



# General Secretary's Report

## 1. Introduction

Gathering for the annual meeting of the Synod is an opportunity to remember that the Synod is more than the staff at Pirie Street, more than faculty and staff at Yarthu Apinhi, more than congregations, organisations and boards, more than councils, presbyteries and chaplaincies. It is indeed all of these things. Collectively it is the people of God gathering to enable 'the general oversight, direction and administration of the Church's worship witness and service within its bounds (C Para 32) ... in order to promote and encourage the mission of the Church (Reg 3.1.5).'

When the Council of the Synod gathers it provides an opportunity to remember, to lament the challenges and celebrate the opportunities. It is a time to share stories and to listen to the experiences of others. It's a time to remember that we are companions, collectively hearing to imagine and determine what God might be up to in our world through the Uniting Church here in South Australia.

The context of my reporting this year is unprecedented events, crisis and disruption. It is important to hold with clarity and focus that many of our communities began the year with devastating bushfires and other tragically life changing events. People continue to struggle with the trauma and chaos these events created. It is also important to acknowledge that the impact of an international pandemic we know as COVID-19, that continues to rage like an out of control bushfire in some countries, has dramatically impacted our lives this year. There is a high level of fatigue, future activity is unpredictable and we have needed to modify our daily routines and expectations.

However the context of my report is also opportunity. While not all opportunity is comfortable, the challenge for the Church has been to consider how we might both survive and thrive in this challenging missional space.

## 2. Looking Back at 2020

The year of 2020 began with great anticipation. The Synod Standing Committee (SSC) had mapped when it would meet and how it would ensure that each of the Ministry Centres would be given appropriate time and attention during the year. My Liaison Group, an extremely helpful system of support the SSC had put in place for the General Secretary, was meeting. Staff appraisals were done and there was a plan on how to progress the big ticket items for the year. By February the new Engagement Team was formed and the SSC had approved the process for the development of the Strategic Plan, a matter I will return to later in my report. Then March arrived and as they say, the rest is history. However we also know that history is important and worth sharing and reflecting on. It is an important story to tell and we learn much from our reflecting on it. So in my role as General Secretary there have been some important happenings that are worth highlighting.

## 2.1 Bushfires



In late January I visited families who had survived the devastating bushfires. The trees were so determined to survive. Those little shoots have pushed a cork of wood out of the trunk to make way for those precious new leaves, red and green shoots of life, bringing hope and joy. My report to the SSC reflected people battling fatigue, trauma and sadness. While they were grateful for the generosity and support of others, I suspect they were also beginning to struggle with an over consumption of sausages!

But still there was resilience and as the touches of green emerge out of the burnt landscape a plan for the future slowly and courageously emerged.

*They need our prayers, a few visiting preachers over the next 12 months, food for the bees and our long term commitment to journeying with them as they rebuild their homes, businesses and communities.*

## 2.2 Physical Distancing and Social Isolation

By April I had made my final trip to Sydney for the remainder of the year to attend the Assembly Standing Committee and the Remote Area Ministry Committee. The state was in lockdown, most staff were working from home and we were rapidly transitioning to the world of Microsoft Teams and video conferencing.



I had become accustomed to sharing my breakfast with my very cute COVID-19 companion “Chook Look” and newly established presbyteries were working hard to form clusters and hubs of pastoral support, resourcing and encouraging congregations as they embraced the challenges of ministry and mission at this time. A regular meeting of Synod leaders with the Office Bearers of the Presbyteries was established and enabled the building of relationships, sharing of experiences and the provision of support.



One of the significant consequences for the church this year has been to find new and creative ways to stay connected, pastorally care for each other and you will all have stories of your experiences. The task to appreciate and value cranky people, letterbox drops to the congregation, 6 pm drinks and snacks on the footpath with neighbours, zoom meetings, videos, family choirs at the window and regular phone calls, all contributed to helping us stay connected and care for one another.

## 2.3 Crisis Management Team

During the first half of 2020 the Crisis Management Team met regularly, seeking to interpret the Governments advice and its implications for the Church. It was a very difficult time and the diversity of context and need within the Church, made it difficult to have everyone happy all the time. We very much appreciate the patience and grace with which the Church received and sort to implement the advice. It is important for me to thank the Crisis Management Team who have since met to review their processes and procedures ready for the next 'crisis event'.

As we slowly returned to our prescribed work places and restrictions eased, a physically distanced Celebration Day was held in the office. We began by remembering that the COVID-19 threat continued and that many thousands of people in our communities and around the world remained at risk. However we had discovered that returning to 'the office' was much more challenging than leaving it and that we needed to provide opportunities for people to reconnect in some fun ways. Staff have since requested we consider developing a policy for a more flexible workplace and the Executive Officers hope to offer this to staff in the New Year.

## 2.4 Review of Communications & Events – Establishment of the Engagement Team

Late in 2019 there were significant changes to the staffing of the Communication and Events Team and the Synod undertook a major restructure, moving from the one presbytery one synod structure to create three new presbyteries. Together, this provided an opportunity to look at the future needs of the Synod in relation to how we manage events and what communication needs the Church has going into a new decade.

The Review Report recognised that the Synod continues to have a significant and strategic role in relation to both communications and events. In the changing landscape of media and events the Church is needing to explore increasingly agile and effective ways of managing events and sharing information within the Church and speaking into the wider community. This led to a decision to separate Events from Communication, offering the Pirie St office and the Brooklyn Park campus each a 0.4 FTE Events support role currently held by Evangeline McAllan, and the establishment of the Engagement Team.

While review processes can often be difficult, the SSC was excited to establish the new role of Executive Officer Engagement and to welcome Bridget Ransome to the Synod. Due to restrictions around recruitment (due to COVID-19) there has been a delay in recruiting the second position, however the process is now well on the way and we look forward to making an appointment early in the New Year.

The third role, Graphic Design, is held by Winaya Kamaputri who continues to do an amazing job. We have very much appreciated her commitment and hard work during this transition, including her role as Acting Communications Manager. We have also appreciated the contribution of Bec Preston who concludes her temporary contract with us in January.

## 2.5 The Synod Standing Committee Action List – Unfinished Business

One of the unintended consequences of the establishment of the Engagement Team and the recruitment processes that followed is that the process raised significant questions for the Synod Standing Committee about recruitment processes. The SSC determined to explore its role in the recruitment processes for placements and non-placements within the Synod. A spreadsheet of the placements and non-placements the SSC has been involved in over the last five years was compiled. However the SSC has not yet addressed the critical questions it has. The General Secretary has been asked to prepare a paper to assist the Placements & Safe Church Ministry Centre, and HRRC will resource the conversation with some understandings around the history of such decisions.

## 2.6 Executive Officers



I continue to value and appreciate the gifts and skills of the Executive Officers (EOs). During the year it became apparent that some clarity around the role and function of the EOs as a group would assist the Synod in matters related to management. I enjoyed some historical research, conversations with past General Secretaries and the minutes of EOs meetings going back to 2005. A document was produced and discussed.

Our shared understanding of the role of the Executive Officers is that they are the Executive Leadership Team – operations and management (ELT-om). I think it is a meeting of the General Secretary with the Executive Officers and it:

- Provides a sounding board for the General Secretary
- Provides a confidential and intentional space to pastorally and professionally support and mentor Executive Officers
- Prepares (with management support) and approves workplace policies and procedures
- Provides oversight of other operational matters - including management and care of staff, communication with and between the offices and the wider church and resourcing the mission, education and administration of the Synod consistent with the UCA Constitution and Regulations
- Provides an editing filter or testing ground for issues going to the Synod Standing Committee to ensure quality and rigor is applied to our work – particularly on matters of strategic, missional and organisational concern
- And reports through the General Secretary to the Synod Standing Committee which is chaired by the Moderator

## 2.7 Strategic Planning

By June the Strategic Planning Working Group felt confident to press the restart button, and the Team, Sue



Page, Andrew Robertson, Leanne Davis, Ian Price, Nick Patselis, Ashlee Littleford, Bronte Wilson, Bridget Ransome and Tracey Bost, joined me in the important task that sort to discern the future priorities of the Synod going forward.

- The Moderator and I began a series of intentional theological conversations and planned a 2020 tour
- The Working Group engaged in intentional prayer and relationship building activities
- A survey monkey was designed and distributed
- The 'map' of face to face conversations with individuals, congregations, organisations, committees and boards was constructed to ensure a broad and inclusive series of voices was heard
- In partnership with CMLA we commissioned an Art Exhibition – “God is Communion – What expression of the Trinity invites us to hear God’s wide and all-embracing invitation to communion with God, one another and all creation?”
- And we prepared to be in conversation with people involved in ensuring the life and witness of the Church is faithful and continues to be vibrant and supported.

The ‘Shaping the Future – Strategic Priorities’ Report from the Working Group will be presented to Synod for decision. Rather than offering the Synod a predetermined plan, it seeks to offer the whole Church:

- An invitation to be part of Shaping the Future of the Uniting Church here in SA
- An education process that seeks to give clarity to the roles and responsibilities of the Synod
- And an opportunity for groups to prioritise activity in a way that is consistent with and can build on their existing emphasis

It may look a little different from previous Strategic Plans you have engaged with but we hope you will be able to identify your place, your voice, your role in ‘Shaping the Future’ of God’s activity through the Uniting Church here in SA over the next five years.

It is important for me to thank the Working Group, the Engagement Team and all those who participated in the process of hearing the church.

## 2.8 Other Matters that came Across my Desk!

As most reports to the Synod will attest, 2020 has been a year of difference. We have all navigated the joys and challenges, expressing capacity in our individual ways. I have valued the many visits I have made to congregations for worship, for intentional conversations and for a ‘look see’. They have all enriched my



understanding of the Synod and the gifted people who seek to serve her. They also remind me that the Church is a very human construct that has been formed by wise and creative leadership and damaged by bad and misguided behaviour.



Such visits remind me constantly about being diligent and attentive to my personal disciplines and to accept the gift of supervision and mentoring the church offers its ministers, pastors and lay leaders. I continue to meet monthly with a professional and qualified supervisor and the General Secretary's Liaison Group.



These intentional and guided conversations help to ensure that I remain true to the call that God has placed on my life. They also hold in focus the roles and responsibilities that I take on as General Secretary and how I should undertake them. I strongly commend to the Synod our individual and corporate responsibility to ensure that all ministers, pastors and lay leaders attend Safe Church Training, are well versed in the History, Polity and Practices of the Uniting Church and participate in regular prescribed supervision and mentoring. For the Synod to underestimate the importance of such practices exposes the church to extreme risk and fails in its duty of care and call to be at mission in the world.

### 3.0 Some Closing Thoughts

The Biblical theme of journey has always been important to me. You may have read in the New Times that driving to Darwin on my own in July provided important time for prayer and reflection, opportunity to be nurtured by the landscape and its stories. Such reflection often takes me to the epic Old Testament narratives and to Paul's letters to the Corinthians. In the final chapters of the second letter, Rev Michael Earl describes the context as tense and combative. Paul has carefully unpacked his understanding of a new covenant, (our confidence and competence is from God) equipping us by faith for a ministry of reconciliation (5:18-21). However Paul's integrity and authority is challenged but his love for the Church and sense of call to be an apostle brings him to a place of grace. He reminds us of our call to say yes to God, to companion with Christ and be disciples, offering peace and forgiveness to people in the world.

Earlier in this report you met Chook Look, my COVID-19 companion! She has been (one of a few) faithful companions during this disrupted year. The Carey Landry song 'Companions on a Journey' (1985) richly informs my understanding of companioning with Christ. While sharing during a meeting of the Leadership Development (MLDB) Subcommittee, it occurred to me that the word 'companion' (seeking to accompany, associate and share in), was conceptually very helpful in understanding the role of the General Secretary and the function of the Synod.

In keeping with its Constitutional responsibilities of general oversight, direction and administration, the Synod will assist Congregations and Presbyteries in their missional responsibility, (resources, training, re-training, consultations, conferences and programs of witness and service) all to promote and encourage the mission of the Church.

As General Secretary, my Position Description asks me to provide pastoral, strategic and governance leadership and advice. It refers me to Regulation 3.6.3.4 and encourages me to work collaboratively with the Moderator, to develop capacity in order to assist and support the Church to exercise its mission, ministry and service.

As I offer leadership and companion with the Synod Standing Committee (SSC), Congregations and Presbyteries, my primary goal is to ensure we have the resources we need to progress the mission of the Church to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In 'providing leadership to the Church and its Councils, actively engaging in Spiritual discernment and strategic thinking about the life, mission and direction of the Church', this primary goal gains form and function for me.

Thank you for the privilege that it continues to be to serve the Uniting Church here in South Australia through my role as General Secretary. I look forward to continuing the journey and companioning with you all through 2021 and beyond.

**Rev Felicity Amery**

General Secretary

December 2020