

renewal

FAITH FOR A NEW SEASON ▪ SYNOD 37

Report from Presbytery of Mary Burnett



Summary

The Mary Burnett Presbytery has faced many challenges since the last Synod. In working within the context of Project Plenty, new priorities, structures, and plans are being implemented to not only address these challenges, but to also nurture and support the many green shoots that are emerging within its worshipping and missional life.

Context

Mary Burnett Presbytery (MBP) is a diverse region of many contrasts. It is composed of busy urban centres including bustling coastal communities along the Sunshine Coast, Fraser Coast and Coral Coast; regional centres such as Maryborough, Kingaroy, Bundaberg and Gympie; and small rural communities such as those dotted through the Burnett region. It literally extends from the mountains to the sea - from the Glasshouse Mountains, up to Eidsvold and out the picturesque beaches of Burnett Heads and Bargara.

Our primary focus is on the mission Jesus calls us to of making disciples. This task is achieved through the local mission of our congregations, agencies, faith communities and chaplaincies. The Mary Burnett Presbytery provides the pastoral and administrative oversight, as well as guidance and encouragement to fulfil this life and mission.

Priorities

Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and he will establish your plan (Proverbs 16:3).

It has become very clear since the last Synod, that the Uniting Church in Australia in general, and the Mary Burnett in particular, is struggling to keep up with changes in Australian contemporary society, and the ensuing impact these have on the life and growth potential of congregations. It is hard to plan for the future when so much time is spent in the present, dealing with issues that are draining the energy from church communities and stifling hope of a renewed and thriving church. MBP has thus been prayerfully discerning how to change these dynamics. How can we turn from being reactive, to being proactive? As the faith and ministry landscape of the church changes, the Presbytery is committed to recognising and understanding these changes, and committing our work to the Lord, in order that He will direct us in the establishment of the correct plans to take us forward.

Some of this work can be tedious and may not immediately seem to have a positive effect, but even seemingly insignificant changes to administrative processes and organisation can provide a strong foundation upon which the church will find a solid footing as it ventures into a new era. MBP has revised its delegations regarding UCA regulations to help simplify and speed up processes. It has established an office space and physical presence at Maroochydore, explored different models of financial oversight and the task of the Treasurer, and is re-establishing an active and effective property team. It is looking towards better and more regular training for ministers and lay people (safe ministry with children, code of ethics, lay preaching, pastoral care courses, lay leadership of sacraments, etc.) to make disciples and empower them to go, serve, and make more.

Plentiful focus

In this report, we have been asked to reflect on the Plentiful focus statement of, 'one church active in every Queensland community, bearer of Christ's offer of life in all its fullness. Through our shared life we are committed to a flourishing future for church and community.' The Mary Burnett Presbytery is a diverse area of communities, and while it holds strongly to, and is committed to these ideals, it recognises that it will not be an easy journey. With diminishing church membership and increasing costs of maintaining ministry and property, what does it really mean to commit to being a church active in every Queensland community? This is an especially difficult pledge to keep in rural and regional areas.

However, as Paragraph 4 of the Basis of Union reminds us, 'The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work... Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church'.

Here are some examples of the way Christ is at work within the MBP, the MBP is being empowered by the Holy Spirit, and Christ is using human witness in word and action to renew his church.

- **Developing and refreshing discipleship culture, missional innovations:**

BELLS Faith Community has been together on the Sunshine Coast for seven years. A 'Dinner Church' gathering and missional community, it was founded on Luke 10 – "Go into the village, where I intend to go."

As in Acts 16, members of the community have been drawn to the thousands of people who choose the Sunday morning street markets in Caloundra. A market stall lacked capacity, yet "we were convinced". With the expertise and support of Presbytery and Synod, BELLS now has a 'pop-up' lease on a main street shop front, with a leading to work with other churches, Connect100, Destiny Rescue and Uniting World to create an oasis of sorts:

- speed church (for Sunday markets)
- Uniting World and Destiny Rescue outlet
- Midweek Chapel
- Chaplaincy to small businesses and their employees

"We won't make dollars, but we aim to make disciples."

- **Transforming the communities we serve, including wellbeing and mental health:**

The MBP has intentionally strived to reconnect with and support the work of the many UCA Chaplains (Aged Care, hospital and prison) that are active within our region. While engaged by Synod or UnitingCare, they also play a vital role working alongside presbytery and congregations in transforming our local communities.

- Three Chaplains out of the six who created the resource *'Remaining in Lament and hope - A Pastoral response for a Voluntary Assisted Dying pathway'* came from the Mary Burnett Presbytery.
 - By the end of this year six CARE Essentials courses would have been run across the presbytery. This is entry level training into Chaplaincy for BlueCare, Private Hospital, Public Hospital and Local Churches for Pastoral Carers serving the congregation and local community.
 - Chaplains continue to offer services of worship, celebrating the milestones and life events of the communities to whom they relate.
 - Chaplains continue to work closely with their organisations (UnitingCare, BlueCare, and Public Hospitals) to create more flexible and accessible ways to meet patients, families, residents and staff in times of crisis, celebration and sorrow.
- **Ensuring systems, structures, and processes are more fit for purpose:**

As previously outlined, MBP is working hard to become proactive; ready to meet the challenges of our changing times. This initiative was largely born out of the Project Plenty appeal for the church to become more 'fit for purpose'. This has included physical changes such as securing and setting up an office at the Maroochydore Uniting Church. This has provided a working space for our presbytery staff to work, meet, consult, and offer pastoral care. We have two office rooms to provide administrative space for our administration officer and secretary, as well as workspace for the Presbytery Minister and Mission Engagement Officer. Use of the church complex is being explored to allow regular training (Code of Ethics, Safe Ministry, etc.), as well as opportunities for guest speakers, lectures, and conferences.

MBP is also updating our structures, processes and practices. We have increased working hours for our admin staff. We are investigating new practices so that the treasurer has support in this complex and multi-faceted role. With an increasing workload in supporting congregations with caring for aging church buildings, we are seeking to ensure we have skilled and experienced people to provide the necessary support, and to move towards forward-planning rather than waiting for problems to arise.

MBP is also investigating how it can provide the most effective support to the growing number of Faith Communities under its care. There are different challenges faced by each group depending on whether they are a new church plant, established home church, or struggling small church in need of care, leadership and direction. Part of the evolving role of our office is to be a point of contact, with worship, mission and administrative resources available for easy access and distribution.

- **Stories of connections, engagement, and collaborations.**

Mooloolaba: Most people will know of the pain and heartache that surrounded the breakdown of the relationship between the people of the Mooloolaba Uniting Church (also known as Mooloolaba Christian Church) and the other councils of the church (Presbytery, Synod and Assembly). As a consequence, the congregation was dissolved in March this year. However, re-planting a church in the Mooloolaba facilities has provided a unique opportunity

within the Synod. This will not be starting a new congregation alongside an existing traditional service. Nor is it a green-field plant without any infrastructure.

Mooloolaba has excellent facilities, including a very healthy Op Shop, a hall, office and worship auditorium. There are no other churches in the neighbourhood, although Uniting Churches and Alex Park Conference Centre are in surrounding suburbs.

We have begun 'looking for Lydia', as Luke and Paul did, outside the synagogue tradition. 25 local leaders have been invited to attend a brainstorm about how a Uniting Church could best minister to that neighbourhood's peculiar needs. A community survey revealed some unexpected information, and we have sought potential partners among: school leadership and chaplaincy, skaters, surfers, service clubs, politicians, other denominations, street chaplaincy, YWAM, etc.

Caloundra: Caloundra is only one of many congregations that are reaching out to make strong connections with community groups to make a real difference in peoples' lives. Caloundra Congregation has a strong focus on outreach with "people doing it tough" through Orange Sky support breakfasts, supporting the Community Centre Food Pantry. More recently Caloundra has begun Uniting Breakfasts on Monday mornings, which provide a full cooked breakfast along with priority/warm clothing, toiletries, and social interaction and support from congregational members who serve and sit with our customers.

Bli Bli: The MBP has also collaborated with BlueCare to provide much needed ministry at the Bli Bli Congregation. A dual role of congregational ministry and BlueCare Chaplain also will build a relationship between the Bli Bli church and the neighbouring BlueCare facility that is expected to ensure mutually beneficial consequences.

Presbytery Synod Interface: Two other areas of connection and collaboration that should be named are the Presbytery Synod Interface (PSI) and monthly gatherings of the Presbytery Ministers and Moderator. These meetings cultivate valuable networking, with sharing of knowledge, resources and experience providing enormous benefits across the Synod.

Challenges

As we move forward into this new and unknown season there are already many challenges that can be identified. Some may not seem 'new', but there is an increasing urgency on finding solutions. Perhaps our key challenge is sourcing appropriate leadership – both in ministry agents and people for important presbytery roles in administration, pastoral relations, property management, and mission development and support. While we are indeed blessed by the gifts and ministry of ministers sourced from overseas or other denominations, we are losing a depth of UCA familiarity, expertise, experience, and historical knowledge.

There is also a need to reassess how best to provide ministry when there is both a lack of experienced ministry agents for regional and rural communities, and also a need for those ministry agents we do engage, to provide ministry over multiple sites. Across 39 Congregations and Faith Communities in MBP, only ten full and part-time agents have oversight of a single church community. This leaves eight ministry agents looking after the remaining 29. In the Burnett network of Churches

alone (stretching from Eidsvold to Blackbutt), we currently have only one full-time minister currently supported by a supply minister, providing ministry across 11 churches.

Situations such as these place an incredible amount of extra expectations and stress on ministry agents. Our historical practices around the working hours of ministers do not take into account the changing shape of ministerial needs and responsibilities. As was evident at the Moderator's Convocation this year, ministers are increasingly experiencing burnout, unhappiness, and fatigue. The traditional 'one day off per week' system is no longer appropriate or able to support ministers in maintaining a healthy work-life balance. A proposed change is being presented to Synod to address this issue.

For the MBP, it has become clear that the Plentiful call to be 'one church active in every Queensland community, bearer of Christ's offer of life in all its fullness', presents challenges that may not be insurmountable, but will certainly require lots of prayer, planning, and work. However, may we join with Jeremiah in declaring, 'Ah, Lord God!...Nothing is too hard for you' (Jeremiah 32:17).

Proposals to the 37th Synod

It is proposed that the 37th Synod receive this report.

General proposal: P3.03 GP3 - Adjustment of the Work Unit Principle in the Ministry Agents Handbook has been submitted by this presbytery. Please see separate General Proposal.

Greener Shoots - possibilities and opportunities

We give thanks for many green shoots that are evident in the life of the church. It is easy for these to be overlooked or overshadowed by issues that can seem to be endless in the life of the church. But the Spirit is alive and at work within the church. For example, the congregations at Coolum Beach and Bli Bli have been without a permanent minister for over two years, but now have new leadership and direction.

And while we are concerned by diminishing numbers in some churches, at our July 2023 Presbytery meeting, Presbytery endorsed the request for the Uniting Life Faith Community on the Sunshine Coast to be recognised as a congregation. In many ways, these outcomes, along with many other positive reports from congregations across MBP are more than simply indications of green shoots, they are a celebration of the bearing of much fruit, and a sign of a greater harvest yet to come.

Now to Him who is able to do so much more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen (Ephesians 3:20-21).

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