since the last Assembly. For a variety of reasons, in a relatively short period of time, a considerable proportion of the faculty moved on to different roles or retirement. Rev Professor Andrew Dutney, who has shown exemplary leadership across the whole church over many years, was one of those who finished their time at Uniting College. This increased the complexity of the work for the remaining faculty and staff. We are particularly grateful to Rev Professor Vicky Balabanski as Principal and to Rev Dr Tim Hein, as the Executive Officer of the Mission and Leadership Development Ministry Centre, who both stepped up into these roles at the time and provided outstanding leadership. Tim has now stepped into a different role at the College. The changes gave an opportunity to revise course offerings and to develop a new team at Uniting College. This has been an exciting opportunity for the College and the Synod, and we are enjoying the contribution of the new faculty.

Concurrent with this intense period of the recruitment process of leadership at the College was moving to the University of Divinity as their Higher Education Provider. Again, this has been an immense amount of work. While there are some of us who miss the Adelaide College of Divinity, which served the churches of SA well, the move to the UD has helpfully brought us into renewed working relationships with colleges in SA and interstate. A final Graduation Ceremony and a Service of Celebration for forty years of service was held for the Adelaide College of Divinity at the end of 2022.

8. REVIEW OF MISSION RESOURCING

In 2023, the Mission and Leadership Development Board commissioned a review of the perceived missional needs within the Synod of SA. The report prepared by the 'Angelwings' Organisation undertook some in-depth research and subsequently provided substantial reflections on the needs and opportunities for mission development. A summary of the report was shared and a 'mission framework' was developed to help clarify the priorities of the Mission Leadership and Development Board in the next few years.

We have recently appointed a new Executive Officer for Mission Resourcing, Rev Jennifer Hughes, and will now be recruiting for the broader team to work alongside current members. One of the exciting



developments is that college faculty are giving some time to research, write and facilitate in areas where their scholarship and interests connect with the framework. This gives new focus to the co-location of the College and the Mission Resourcing Team.

The Review also caused reflection more broadly on our Strategic Planning as a whole Synod. For example, what commitments do we have as a Synod that were not reflected in the feedback from the consultations across the church? As well, we are considering what needs to be communicated and done to help operationalise the Framework. We are in the early stages of this process.

9. COMMENTS ON THE DISABILITY ROYAL COMMISSION

The Synod Task Group (STG) on the Disability Royal Commission (DRC) has been meeting over the past four years to track the evidence and impact of the DRC. Under the leadership of Mr Bruce Ind OAM with the support of UnitingCare SA, the STG has: -

- Promoted the Assembly Overarching Principles from February 2024.
- Encouraged congregations and services to think about access and inclusion across the church for people with disabilities.
- Developed resource pages about their activities on the Synod SA website seen at UCA SA - Synod Disability Taskforce, written articles for the New Times and held interviews and panel discussions recognising the needs of people with disabilities.
- Consulted upon a future role for a Chaplain for People With Disabilities focused upon advocacy and education.
- Started to explore the WA Synod Access and Inclusion Policy and the relevance of such a policy in South Australia.

The (DRC) kept to its timeline and handed down its findings to the Australian Government through the Governor General at the end of September 2023. The Government indicated that all jurisdictions would respond to the Commission's recommendations by the end of March 2024. An interim response was provided on March 13th 2024 with a guarantee that Governments would report by the middle of 2024.

How the Government responds to the call from four of the six DRC Commissioners to de-segregate education, employment and group housing remains the key question for people with disabilities, their carers, services and the Uniting Church into the future.

10. CONCLUSION

The last three years have been hard at times for the Synod Office and the Brooklyn Park Campus, Venues and presbyteries, and for many of our congregations. We continue work on some of the major projects, property and mission, developing a healthy theological culture across the Synod, and growing our leaders. We also are committed to strengthening the Covenant across the Synod of SA, and to finding ways to support congregational renewal and church planting. As we continue working towards our next Strategic Plan we do so with a deep sense of the complexity of the tasks we face and hope in the transforming power of the Spirit.

Rev Philip Gardner
General Secretary