

Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

This report to the Twelfth Assembly by the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania provides a snapshot of the life and witness of the Church within its bounds. We have arrived at this moment in time through a progression of many moments by which we respond to God's calling to us presented through the need of our world and the vision of faithful people, by the Living Water who is Jesus Christ.

CHANGES TO PRESBYTERIES

There are eight presbyteries within the Synod where there used to be fourteen. For reasons of geography some presbyteries resemble their former entities. These are Tasmania, Gippsland (with some changes) and North East Victoria (also with some changes from what was Goulburn-Murray). Two other rural presbyteries are Loddon Mallee and Western Victoria. Three presbyteries cover Melbourne and Geelong, Port Phillip West, Yarra Yarra and Port Phillip East. Five presbyteries are much larger than the former entities, some serving nearly 100 congregations, agencies and schools. The main change to the Victorian presbyteries is the way in which they are resourced. Three presbytery ministers in each presbytery provide pastoral care, mission and education, and administration.

This new beginning has provided an opportunity, in many instances, to find new ways of being the church.

CHANGES TO TEACHING STAFF

There have been a number of changes to the teaching staff of the Theological College. Professor Dorothy Lee concluded seventeen years as professor of New Testament in 2007 and continues her teaching through the United Faculty of Theology. Professor Robert Gribben retired at the end of 2008. Robert was ordained in 1970 and served as Professor of Worship and Mission from 1998.

Two professors have begun teaching at the College from 2009. Sean Winter from the Baptist Church, UK, is Professor of New Testament and Garry Deverell is Professor of Worship and Preaching.

CHANGES TO LEARNING FACILITIES

The building of the Centre for Theology and Ministry, as reported to the Eleventh Assembly, was completed on schedule and the Theological College and lay education moved in at the beginning of 2007. The opening celebrations in June coincided with a week's ministry conference, "Wisdom's Feast". The "Feast" is becoming a biennial event. The program this year promised a sumptuous continuing education event for ministers and lay leaders, offering of bible, theology, ministry

resources, worship and the arts. An art exhibition has accompanied the program.

CHANGES TO YOUNG LIVES

Melbourne was host to the 2009 National Christian Youth Convention. Shane Claibourne was one of the speakers. When he returned home to the USA he reported on what he had experienced. Part of what he wrote was:

...there are those special moments where Jesus and Justice kiss. I recently had a moment of that kind of romance, in Australia. I just got back from a trip to Australia where I saw folks fall in love with Jesus, the real Jesus, for the first time... and with the innocence of a kid at the altar in a big tent revival, fell on their knees with tears going down their cheeks for they had found their Lover. It was a revival.

The Uniting Church and National Christian Youth Convention have raised the bar on what you can do with a few thousand Christians gathered in a city together. They sent hundreds of folks out in small affinity groups all over the city of Melbourne to infiltrate the city with grace and holy mischief.

CHANGES IN WAYS OF PLANNING

The Synod has embarked on a second phase of a planning journey. The program is called 'On the Way Together' and has been guided by John Emmett as consultant to the General Secretary. In the first phase a broad cross-section of the church engaged in spirited conversations inquiring into the values and activity of the church when it has been its most whole as a sign, foretaste and instrument of God's reign. These conversations enabled the Synod to identify five live-giving themes for provoking missional initiatives:

- Encountering Christ in community
- Living God's transforming story
- Spirited listening, giving voice
- Engaging diversity
- Liberating stewardship

Now, in the next phase, the Synod's boards, commissions and committees, and the presbyteries and congregations are invited to identify their values for ministry and mission in the light of the live-giving themes and to develop propositions that refine into proposals that become new missional acts for the next part of the journey for the Church.

In some presbyteries the process of 'On the Way Together' is providing a helpful framework for engaging congregations in mission studies and consultations.

CHANGES TO PROVIDING RURAL MINISTRY

Through 2007-8 the Synod engaged in extensive consultations through rural regions hearing the

stories of drought affected communities and the innovative ministries provided by congregations, their ministers and pastors. The Moderator initiated a conference to address the issues of providing ministry in rural communities. These deliberations continue, but among the innovations being enacted is one in which worship is being streamed between a metropolitan and a rural congregation providing an interactive community meeting in two places hundreds of kilometres apart.

CHANGES TO COMMUNITIES

The bush fires of summer, 2009 have left a number of Victoria's communities destroyed. The response to this devastation by the Uniting Church across all our synods has enabled the Share Bushfire Appeal to provide ministry support through the initial period and now into the recovery phase of this disaster. Congregations, their ministers and UnitingCare agencies have been at the forefront of the Church's ministry, and are continuing to provide ongoing care for affected households through the burnt out regions. Extra ministers are being made available for this rebuilding phase. UC Camping, a unit of the Synod, is engaged in providing oversight of those facilities established to provide medium term family accommodation for families who have lost their homes.

CHANGES IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Synod has requested its Standing Committee to bring a balanced budget to the 2010 meeting of Synod. The shortfall is \$3m and the task of meeting this demand is daunting. A process is being enacted.

This moment in time is the opening to many future moments in which we commit to a pilgrim way in a thirsty land.

Rev Rob Brown
General Secretary