

# Synod '24



## General Secretary Report

### Introduction

It has been nearly eighteen months since the June Synod meeting agreed to appoint me as General Secretary. The main focus of this report will be on the thinking we have been doing about Strategic Planning and the work we intend to do until the next meeting of the Synod to think and plan together. Before that I will make some general comments about the work of the Synod Office and our collaboration nationally.

### Changes in Executive Leadership

A good deal of our energy has been focussed on appointing new staff after some changes in the last twelve months. This has included the Rev Andrew Robertson to my former role of Associate General Secretary: Placements and Safe Church. Andrew has brought new energy and vision to both areas in his portfolio.

Similarly, when Rev Dr Tim Hein stepped down as the Executive Officer of MLDB to undertake the role of Director of Leadership, that was another role we had to explore. The Principal's position was recognised as an Executive Officer role, and we reverted to having an Executive Officer for Mission Resourcing. We were grateful when Rev Jennifer Hughes was successful in applying for the role. For both Andrew and Jenni there has been significant work in recruiting and building their teams in 2024. You can read more about this in their reports.

I am grateful to those who have continued to lead in executive roles in the Synod. In particular, Rev Sue Page for the significant work that she did as interim General Secretary, and also when we shared the role. Sue's role as Associate General Secretary: Governance and Operations is invaluable to the Synod Team. The Executive Officers are rounded out by Peter Battersby in Resources exercising significant and wise leadership to the Synod in the stewardship of the Church's resources and Bridget Ransome in Engagement, leading the Synod's communication and connection within and beyond the Church.

### Assembly 2024

Assembly was its usual strange mix of inspiring, deeply moving, fascinating and frustrating. You certainly get a sense of the cultural diversity of the church. There is also a sense of the theological breadth. It is helpful to catch up with leaders from other synods and learn who some of the newer leaders are from those synods.

It was great to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Covenant. Congress played a significant role at the meeting. The Assembly resolved to explore how we might together revive and redesign the Covenant.

We also gained a deep sense of the way in the culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) elements of our church enrich our worship and ways of meeting. Our new President Rev Charissa Suli brought us back time and again to an image from her own Tongan background of meeting and conversation (talanoa) on the mat (fala), weaving our stories together.

Andrew Johnson was appointed as the new Assembly General Secretary and the first Synod he will attend will be this meeting. We look forward to working with Andrew who has led the ACT2 Team for the last two years.

We were alert to the running of the meeting due to our hosting the next Assembly in 2027. It was pleasing to have Helene Neilson, our Events Officer present for the beginning of the Assembly. Bridget Ransome, our Executive Officer for Engagement, assisted the Assembly Communications Team – and I believe learnt quite a lot about communications at an Assembly meeting. The excitement for 2027 was magnified by the good news that Rev Dr Paul Goh is President-elect.

ACT2 was a project looking at how to structure the Uniting Church in Australia for the future. I share more generally some of my thoughts about ACT2 below. You might summarise the proposals that flowed from the consultations and thinking as general vision for mission and ministry for local congregations, theological culture and the councils of the church. Then there were more specific proposals, with the thought of commissions to work on these three streams in preparation for the 2027 Assembly.

Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) has had one meeting since the Assembly meeting. The outstanding proposals from the Assembly meeting were dealt with, including some of the more detailed proposals from ACT2. Andrew Johnson will commence in the Assembly General Secretary role in October, so one assumes that we will have a clearer idea about the next phase of the work after the November ASC meeting.

## ACT 2

The ACT2 process has been a massive undertaking. The amount of work and consultation in such a short space of time is amazing. It is hardly surprising that as a Synod General Secretary I might have some issues with some of the conclusions and recommendations, and I am sure some of you will have a range of concerns. However, I want to affirm that the report is a significant piece of work. There are parts of the report, especially chapter four, “Building One Another Up In Love: Life-Giving Communities of Faith and Discipleship”, that I read with genuine excitement. I commend the report to you. You can access the report at [Act2 – Shaping the future Uniting Church. \(act2uca.com\)](https://act2uca.com)

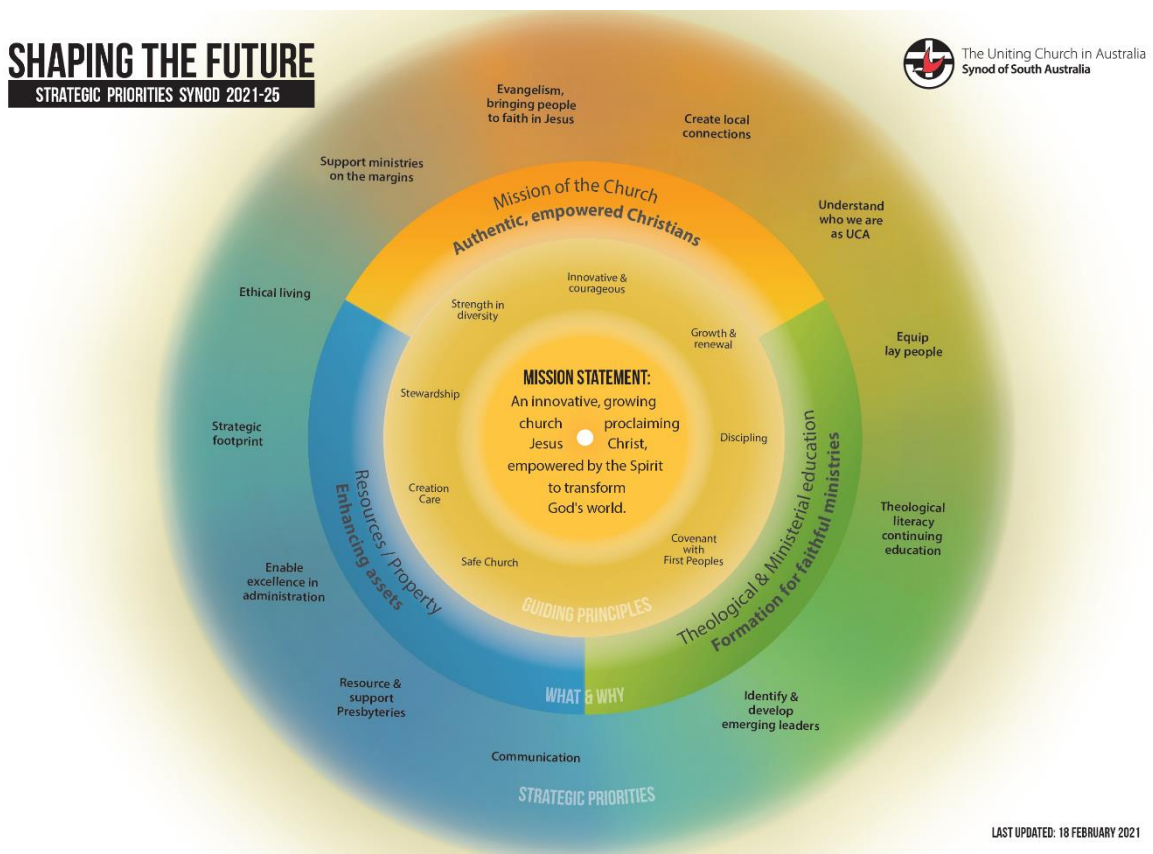
I was also impressed with the immense amount of work that produced discussing our “Theological Culture”. There were some noteworthy contributions from South Australian writers, thank you. The papers varied greatly in topic and tone, but what an engaging conversation they created, hopefully one that can continue. If you are wondering where to start Andrew Johnson will be able to help you. He did have a Facebook post on the subject too.

The Season of Prayer seemed to create a stir in some congregations. When I was preaching between Easter and Pentecost in the last couple of years, a good percentage of the congregations would pray

for other churches across the nation as part of this project. I trust in our own planning together we might have projects that we develop that have the same level of verve and imagination.

## Synod Strategic Directions 2021-2025

After considerable consultation across the Synod, especially by the former General Secretary, Rev Felicity Amery, the Synod Strategic Directions 2021-2025 document was received by consensus in 2021 (after the addition of an extra focus area). This plan was presented graphically as a series of inter-related “wheels” and was designed as an aid to mission planning. This model proved useful as we moved from a single synod/presbytery back to multiple presbyteries clarifying the focus of the Synod’s work. The model continues to inform our work, but we will need to refresh our planning by the next meeting of the Synod (in 2026?).



In a recent report to the Synod Standing Committee, I summarised what I believed were key areas of work flowing from the Strategic Directions paper. These were:

- We have continued the work around Property and Mission, a project that continues slowly and steadily.
- As well, Uniting College has joined the University of Divinity, there has been major changes to staff and course offerings. This has been a significant period of restructuring and renewal.
- A major review was undertaken of Mission Resourcing by Angelwings Consulting in 2023. A summary report was made available to the wider church and a “missional framework” was

developed to guide the work of the Mission Resourcing Team. The focus in 2024 has been on recruiting and team development.

- Another focus of the current plan was working with Congress. In 2023 we focused on supporting Congress during the Voice Referendum and in 2024 we worked together on marking the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the signing of the Covenant.

We have had some useful conversations at Synod Standing Committee and the Executive Officers meeting thinking about the purpose of strategic planning by a synod. The Strategic Directions work in 2020/2025 was also trying to address this issue. The conclusion we reached was that there are three different ways of thinking about strategic planning for a synod:

1. Planning and articulating the work of the Synod Office and its Ministry Centres. There is work that we are required to do in the regulations and by-laws, and it is helpful to think carefully and plan that work.
2. Guiding the use of the resources of the Synod. A straightforward example is the way the “Synod Strategic Plan” helps shape the priorities of the Uniting Foundation Grants.
3. In a less direct way, the Synod Strategic Plan hopefully shapes the work of presbyteries and congregations. I acknowledge that at its best this will be a mutual exchange, with the Synod Strategic Plan shaped by what presbyteries and congregations are learning and doing.



In the last couple of months, I have been having conversations with other General Secretaries, and one Moderator, about their strategic or mission planning. It is interesting to me that in a couple of cases they have slowed down the planning process for deep conversation with presbyteries, seeking to build deeper consensus, or alternatively maybe the conversation is part of the plan! There is commonality in many of the key areas of focus in the plans that synods make, the differences tend to be in the strategies and in the resources available to invest in those strategies.

I have been helped in my thinking by United Methodist writers like Gilbert Rendle and Robert Schnase. Both speak of the importance of the strategic conversation. “*Where we once defined leadership in terms of decisions leaders made on behalf of others, the most recent focus has been on the conversations that leaders invite others into. Conversation is the currency of change.*”<sup>1</sup> And later in the same book he writes, “*Teaching by leaders who know the right answers is replaced with*

<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Rendle, “Doing the Math of Mission: Fruits, Faithfulness and Metrics”. (Rowman and Littleford: New York; 2014)

*conversations led by a leader who know the appropriate questions.*<sup>2</sup> In preparation for presenting a strategic plan in 2026. I intend in collaboration with other leaders to hold a series of strategic conversations in a variety of settings and places. Moreover, we will also host conversations with people with interest and expertise in key focus areas. It is hoped that conversations and discerning prayer on key focus areas will help us work towards the change of culture we need to be fruitful in the future.

## The Pieces of the Puzzle

We are not inventing a plan out of nothing. There is continuing work on property and mission undertaken in the main by the Synod Strategy and Property Working Group (SSPWG). There is a separate report on that work in your papers. We understand that this is a difficult area for many people. That for some of us there is deep commitment and connection to church buildings. That is appropriate, for buildings can be experienced as sacred space. It is where we have experienced God's presence and key events in our life of faith. It is where important family events have taken place and social connections made. In collaboration with presbyteries and congregations we need to pastorally and thoughtfully reconfigure our property portfolio as a synod. Our goal in this project is to have missionally vibrant congregations in safe buildings that are fit for purpose. (As much as they can be!) To reach that goal hard decisions will need to be made.

I mentioned earlier the consultation that took place last year regarding **Mission Resourcing**. The response to that consultation was summarised as the "**Missional Framework**". The Framework highlights the key areas of focus for the Mission Resourcing Team. This year has focussed on recruiting a new Executive Officer and "Mission Activators" to work as a team across the focus areas.

We will explore the Framework in more detail below. Further reflection on this will also be found in the MLDB report.

The AngelWings report reflected on the low morale that many leaders were experiencing. This in part is from the complexity of leading congregations in a rapidly changing world, with the Church marginalised in much of Western society. It is also a result of leading during a pandemic, the steep learning curve that many experienced in coming to terms with the technology, the story telling and the many questions that rise from leading worship online. One of the headings in the report spoke of "lightening the load", and this language was also reflected in the ACT2 report. That is why "gospel joy" is placed at the heart of the framework. The quote from Lesslie Newbigin, that is used in talking about the framework suggests:

It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel. If one looks at the New Testament evidence one gets another impression. Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy<sup>3</sup>.

At the heart of the life of the church is good news. The good news that God's purposes for all creation, God's promises to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and the people of God, and in the law and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. 84.

<sup>3</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "The Gospel in a Pluralist Society" (London: SPCK; 1989) p. 116

prophets is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, his life, teaching and ministry, his death, resurrection and ascension. That good news should animate all that we do as a community.

Therefore, the conversation we conduct need to reflect the joy of the gospel. It is not going to be easy for we need to find ways to bring a sense of urgency, a commitment to an informed faith, the willingness to make difficult decisions and a deep abiding engagement with the disciplines of prayer and discernment.

Please note that covenanting is in each of the main areas discussed below. This is in recognition of the importance of covenanting to the health of the UCA in South Australia. It is also in recognition of the way in which covenanting is an important lens through which to view faith formation and vitality, congregational renewal and intercultural capacity.

I highly recommend Tim Hein's introduction to the Missional Framework that he prepared last year for the Standing Committee. Tim recorded the presentation, and it can be viewed here:

[UCA SA - Synod Meeting 2024](#)



There was a time when I wondered whether the “Missional Framework” was our new strategic plan. However, as we discussed this possibility at Synod Standing Committee and other spaces it became clear that this was the work of Mission Resourcing, with some assistance from the Uniting College team. Furthermore, there were also areas that were not covered by the framework that would need to be priorities of the Synod.

# Missional Framework

## WHAT

### Faith Vitality & Formation

How to grow faith vitality in all stages of life

- Local Christian Education
- Experiences and Encounters
- Spiritual Practices
- Personal Renewal
- Intergenerational—all generations
- Grace/Gospel Dynamic
- Moving beyond the comfort zone
- Preaching + Worship
- Covenanting

### Congregational Renewal

How to lead a congregation through renewal into a new future

- Every congregation has a Renewal Plan which explores all options
- Legacy Pastoral work
- Cultural change in congregations
- Change strategies
- Community Building
- Covenanting

## HOW

Deep + Inspiring  
Training/ Conferences

Connecting  
(Mission Lab)

## WHO

### Staff:

- Mission Activators
- Integrated Team Approach
- Working Together on the Focus Areas
- Conduits to the Whole Church

## WHY

Gospel Joy\*

Catalytic Experiences:  
Walking on Country  
Immersion Trips

UCLT  
Courses

Web Hub/ Social  
Media Accessibility

### A Covenant Come Alive

How our Covenant relationship can be experienced & lived into more richly

- Broadening, deepening and personalising understanding of the Covenant relationship between UCA and UAICC
- Understanding and learning from mission history (such as through the Preamble)
- Shaping reconciliation and renewal in Australia.
- Deepening Second People's understanding of First Peoples spirituality for mutual Christian discipleship

### Local Community Mission

How to do local practical mission

- Informal care
- Partner with Formal Care
- 'Chaplain' to Neighbourhood
- Justice, Mercy and Advocacy
- Covenanting

### Evangelism

How to effectively proclaim share the gospel

- Public Theology
- Empower every Christian to articulate faith
- How Community Action and Evangelism interweave

### Intercultural Capacity

How to read and discern the complexity of contemporary cultures in order to engage faithfully.

- A sophisticated and informed understanding of our context
- Multicultural
- Secular
- International Partnership
- Robust missiology & intercultural theology
- Covenanting

As mentioned earlier, the first of these is the ongoing work on **property and mission**. This work that begun under the former General Secretary Felicity Amery in 2021 in response to the Property Audit. We are slowly working away, developing policy, collaborating with the presbyteries and working towards missionally vital congregations, in safe buildings that are fit for purpose. This is a long-term project and is of crucial importance to the work of the Synod. The report on this work is a separate document.

Another area is our commitment to **climate justice**. There is a commitment that we made to seek to be carbon neutral by 2040 as a Synod. (Similar commitments from the Assembly and the other Synods.) A committee has been working in this area on behalf of the Synod for some time but a more focussed piece of work will be needed if we are to meet our target. I do note that many congregations have made important decisions over the years regarding reducing their waste, improving the quality of their buildings and installing solar panels. I look forward to this continuing work.

An area implied in the Framework but not named explicitly is leadership development. This includes improving the general leadership, lay and ordained, across the Synod. Some of this will relate to specifically Christian practices like understanding Scripture and tradition, deepening our engagement with spiritual disciplines and opportunities to experience the wider church and our international partners. Some of them will include more general leadership practices like strategic planning and execution, governance training and understanding of our culture. Other foci will include ministry formation and professional development

## Observations

I want to make some general observations about planning and the life of the church. Sorry if this is too much – many of them are things I've wanted to say!

- **Planning is a spiritual practice.** Helpful writing has been done on this, for example by Gil Rendle and Alice Mann. They remind us that planning for churches includes the practices of discernment, engaging with Scripture, and listening to the community of the church and to the wider community of our neighbours.
- **Adaptive Change:** This phase associated with Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linksy describes seeking to solve problems where you neither understand the problem or the solution. This is the place we find ourselves in. We are in a new context, and many of the programmes and strategies that used to work have diminishing returns. Writers in this area talk about the importance of small steps and reflection upon what we are learning. "Safe to Fail" experiments are also helpful, as long as we are willing to learn from our mistakes and successes.
- **Secularisation:** The church has seen the growth of a more secular society over many centuries, but the pace of secularisation since the 1960's has been dizzying. For much of the last few centuries the church had a central role in western society. Now we find ourselves moving to the margins. We cannot turn the clock back to the 1950's, the 1850's or the 1250's. Secularisation has been both a boon and a difficulty for us. A boon, because who wouldn't want to live in an era where pain relief, good dentistry and antibiotics have increased the length and quality of many people's lives. A difficulty because the church has moved from the centre of Western societies to the margins. That may be where we should have been all along but it will take some time and effort to rethink our mission and ministry in this changed context.



- **Give up blaming for Lent:** Having been in active ministry since the mid-1980's you sometimes experience ministers and lay people blaming various groups within the church for the situation in which we find ourselves. If only we had been more conservative/or more progressive, if only we had been more effective at evangelism/or social justice, if only we had done worship more faithfully/or adopted new musical styles earlier, and so it goes. The recognition that we have experienced one of the most significant shifts in culture in many of our lifetimes should give us pause. As Kennon Callahan might say, "*Let's give up blaming for Lent*".<sup>4</sup> Let us not focus on who is to blame but rather what small steps we can do to move us into healthy relationships with our communities so that we might bless them and witness to the goodness of God.

**Small Steps:** Those of you who have been reading in the mission planning area recently might notice a growing emphasis on taking small steps rather than launching major initiatives. In part this is creating a "**safe to fail**" approach. For example, we need to affirm people who take measured, missional risks and then fail – and learn from the experiment. Encouraging them to try again or something slightly different with their new wisdom. Whereas big expensive projects can make it difficult to let go when it is failing, harder to learn from our mistakes and less eager to try again.

**Importance of conversation:** I am drawn to those writers who write of the importance of conversation in leadership mentioned earlier in this report by United Methodist writers Gilbert Rendle and Robert Schnase both speak of the importance of the strategic conversation. It is hoped that conversations and discerning prayer on key focus areas will help us work towards the change of culture we need to be fruitful in the future.

## Conclusion

It is a privilege to serve as General Secretary of the Synod of SA. We are served by an excellent team within the office, presbytery leaders and ministers and congregational leaders. In particular, Rev Peter Morel has proven a thoughtful and collaborative leader in the Synod Officer, ecumenically and nationally. Our work as a Secretariat team has been enhanced significantly by Michelle Cavallaro my Executive Assistant who began working with us in December 2023. I am grateful too for the collegiality and wisdom shared by the other general secretaries.

I look forward to the work we will continue to do as we seek to encourage the growth of missionally vibrant congregations, renew the covenant with First Peoples, and live out our mission in ways that bring life and health to our state, our nation and our partners in mission and ministry.

**Rev Philip Gardner**

*General Secretary*

25<sup>th</sup> September 2024



The Uniting Church in Australia  
Synod of South Australia

<sup>4</sup> I am not sure that Callahan ever said this – but those of you who heard him will recognise who could have said it. And I am sure that I heard him say it!