



# #realunitingchurch

Report from

## Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee



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### Context

Reconciliation is at the heart of the Uniting Church's understanding of the nature and purpose of the church—the reconciliation of heaven and earth, and all people, to God through Christ, of which the church is to be a sign and foretaste. Our congregations, councils and agencies are

called to bear witness to this foundational vision of church which is greater than our own institutional life, a story larger than our own. The Uniting Church in Australia's 40th anniversary this year has been an opportunity to recall the vision of Christian and cosmic unity which was so compelling to the architects of church union and the writers of the *Basis of Union*.

That vision continues to find expression in our life and witness in many ways—locally, regionally and on a state basis. The Uniting Church is either an initiator or active participant in most inter-church collaborations in communities across the state—from ministers' fellowships and state school Religious Instruction to Christmas, Easter and civic events and community care.

The Synod Ecumenical Relationships Committee seeks to foster this ecumenical spirit across the Synod, as well as energise and oversee the Synod's more formal ecumenical engagements and networking.

## Priority Directions

A key focus has been giving ongoing encouragement to the local prayer covenant initiative, One in Christ, which the 32nd Synod commended to the church. This contributes to the Synod's priority directions of being Christ-centred and developing a life of prayerful listening, and of creating stronger connections with the wider community.

Local ecumenical study of the booklet *Intercession* by Lukas Vischer, and the consequent covenanting of local churches to pray for each other, is a practical step enabling congregations to engage in intentional relationships which could transform the Christian witness in their communities.

## Report

### Membership

SERC membership for 2016-18 comprises John Agnew, Clive Ayre, Neil Ballment, David Busch, Sunil Kadaparambil, Richard Lance, Russell Morris, Nathan Barton and Fiona Patterson, with Bruce Johnson as observer/consultant. The committee continues to seek women and younger people to join. Three members are from outside the south-east corner and the use of teleconferencing is common. Additionally, each presbytery now has a SERC liaison person to help link their presbytery and its congregations with the committee's work, and to identify regional stories and issues for wider sharing.

### One in Christ – *Intercessions* and local prayer covenants

By December 2016, some 250 copies of the reprint of Lukas Vischer's slim volume *Intercessions* had been sold. It is not known how often the accompanying study guide available through the Synod's website has been downloaded. The booklet and study guide are designed to inspire and inform congregations for entering into prayer covenants with other churches in their community as an expression of their mutuality as members together in the Body of Christ. The committee is keen to hear how these studies and prayer covenants are developing. The 33rd Synod will incorporate elements of such a covenant in its daily schedule. Copies of *Intercession* are available through Vision Books or the publisher, Morning Star in Melbourne.

### Reformation 500th anniversary

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation on 31 October 2017 has generated a long list of commemorative events around the world over more than 12 months. SERC is organising a forum exploring the nexus between reformation and reconciliation for one of the lunch breaks

during the 33rd Synod. The Michael Putney Memorial Lecture will explore Reformation-related themes with Catholic and Lutheran keynote presenters, plus respondents, on 8 October 2017. An official Catholic-Lutheran commemoration will be held at St Peter's Lutheran College, Indooroopilly, on 1 November 2017 at 7 pm, involving Catholic Archbishop Mark Coleridge and Lutheran Bishop Paul Smith.

### Events

- Brisbane was privileged to host the General-Secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev Dr Olav Fykse Tvelt, as the presenter of the **Michael Putney Memorial Lecture** in October 2016. His theme, "Ways Forward in Ecumenism in this Contemporary Age," identified a number of challenges and issues which prompted discussion. The lecture was live-streamed and recorded.
- The **2016 ecumenical dinner**, a collaboration between the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Church ecumenical committees, was hosted by the Catholic Church at Ashgrove with Rev Dr Cathy Thomson of the Anglican Church speaking on "The Changing Face of Ecumenism". Dr Thomson, who had been active in ecumenical work and a vice-president of Queensland Churches Together, has since returned to Adelaide for family reasons.
- Two SERC members represented the Synod at the **UCA Christian Unity Working Group** annual meeting in October 2016. This meeting receives reports from each Synod, from Uniting Church in Australia member participants in international ecumenical councils and organisations, and from Uniting Church teams involved in national bilateral dialogues (the Roman Catholic-Uniting Church national dialogue is currently based in Brisbane). The 2017 meeting will be held the week prior to the 33rd Synod.
- SERC is encouraging interested Uniting Church in Australia members to attend the fourth **International Conference on Receptive Ecumenism** in Canberra, 6-9 November 2017.

### Queensland Churches Together

SERC has ensured that Uniting Church nominees continue to serve on Queensland Churches Together (QCT), its executive and its various commissions including Faith and Order, Queensland Churches Environmental Network (QCEN), the Joint Churches Domestic Violence Prevention Project, Church Together Indigenous Peoples Partnership, and the Commission for Religious Instruction and Chaplaincy in State Schools (CRICSS). Brief highlights of QCT's work since the 32nd Synod include:

- QCT became a founding member of the Queensland Faith Communities Council, a peak body of religious communities, in May 2017.
- The JCDVPP published a revised version of its excellent resource on domestic violence and the Christian faith, called *Questions Women Ask*. Member churches are revising all their resources to bring them up to date and looking at how training and information on prevention of domestic and family violence might be included in pastoral care courses and other in-service training.
- QCEN attempted to create a partnership with university researchers and obtain crowd-funding to investigate the health impacts of Coal Seam Gas (CSG) extraction on rural communities — after a promising start, a change in circumstances has seen QCEN move out of direct involvement although the research is still planned to proceed.
- A rural ministry summit was held in Warwick in May 2017 to assess the prospects of reviving Living Church in Rural Queensland as a commission of the QCT.
- CRICSS has been significantly involved in discussions with the State Education Department on issues regarding Religious Instruction in schools.
- In the wake of Cyclone Debbie, QCT is exploring if it has a role in the provision of disaster recovery chaplaincy.
- The future of CTIPP remains unclear—with the Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Churches developing their own Reconciliation Action Plans, the contribution which QCT seeks to make in this space may need to be re-evaluated.

## Resources

SERC Secretary Clive Ayre has compiled an ecumenical resource pack promoting Queensland initiatives and activities, primarily designed for new ordinands and ministry agents arriving from interstate. Presbyteries are welcome to ask for copies of this to give to such ministry agents at their arrival or induction. Attempts have been made to partner with other churches in creating a reading-reflection course on historical and contemporary aspects of ecumenism which could be used by ministry agents for Continuing Education for Ministry. This has proven more difficult than expected and the project has been put aside for the moment.

## Challenges/risks as we progress

The Uniting Church in Australia's ecumenical vision and commitment persist against the tidal flow of denominational angst about mission and resources in a survival-focussed paradigm. We risk abandoning a key part of our spiritual calling if we lower the horizons of our purpose to our own institutional security. We engage in ecclesiastical cannibalism if we see ourselves as competitors against other churches for a declining market share. Our movement bears witness to unity as a defining expression of authentic Christian mission—Christ's ministry of reconciliation—and we are challenged to maintain an open, generous posture towards the wider Body of Christ in faithfulness to who God calls us to be. The ecumenical vision — the reconciliation of the whole *oikumene* to God through Christ—also propels our passion for social justice, confronting a world of increasing polarisation, inequality, and a politics of resentment. This is the vibrant but challenging counter-cultural beacon which the Uniting Church insists on holding aloft in its life and witness.

In its limited way, SERC aims to keep that challenge and vision alive.

## For consideration

SERC acknowledges with gratitude the encouragement, coordinating and resourcing given to the Uniting Church in Australia's ecumenical work by Rev Dr Chris Walker in his role as the national consultant for Christian unity with the Assembly. Dr Walker retired from the Assembly in July 2017.

## Proposal

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

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