

renewal

FAITH FOR A NEW SEASON ▪ SYNOD 37

Report from Presbytery of The Downs



Summary

KNOW GOD

(Discipleship)

CONNECT

(Transforming Communities)

DO IT!

(Fit for Purpose)

WORK TOGETHER

(Connect)

Since the last Synod, The Downs Presbytery has completed a Presbytery-wide review which resulted in a celebration launching the Bottle Tree Remote Area Ministry based in Roma in February 2023. There are so many green shoots and we are excited to see God at work here in The Downs. We also acknowledge the ongoing effect of living in a liminal space for a number of years. Key leaders in congregations are facing the anxiety and pressures of this season and are tired. Together we are seeking to remain focused on our life in Christ in all we do, especially in the challenging times. We offer this report to the glory of God as an incomplete picture of all that God is doing in the life of The Downs Presbytery.

Context

The Downs Presbytery is located on the lands of the Giabal, Jarowair, Wakka Wakka, Gooragooby, Kambuwal, Banrungam, Kooma, Bigambul, Mandandanji, Gunggari, Wangkangurra-Yarluyandi, Kenja and Bidgari people and we pay our respect to Elders and all First Nations people as we work together for reconciliation.

The broad area for congregational and agency mission within the bounds of the Presbytery include large regional towns Toowoomba (approx. pop. 170,000), Warwick (approx. pop. 21,000), Stanthorpe (approx. pop. 5400), Chinchilla (approx. pop. 6600), Dalby (approx. pop. 12,700), Oakey (approx. pop. 4500), Roma (approx. pop. 6800), Goondiwindi (approx. pop. 6300) and St George (approx. pop. 3000) as well as remote areas of the Channel Country and South Western Qld.

There are 26 Uniting Church congregations supported by seven (7) Lay-Lead Ministry Teams and nine (9) Ministry Agents and a dedicated team of Local Lay Pastors, retired Ministers and Lay Preachers. Surrounding these centres are many smaller towns and rural communities. These more lightly populated areas are supported by two (2) Bush Chaplains in Remote Area Ministries (RAM). They are funded predominately by Frontier Services, with some funding from UnitingCare Connect 100 (C100). Our newest RAM launch in February 2023 is the Bottle Tree RAM, based in Roma and supporting communities mainly in the Maranoa, Western Downs and Banana Regional Areas. This RAM is partly funded by C100 and links to community services in Roma and Injune. The Cunnamulla Burke & Wills RAM is based in Charleville, covering over half of the Presbytery and is funded by Frontier Services. This position has been vacant since February 2022, however we are excited to have a new Bush Chaplain starting on 1st September 2023. The Presbytery also supports the ministry of three (3) Chaplains, one each at Scots PGC College in Warwick, Darling Downs Health Services and BlueCare in Toowoomba. As this report goes to print C100 and the Presbytery have approved a new placement for a Community Chaplain linking with Lifeworks UC. Since the last Synod we have closed Ravensbourne UC congregation marking and celebrating the nearly 125 years of ministry that has taken place in that community. We look forward to where God is leading us next in that region.

The Presbytery relies heavily on lay people to lead and support local communities and we acknowledge and value their commitment to serving the mission of God in this region. We particularly acknowledge, on their retirement, Ps Jenny Noble and Ps Barb Betts who have stepped down from placements within this Presbytery since the last Synod. We give thanks to God for their service and bless them in the next stage of their call as disciples.

This Presbytery is called to be present alongside the communities within its bounds. We have strong, growing ecumenical links and continue to work together with other churches to bring the gospel hope to rural Queensland. Alongside this we are actively involved in the interfaith network that supports and encourages peace and harmony here in Toowoomba.

Priorities

Since the last Synod, the Presbytery has completed its Presbytery-wide review to explore the best ways to resource, equip and encourage small and remote communities to be church in their context. The main purpose of the review was to evaluate the almost 10 years of valued ministry of the Leichhardt Patrol, as well as to explore how best we can provide adequate ministry resources to small remote communities. The Presbytery listened to God and each other to reimagine new ways of providing support and gospel hope to these communities; we explored with NSW Synod Saltbush; Frontier Services and Uniting Care Connect 100; and celebrated a growing relationship between St George UC and New Life Church.

We learnt from Saltbush a different way of being a gathered, scattered community and this offered new relationships for Lay-Lead communities and opportunities to gather online to share life together and valuable worship resources. We are grateful to the Saltbush team Mark, Geoff, Tim and Peter for giving of their time and energy and inviting The Presbytery of The Downs into their space and hosting a Gathering in Goondiwindi in March 2023.

In February 2022, Frontier Services and Uniting Care Connect 100 agreed to provide resources to support a Bush Chaplain based in Roma in the new Bottle Tree Remote Area Ministry. This new placement was launched in February 2023 and we have already seen the fruit of this ministry. We are excited to be working closely with Frontier Services and UnitingCare Connect 100 and look forward to sharing more stories of where God is at work in rural and remote Southwest Queensland.

In 2022 we returned, after two years of COVID-19 restrictions, to support the work of Frontier Services at their yearly trek to Birdsville. In preparation we spoke with the young adults to give them a vision and an opportunity to join the trip as an Outback volunteer. We had one young woman from Kangaroo Point UC join us and she had a life-changing experience sharing with people and encountering the beauty of remote Queensland as a mission field.

Plentiful focus

The Presbytery meets three times a year to listen to God and to each other, to build a Christ-centred community and to pray. We recognise that we cannot do this alone and that we are part of a great cloud of witnesses. We thank God for other Presbyteries, Frontier Services, UnitingCare Qld and the wider church for holding us in prayer and offering support as they are able. The last few years have been difficult, and we recognise that we are all in a liminal space as we 'do church'.

Some ways that the Presbytery is developing and refreshing a discipleship culture are:

- Many of the congregations and the Presbytery offer online prayer opportunities
- Congregations, who are able, offer online worship connection not only to small rural congregations but many beyond the bounds of the Presbytery
- The Presbytery hosted a 'Building a Culture of Discipleship Workshop' hub
- Alpha groups – exploring faith in Jesus
- Intergenerational Worship
- Messy Church
- Supporting Lay Preachers and Clinical Pastoral Education training

Some ways the Presbytery is transforming communities:

- Warwick Killarney UC completed the refurbishment of their old manse to join in partnership with Protea Place Warwick, a place for vulnerable woman to gather and be supported. Congregation members committed over 1550 volunteer hours to the project. This will transform the lives of many vulnerable women and the congregation members.
- Each congregation connects into what is happening locally - this is a natural part of small community living. Local shows and festivals are important events where the church is present; and churches also offer support and pastoral care at times of disaster.
- Bottle Tree RAM launch - reimagining ways to connect with small rural communities and UnitingCare agencies
- St Stephens UC opens its hall one night a week for Winter Homeless Shelter. Not only does this ministry provide shelter, it also supports people to build relationships and has connected guests to housing options and health facilities.
- St Stephens Meals on Wheels ministry
- Being involved in interfaith network to promote peace and harmony between faiths

Some ways the Presbytery is working towards being fit for purpose:

- Carrying out a review of Combined Presbyteries Mission Pool (CPMP) and adopting a new CPMP policy
- Office refurbishment and review of our administration resources
- Developing more accessible systems for compliance
- Built a new website and developed an effective communication strategy
- Engaged with Synod to equip our key leaders to be more effective
- Offered healthy team workshops to church councils
- A number of key leaders have completed the Plentiful Leadership Mentoring Program
- Engaged with the Synod in the Resourcing Review
- Supported congregations to better utilise their properties by the establishment of a Property Committee

Some ways the Presbytery is connecting, engaging, and collaborating:

- UnitingCare Connect 100 working with Bottle Tree Bush Chaplain supports the staff of our more isolated agencies out West

- A new collaboration between C100 and Lifeworks UC to provide a Toowoomba Community Chaplain
- Presbytery Minister (PM) attends and participates regularly in Presbytery Synod Interface (PSI) – the intentional building of relationships between PMs and Synod team benefits each of our Presbyteries, the congregations and the Synod
- Participating in the Mission Collaboration Coordination Committee to encourage and develop mission across the Synod
- BlueCare Toowoomba - Grief and Loss Program training facilitators and offering a well-received service
- Ecumenical Relationships providing Ecumenical Pastoral Care Coordinator in Darling Downs Health Services
- Abrahamic and Interfaith conversations to promote acceptance and understanding

Challenges

Resourcing the work of the Presbytery through the CPMP each year is a challenge as congregations have less capacity to find resources to stay afloat themselves. We have engaged in a Synod-wide resourcing review recognising that we are not alone in this challenge - we all need to find other ways to resource the ministry and mission of the church. In the short term we have agreed as a Presbytery on how we will contribute to the CPMP and will keep exploring and praying for wisdom.

Congregations, especially small congregations, are challenged by the amount of administration and compliance, there is a frustration about what is required and receiving confusing messages.

Health and Wellbeing of our Ministry Agents - There is a recognition of the significant effect that the disruption of the pandemic, alongside wider church decisions and uncertainty about the future direction of the church, has had on our key leaders. We have a genuine concern for ministry agents suffering from compassion fatigue and not having space to recover. At our last Presbytery meeting we acknowledged and lamented together the significance of the emotional impact this season is having on all of us. We explored together 'Leading in a Liminal Season with Rev Susan Beaumont'¹ – shifting from 'Knowing to Unknowing'; from 'Advocating to Attending' and from 'Striving to Surrender', encouraging us to be ok with not knowing, be present and surrender to God.

Proposals to the 37th Synod

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

Greener Shoots - possibilities and opportunities

- Two Bush Chaplains, taking up the mantle and ministering to over 300,000km² of this Presbytery. These roles can offer support and care to communities who feel forgotten.
- Celebrating our connection with Frontier Services and UnitingCare Connect 100 who offer resources to provide vital ministry opportunities.
- Crows Nest District Uniting Church completed a time of Intentional Interim Ministry and are ready for mission and motivated to share the gospel.

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- A revitalised expression of church in Nobby UC connecting to the local school across the road and have re-established a vibrant Sunday School.
- Our new partnership with Saltbush, a part of the NSW Synod who have given new energy to individuals and small rural communities.
- Our meetings of Presbytery show signs of hope and opportunities for growth as we have difficult conversations with respect and surrounded in prayer.
- A guest at last year's Winter Homeless Shelter coming this year, re-housed, to support the ministry as a volunteer.
- The connection with Protea Place Warwick building new relationships and serving the community.
- Good support from the staff at the Office of Synod who assist congregations and attend our Presbytery meetings to build relationship and listen to our concerns.
- A growing connection to Scots PGC College to support them in their mission.
- Celebrating with Highfields Community Church their growth and vitality, and the generosity of Moreton Rivers Presbytery in gifting some Mission Development Funds to off-set the loan on their worship centre.

Contact for report questions

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ⁱ YouTube Video: 20 October 2021 'Leading in a Liminal Season with Rev. Susan Beaumont', Yale Divinity School, <https://youtu.be/nXuj3H6XB3E>