

SYNOD OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

1. INTRODUCTION

The Synod of WA continues to give 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.

Ms Susy Thomas was elected as Moderator in September 2019 and took up the role of Moderator in September 2020. Rev Dr Ian Tozer began his term as Moderator (as a part-time role) in September 2023. Following Rev David de Kock's conclusion as General Secretary in May 2021, the Rev Andrew Syme and the Rev John Dunn served as interim General Secretaries until Rev Dr Andrew Williams commenced in the role in February 2022. At this time COVID restrictions were still in place, though easing in WA. Andrew replaced David at the reconvened Assembly meeting in Queensland.

The Synod continues with only one Presbytery. Operating with a single Presbytery presents a unique set of challenges. There are currently 98 congregations and/or Faith Communities in the Presbytery of WA. About a third have ministers in placement. The Presbytery has been using a new matrix on what constitutes a 'struggling' congregation and has been undertaking a process of listening journeys to discern more about the needs and aspirations of our congregations.

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 three 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). A fourth agency, the Beanangirng Kwuurt Institute (First Peoples) has recently had its operations suspended and all work put on hold at the request of the Congress.

We have an Executive Officer (John Berger) to liaise between the caring agencies and the Synod. This has been particularly helpful in forming common values and working towards a common purpose. John also serves on the Uniting Care Australia Board.

2. DEALING WITH THE CHALLENGES

2.1 Redress

WA has faced a high number of Redress cases which put us in considerable financial stress. We have not had a balanced budget for the past three years, and have sustained a 30% reduction in Synod staff in that period. A national summit of Synods and Assembly agreed a more equitable cost sharing approach for the national burden of Redress payments and WA will be a beneficiary of this realignment. It will not solve all our financial problems and we are working hard to avoid another deficit budget in 2025. We have also restructured our investment holdings and have transferred our business to Uniting Financial Services in the NSW/ACT Synod. We believe there will be benefits to both Synods from this arrangement, but are particularly grateful for the offer of support from NSW/ACT and other Synods in our time of need.

3. MOVING FORWARD IN MISSION

The Synod Strategic Plan 2018-2021 was introduced in 2017 and was updated and reviewed by the Synod in 2022. We now speak of that document as a 'strategic framework' and work is ongoing to 'operationalise' the document. This has been particularly important in the light of budget

considerations. Alongside our budget discussions, which are worked on by the Synod and Presbytery together, we have tried to reframe our strategic goals.

The Vision Statement we continue to work with is:

- A Welcoming Christian Community

At a joint meeting of the Presbytery and Synod Standing committees we identified key strategic priorities for Synod and Presbytery.

The key strategic priorities support the strategic vision and objectives over a 5-year plan with some items to be actioned immediately including reports and proposals to Synod 2024.

- Identifying and resourcing those congregations which we believe have the potential to engage in effective ministry and mission.
- Developing a strategic plan for which properties must be prioritised due to their strategic missional location or income potential.
- Developing new income streams, in particular developing property to become income generating.
- Exploring and implementing ways in which the operations of the UCA in WA can be streamlined to reduce costs.
- Collaborating with Congress to develop a sustainable model for their future ministry and mission.

3.1 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 Mission Committee is the driver for congregation mission activities.

CEDAL (Commission for Education, Discipleship and Leadership) which incorporates the Ministerial 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 fluctuates annually and after a season of several ordinations our candidate numbers are currently low, although we have some people engaged in POD's which may lead to a number of candidates in the near future.

4. RESTRUCTURING FOR MISSION

The Synod has restructured its Finance and Property Boards which had been functioning as sub-boards of a Resources Commission. We have returned to a more familiar pattern of having a Property Board and a Finance and Investment Board. At the same time we have instituted a Mission Resourcing Committee which has the task of assessing grant applications from congregations and bodies for funding from our fund set aside as a 'Future Mission Fund'. Through the Property Trust, the Synod also amended and simplified many of the Trust and bequest accounts into seven 'endowments' which can be used to resource ongoing work. It is the Presbytery or Synod Standing Committee only who can use money from these endowments.

5. WORKING WITH CONGRESS

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. A Covenanting action plan was agreed by the last Synod and one of our strategic priorities is the implementation of that plan.

6. RESPONSES TO CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The Synod has a Culture of Safety 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.

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. As mentioned above it remains a high financial burden for the Synod which has divested itself of quite a few properties to meet the costs of Redress claims.

6. 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 Uniting and with input from Good Sammy Enterprises. The Task group includes members who are disabled. A disability inclusion plan has been agreed by the Synod.

7. CONCLUSION

The Moderator's theme for this (Synod) triennium is "With Jesus in ministry". As a small Synod (numerically) in a large area (geographically) we are always aware that it is Jesus who sustains us in our work. We know that the few loaves and fishes that we can bring will not be enough to meet the needs of the people and area we serve, but we bring what we have and do what we can, asking Jesus to bless our work and our offerings so that the kingdom of God will be seen to flourish under our stewardship in the areas God has entrusted to our care.

Rev Dr Andrew Williams
General Secretary

