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Report from

Synod Advisory Committee on Ministerial Placements

Context

The Placements Committee (Advisory Committee on Ministerial Placements) is responsible for the oversight of the processes that enable the placement of ministers, ministers from other denominations, and lay people in particular specified ministries.

Membership includes the moderator (chairperson), associate general secretary (secretary), each presbytery minister, delegate of the CEO of UnitingCare Queensland, the executive officer of the Queensland Chaplaincy Commission, and the Director of Christian Formation or delegate. This geographically diverse membership brings together a collective story about what is happening across the life of the church and what resources are best able to meet the needs of particular ministry locations.

Priority Directions

Through its oversight and discernment function, the Placements Committee seeks to match ministers and vacant placements. In doing this, the Placements Committee is mindful of the priority directions and how these impact on the needs of placements.

Report

Placements review

The 31st Synod (October 2014):

Resolved to direct the Synod Standing Committee to initiate a review of the placements process to seek to deal with issues such as:

- The length of supply ministry between placements.
- Availability of suitable leadership for church plants/redevelopment projects and specialist placement venues.
- The decreasing influence of the Uniting Church in Australia in leadership in provincial cities and regions.

In response the Synod Standing Committee (November 2014) directed a task group to look at the placements process in and of itself. The associated matters of leadership development and the influence of the church are being taken up in work associated with the Key Change Initiatives.

Extensive consultation was undertaken across the Synod in 2015. This identified some major factors impacting on the placements process:

- (i) Financial resources of congregations and the wider church are diminishing.
- (ii) Changes in family life impact on a minister's capacity or willingness to make significant intra-state moves.
- (iii) Increasing number of part-time placements.
- (iv) South east Queensland preference and/or reluctance to be placed in rural/remote areas.
- (v) Reduced number of suitably skilled ministers available for placement.
- (vi) Number and size of congregations is diminishing.

Coming from this consultation, the most commonly proposed revisions to the current process include:

- (i) Increased transparency and openness in the placements process.
- (ii) Move to a deregulated/open system of placements allowing congregations and ministry workers to exercise greater initiative in the placements processes.
- (iii) The importance of emphasising honesty in profile documents.
- (iv) Emphasis on recruitment and appropriate training of ministers for the current/emerging context (together with CEM for existing ministers).
- (v) More strategic focus in terms of succession planning.

In August 2017 the Synod Standing Committee approved the implementation of the optional dual track process for an initial trial period of three years, commencing 1 January 2018.

The introduction of a dual track placements process will allow Joint Nominating Committees (JNCs) and ministers a choice of whether to proceed using a flexible placements process that provides greater freedom and initiative or to continue to use the highly regulated current placements process.

The option to use the delegated process will shift the locus of the operation of the placements process from the Synod to the presbytery and congregation as councils giving 'heed to one

another' (*Basis of Union* para. 15). It seeks to loosen up the functioning of the placements process at a local and regional level, while retaining (or adding) some discretionary interventional capacities for the Placements Committee to exercise its discretion to support the wider missional needs of the church beyond a particular congregation, placement or even presbytery.

As JNCs and ministers are empowered through the optional process, they will have a greater capacity to manage the process, time lines and will have greater involvement in the outcome.

Through the use of the optional delegated pathway, it is hoped to bring a greater sense of transparency to the process so that those most intimately involved in the discernment process, ministers and JNCs, might feel that they know what is happening and be empowered to act.

The proposal involves working within the current regulatory framework, but with the Placements Committee exercising its power in a way that is consistent with the principles of flexibility and empowering JNCs and ministers to exercise initiative.

Elements of the process that will be amended from the current process are:

- All vacant placements to be notified in *Uniting News* at the time the placement is known to be coming vacant, not when a profile is presented to the Placements Committee as currently happens.
- A password-protected online database of vacant placements and ministers available for placement will be created. Access will be given to JNCs and ministers who opt to use the alternative track.
- Placements Committee to delegate to the secretary of Placements Committee the ability to refer JNCs and ministers to each other for conversation, once one of them has indicated they wish to enter into conversation. Protocols will be established that ensure this is an operational delegation and not an exercise of discernment.
- Placements Committee to delegate to the secretary of Placements Committee the ability to approve requests to advertise vacant placements; currently the Placements Committee makes this decision. Again, protocols will be established for the exercise of this delegation.
- Prior to a conversation, the JNC and minister will be asked to provide a written response addressing the points of connection in preparation for the discernment conversation.
- Training will be provided to JNCs that addresses the process and the practice of discernment.

The Placements Committee will continue to have a general oversight function of the placements process and, where it considers necessary, can act in what it sees as the best interests of the wider church and individual ministers and placements. The Placements Committee also believes that, with the possibility of less of its time taken on transactional business, it will have greater time to devote to strategic thinking, vocational trajectories, and general oversight of the trends and needs of placements across the state.

Statistics as at 1 August 2017

Total number of approved placements (including vacancies)	300
Number of approved placements less than full time	111
Number of ministry agents in approved placements	245
Ordained	178
Lay	67
Male	160
Female	85

Challenges/risks as we progress

- Our ability to resource the church's witness in locations of strategic importance geographically, organisationally, and demographically with suitably skilled ministry agents.
- The rise in the number of part-time placements demands the need to rethink the nature of ministry in the placement. When placements reduce from full time, history shows that without significant, purposeful intervention, the fraction of the placement continues to decrease.
- Placements Committee continues to work with presbyteries and councils to find constructive ways to respond when the vitality of a placement come into question.

Proposal

It is proposed that the 33rd Synod receive this report.

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