

General Secretary's Report

I am grateful for the opportunity to share about the continuing work of the Synod in this report. We are well served by our Executive Officers and the Moderator. We are also fortunate to have competent and dedicated staff in our Synod Office at 212 Pirie Street, Yarthu-Apinthi and UCA Venues.

Below there will be comments on some of our major projects, mainly in terms of process, there will be fuller reports on the Strategic Plan and the Mission and Property Strategy (MAPS) Project elsewhere in the Synod papers.

1. Major Projects

1.1 Synod Strategic Plan

In my 2024 report to the Synod, I reflected on both the 2021 'Strategic Directions' report and the 'Missional Framework', work that had been done to inform and guide the work of Ministry and Leadership Development Ministry Centre, particularly the work of the Mission Resourcing Team.

Since the 2024 Synod meeting, we have continued to develop the Synod Strategic Plan. There were regular updates and discussion at Synod Standing Committee and at the meetings of the Executive Officers. We consulted with the Synod Ministry Centres, as well as Congress. We had conversations with rural and regional congregations to discuss aspects of the plan. When we were close to a final draft we consulted with the Presbytery Standing Committees, and we are grateful for their time and attention. I am grateful for the many people who helped shape the plan that we have. In particular, Rev Sue Page and my Executive Assistant, Michelle Cavallaro, helped ensure that the work was completed in a timely way. Rev Dr Jenny Byrnes from the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania has been very helpful in shaping our thinking and leading some of our consultations.

We are forming a Synod Strategic Oversight Group (SSOG) for whom a key responsibility will be overseeing the implementation of the Synod Strategic Plan. The concept for this group is a Core Group from the Synod Office with regularly scheduled consultations with other Boards, Councils, Committees and Task Groups. There is space to add members to the SSOG as the work develops. The Group is responsible to the Synod Standing Committee.

1.2 Mission and Property Strategy Task Group (MAPS)

The Mission and Property Strategy work has continued since the last Synod Meeting. This work has its origins as a response to the Property Audit that was completed in early 2020, where we became aware of the need for a significant financial investment if our buildings were to be safe and meet community expectations.

The Synod Strategy and Planning Working Group was set up in 2021 and at the last meeting of Synod we changed its name to The Mission and Property Strategy Task Group (MAPS). It was a change of name that has worked well, an acronym that seems appropriate to the work of the group.

There is a full report on the MAPS group from Rev Sue Page in these papers. We are grateful to Rev Steph Tai for her work on the data from the Mission and Property Survey. There is some fascinating information that Steph has organised for the report.

The work of the MAPS group since our last Synod Meeting has been focussed on a shared understanding and therefore outcomes appear to come slowly. A key factor has been building consensus between the presbyteries and the Synod so that we have agreed understanding and definitions of the work that we are doing. We have had to change our plans at times. Eventually, it became clear that this was work that the presbyteries would need to undertake themselves and thankfully we were able to find resourcing through UC Invest for this. Currently each presbytery has a MAPS Project Officer, although their actual Position Descriptions vary somewhat. We are grateful for the work these Maps Project Officers are doing in helping congregations come to terms with their responsibilities under the regulations, their missional capacity and their buildings. These are not easy conversations, not always welcomed but at their best they can help remove a burden from overworked leaders.

1.3 Assembly 2027 & the 50th Anniversary

2027 is the 50th Anniversary of the Uniting Church, and it is a privilege to be hosting the Assembly meeting in the South Australian Synod in this significant anniversary year. The meeting will be held at the Adelaide Town Hall from the 8th to the 13th of July. There will be public events around the meeting so keep your eyes open for opportunities to engage with the Assembly.

The Moderator has begun planning for Synod events around the 50th Anniversary. We will also be looking for ways to equip congregations to celebrate and connect with their communities around the anniversary.

The 50th Anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on our theology and values as a denomination. When I meet with new staff it is an opportunity to share what makes us who we are as a community. Once I have discussed the importance of inter-related councils for understanding the UCA¹, I normally move on to our commitment to the place of women in the life of the church, to ongoing wrestling with our relationship with First Peoples, and our openness to being informed by scholarship and learning, the worldwide church, and especially the wisdom and insight of our partner churches. (Not all of those every time – but at least some of them.) These values flow particularly from the life and teaching of Jesus who embodied the reign of God, and the liberating news of his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

¹ Of course that is partly tongue in cheek, however for some teams learning how to navigate the various councils can be difficult for them. At least giving some explanation of why we are governed this way helps (I hope).

1.4 Renew

At the 2024 Synod meeting the Synod resolved to meet biennially until after the 2027 Assembly Meeting, recognising that hosting an Assembly and organising a Synod meeting in the one year would put undue pressure on those responsible for event management. The Synod meeting also resolved to have a resourcing event in 2025, the year we weren't having a Synod meeting.

The event was held in October 2025 and was called 'Renew'. Impressive work was done by the Mission Resourcing Team in developing the programme, including recruiting the NSW/ACT Mission, Growth and Innovation Team. It was helpful to hear about congregational renewal and mission from another Synod, where they were dealing with many of the same issues but in a different context and with different strategies. We were greatly enriched by their sharing. In conversation during and after the event one often heard that people had received helpful frameworks for their thinking about their own mission. I was encouraged by the combination of the call to deeply engage with one's local community and at the same time accept a missional humility, a willingness to start where one was and discern God's call.

We are also grateful to the Engagement team who excelled themselves in communicating about the event. And of course, the Secretariat team who pulled much of the logistics together while we were in between Event Managers.

Congregations who had attendees at the meeting could apply for a small 'Renew' grant to help them kick start their response to the event. The Mission Resources Team Mission Activators have been working with each of the grant applicants

1.5 Theological Education Summit

In July 2025 we held a Summit at Yarthu Apinithi inviting presbyteries, faculty, Congress and key synod staff to come together and have a conversation about Theological Education for the UCA in South Australia. The timing was the best that we could do in the circumstances and some other factors have meant that the follow up has been slower than ideal. Below is a reflection I wrote for the Synod Standing Committee following the meeting.

Reflections on the Theological Education Summit

I felt like there was a lot of commentary on Uniting College from a variety of sources. Hence the decision to hold a "Theological Education Summit", maybe the title was a tad grandiose, but getting some of the key players in the room to have a focussed, facilitated conversation seemed a good idea. What follows are some of my reflections.

I should have brought in the facilitator earlier! One of Jenny's first comments to me was that I hadn't allocated enough time. Whereas I was worried that I had asked too much of people!

It is a crowded landscape. In preparing for the summit, I realised afresh how complex the space is for the College. There are a range of stakeholders, including the Synod, the Presbyteries, the Assembly, other Uniting Church Theological Colleges, Higher Education

Providers, government, academic expectations and congregations. For those leading the college, especially the principal, this makes for a demanding space to lead in.

Theological Education is a substantial investment by the Church. There is little doubt that there is a commitment in the Synod of SA to the education and training of ministry agents. The tensions arise around the amount of investment, what we are investing in, and how we measure the effectiveness of that investment. **There needs to be an agreed understanding of the purpose of the college. And recognition that there are polarities to be managed.** In the table group I participated in there was a good deal of conversation about ‘lay education’ and ‘professional development’. What would it mean for the college to invest more intentionally in these areas of education? Moving out of the VET sector reduces one set of option for lay education while increasing other options. It would be helpful for the college to be actively engaged in general theological education for lay people. (some faculty are) Similarly, providing a range of options around professional development. For example, last decade there was quite a number of intensives offered for professional development. I can also recall being in discussions about having a professional development event at the college over a couple of days. Maybe it can be linked with micro credentialling.

When we moved into self-selecting table groups to discuss topics there were three main foci.

- Clarity on Core Business
- Fit for Purpose College
- Partnership with Presbyteries

The view was that if we got these things right that would lead to financial sustainability. However, some people would question whether given the size of our market we can ever develop enough student numbers for financial sustainability.

Some key points that were shared from table groups were not ‘interrogated’ further by the wider group. I imagine that if we had more time the testing of ideas would have been part of the next stage.

I meant to comment about the purpose of the College. At one end of the spectrum, we might see it focussed on “theological education” at the other end “training leaders”. Two comments follow for me. One is that there are a variety of points in between these ends. So, we might agree on the college as a place for the formation of ministers but might have different understandings of that goal. Some of my colleagues would name it as ‘reflective practitioners’, others it would be ‘effective leaders’. Again, they are not mutually exclusive, but they would have different emphases.

Recently I met with the faculty to discuss the Summit and ways forward. We will continue the conversation with faculty, in MLDB and its subcommittees, and with the presbyteries. As well there is an important series of conversations about theological education and ministry formation in Stream B of the ACT2 project. We will need to cognizant and responsive to developments in that space too.

2. National Participation

I continue to be grateful for the leadership and support of the other General Secretaries. We normally meet three times a year, with a Trans-Tasman meeting every eighteen months, where we are joined by the General Secretaries of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches. Our meetings are normally a rich time of sharing, and the opportunity to seek advice on a range of topics is invaluable. It is not always straightforward, especially as our governance structures, size and capacity are considerably different from other synods, but it is worthwhile. The two major governance differences are the separate incorporation of organisations associated with the Uniting Church in SA and having a non-geographic presbytery. We will be hosting the next Trans-Tasman gathering in 2027 in South Australia.

3. ACT 2

I assume that you will be hearing more about the ACT2 Project from the Assembly General Secretary. We are well represented on the three Commissions, ensuring that we are participating in the conversations. This is important work which has the potential to have significant impact on the UCA in the years ahead.

4. International Partnerships

The Moderator mentions in his report that there is a team visiting the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PROK) in May, a partnership that has continued to flourish. He also notes that Rev Cyrus Kung and I are attending the Quadrennial Assembly of United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), a partnership that has been important to us over a long period but suffered recently due to the COVID pandemic and other concerns. We are grateful for this first step in reengaging with the UCCP. It is likely that there will be opportunities to partner with Uniting World to support significant missional work in the Philippines through the UCCP. We will be travelling with Sureka Gorringer, Director Uniting Care, which is also a privilege.

While talking about partnerships it is important to note that some congregations have built strong relationships with overseas churches independently of the Synod and Uniting World. While this is commendable, there are risks involved in developing these kinds of relationships, especially when it comes to sending money overseas. The Australian Government has grave concerns about money laundering, both from a sending group and the receiving group. Sending money overseas as a congregation, especially substantial amounts, puts the Synod Financial License at risk. Before sending money to any overseas parties, it is important to check with the Financial Team in the Synod office. It is also a reminder that if you are looking to work with an overseas congregation Uniting World can be a very helpful resource in navigating these relationships.

5. Connecting beyond the office

The Moderator and I have visited the Eyre Peninsula and the South-East in the last year. Our next region to visit is the Riverland. It has been helpful to travel with the Moderator, and we are grateful for the hospitality shown to us. You certainly get a sense of the diversity of our congregations and communities by visiting our regions.

6. Closing Thoughts

We live in disturbing times. I recall a presentation I attended around 2001 by a nun working with the Catholic Theological College. She reflected on the two sidedness of much of what was happening in the world at the time. An increase of connectivity, and a growth in tribalism for example. There appears to be hunger in our own time for spiritual connection, and although it is complicated, anecdotally there does appear to be more people attending. (For example, worship attendance of Easter this year.) However, some of the new expressions of Christian Faith are deeply disturbing. Particularly some of the stories coming out of the UK late last year. A growth of conservatism, a fear of the stranger, a mix of 'Christian' faith and nationalism. The growing use of the Cross of St George Flag in England is a case in point. (Of course, St George wasn't English -probably Palestinian!)²

In a time of increasing polarisation, the call to be communities of reconciliation is more important than ever. That we are known for building mutual understanding in our communities, offering genuine hospitality and being peacemakers is vital to the well-being of our neighbourhoods.

I hope therefore that the work that we are doing as a Synod, and at least some of the priorities we have as in the Strategic Plan will make a difference to building effective congregations that embody the reign of God and help ensure healthy neighbourhoods. As the Basis of Union declares in paragraph four, we are called to be a 'fellowship of reconciliation'.

I am grateful for the work of our congregations, presbyteries and ministry centres, for the way in which they seek to serve the reign of God. My hope is that as we seek to be more discerning, more intentional and open to the leading of God's Spirit we will become yet more faithful and effective.

Rev Philip Gardner

General Secretary, Secretariat

10th May 2026



The Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of South Australia

² The Podcast 'Reading our Times' from the Theos Think Tank in the UK, their current series, beginning May 26, is discussing Nationalism, and so far it is helpful and nuanced.