

Synod of South Australia

As we report to the Twelfth Assembly, the South Australian Synod can note a number of significant developments in our life and mission over the past three years that the church can celebrate. There are also a number of challenges that are requiring careful, prayerful discernment in order to find God's direction for the future. In all of this we can say that God's faithfulness toward us is steadfast and a source of both comfort and inspiration.

THINGS TO CELEBRATE

The vision of the Uniting Church in SA is that we become:

*An innovative,
growing church
proclaiming Jesus
Christ, empowered
by the Spirit to
transform God's
world.*

In order to achieve this vision, in November 2006, the Presbytery and Synod adopted a 3-5 year Strategic Plan. This plan is centred on 6 key directions:

- Conversion Growth
- Leadership
- Discipleship
- New models and fresh expressions of "church"
- Raising our profile
- Justice

Much has already been achieved in the above areas including the preparation of a "travelling road show" to visit all congregations within 2 years to foster conversion growth, production of an Australian Leadership magazine and also discipleship resources, engagement of an advertising company to assist us in raising our profile in the community and support for justice projects with marginalised groups.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the Strategic Plan has been the launch of the Uniting College for Leadership and Theology on 27 March 2009. This new College incorporates the former Parkin Wesley and Coolamon Colleges and marks a major cultural shift in the way we equip ministers and lay people for effective ministry. Without compromising sound biblical and theological study, we are now intentionally placing an emphasis on missiology and leadership and the equipping of leaders to be effective fruitful practitioners according to their passions and giftedness. As Rev Dr Andrew Dutney said at the opening:

"Uniting College for Leadership and Theology isn't a repackaged version of what we've always done in theological education. It's a fresh start – a fresh departure. It's not a comment on what we've done

in the past. It's a response to the demands and opportunities of mission today. It's not the best thing that's ever happened in theological education. It's simply the next thing that has to happen for the College to serve this pilgrim people on the journey."

The new College puts aside a "one size fits all" approach to education in order to focus on the particular gifts, experience, potential, passions and calling of each person. This new model will involve taking courses, sharing with a mentor as well as serving in ministry and "learning on-the-job." The goal is to develop effective leaders for a healthy, missional church, who are:

- Passionate
- Christ-centred
- Highly skilled
- Mission oriented practitioners

The one Presbytery and Synod structure is working well in SA. There are 3 meetings each year with a major focus on resourcing for ministry as well as general business. Following a review of this new structure in 2008, the number of Mission Networks has been reduced to 11 and the Pastoral Relations staff team has been expanded.

Children and youth ministry across our state continues to be a mixed bag. While many congregations are ageing, there are many good news stories in congregations with youth groups and children's programmes growing and many churches running playgroups in order to engage their local community. At the same time, at a Presbytery and Synod level, KCO continues to flourish and involves around 3000 primary school children and their leaders in an overnight camp. Each Easter hundreds of young people attend Easter Camps with many participants discovering faith in Christ and/or having their faith deepened. SAYCO, a camp modeled on KUCA Campout, but for 12-15 year olds, is growing at around 20% per year and now has around 500 participants.

Diverse expressions of congregational life continue to demonstrate the work of God's creative Spirit. South Australia has 4-5 larger, regional styled congregations that resource not only their communities, but increasingly the wider church. Lay Ministry teams continue to grow and develop, especially in rural areas, but also now in urban settings. Following a major report by Rev Dr Philip Hughes and the Christian Research Association in 2008, the Presbytery and Synod has agreed to move towards a cluster model of ministry in rural areas which involves congregations covenanting together with a resourcing minister or an appropriately trained/gifted lay person providing oversight.

The Synod's relationships with its agencies (missions, schools, aged care providers, hospital) has grown and developed in recent years. Chaplaincy ministry continues to touch the lives of many people.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

While there are many positive signs of hope and growth - and while there are thousands of faithful servant-hearted Uniting Church people all across the state - the fact is that there are many congregations that are declining, ageing and struggling to engage in meaningful mission activities. We celebrate that the Uniting Church in SA does many things well – but at the same time, generally, we still seem to struggle with key aspects of our “core business” as a church such as faith-sharing and reaching and discipling new people so that their lives are transformed and they become active partners in mission and ministry.

Sadly, this has resulted in a number of congregations closing while there is also a significant increase in the number of congregations unable to fund full-time ministry. At the same time it has become increasingly difficult to find Ministers skilled and willing to serve in some key placements (both rural and urban). This is an enormous frustration for the Placements Committee and a great disappointment to those congregations affected, some being without placement for significant periods of time.

With congregational contributions amounting to less than 15% of our Mission and Service Fund income, the global financial crisis has had a significant impact on our investments and consequently on the Presbytery and Synod. The Presbytery and Synod’s willing “support” of the Beneficiary Fund to the tune of around \$330,000 per annum over the next few years will bring another challenge. In the light of these developments, we are currently undergoing a major service level review with the goal of increasing revenue and reducing expenditure in order to reduce our budget deficit by \$750,000 by the year 2011. No doubt this will require some wise and probably tough decisions.

The financial crisis has also had a major impact on the Uniting Foundation which provides financial support for leadership development and missional activities. While grants of over \$2 million are still being used by congregations, unfortunately the giving of new grants has been suspended for the present time.

IN CONCLUSION

The South Australian Presbytery and Synod is excited about the possibilities for the future. While there are a number of challenges before us, we see these as opportunities for new missional ventures and creative ministries. We thank God for the tremendous opportunity we have to co-operate in Christ's all-encompassing ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20).

Rev Dr Graham Humphris
CEO/General Secretary

Rev Rod Dyson
Moderator