

## 36. Presbytery of Western Australia

<i>Chairperson</i>	Rev Lorraine Stokes
<i>Immediate Past Chairperson</i>	Rev Steve Francis
<i>Chairperson Elect</i>	
<i>Acting Secretary</i>	Rev John McKane
<i>Treasurer</i>	

The Presbytery of Western Australia (WA) is not even two years old, but it continues to develop and function as its own body separate to the Synod of WA.

It has been an eventful 12 months. The Presbytery of WA has been involved with some momentous decisions that offer a vision for a new model of operations of our congregations and Presbytery services. There is, at times, a lot of excitement to the transformation which are often tempered by the practicalities which limit the rate we can progress from ideas to outcomes. A key decision in the last twelve months was for the Presbytery of WA to increase its meetings from twice a year in 2017, to three times in 2018 with a desire to meeting four times in 2019 as we focus our meetings on re-establishing effective Presbytery activity as well as building relationships between congregations and resourcing congregations for mission.

After the last Synod in 2017, the Presbytery Property Committee was re-established and in October 2017 received its powers back from the Synod equivalent as part of continuing the separation of the two bodies. This allowed the Presbytery to take responsibility for the missional use of its congregational properties. At the November 2017 Presbytery meeting, the Presbytery of WA resolved to dissolve Swanbourne Uniting Church. As part of this closure, the Swanbourne congregation deemed their assets and/or any funds from the sale of them, should be used for Alternative Missional Use by the Presbytery. Discussions are still ongoing with the Synod Resources Commission regarding this property and what remains of the assets.

Prior to the previous Synod meeting, the Presbytery of WA and its Standing Committee upheld the decision from the previous General Council not to appoint a Lecturer in Systematic Theology. When the Perth College of Divinity challenged this decision, Presbytery Standing Committee gave 12 months' notice of the intention to withdraw from the Perth College of Divinity. This was a momentous decision that has been continued to be worked through by Presbytery office bearers, the Principal of Theological Hall and the Commission for Education for Discipleship and Leadership (CEDAL).

After lengthy consultation with Synod Human Resources and external legal advice, the Uniting Church funded lecturing staff at Murdoch University completed their placement on 30 June 2018. At this time our involvement with the Perth College of Divinity also ended. Whilst that part of our education strategy ended, through 2018 the Presbytery of WA brought on two 0.5 full-time equivalent (FTE) for the position of Presbytery Minister (Education and Formation) as well as appointed a 1.0 FTE for the position of Presbytery Minister (Education and Training). These positions signal the change in strategy, prioritising the development and provision of lay education.

One of the big challenges facing the Presbytery of WA is the shrinking number of members within congregations. As we seek to operate as an effective presbytery resourcing our congregations for mission, this reduction in membership places high overheads on the few faithful that remain as well as pressure on the Presbytery for representation. At the June 2018 Presbytery of WA meeting, it resolved to deem any congregation with confirmed membership under 16 to be a faith community, with an option to request to be designated as a small congregation. This doesn't affect their ability to meet, but will simplify their obligations to the wider Presbytery. This is a sensitive topic that needs to

be gently and prayerfully managed across these congregations to be an enabling activity that brings life to them.

The structure of the Presbytery of WA, its committees and supporting staff has been a key focus of Presbytery Standing Committee throughout the last 12 months, in particular as both the Presbytery and Synod Standing Committees work through bringing clarity to the separation of the two bodies. Loss of significant staff hasn't helped progress this work, but the working through the experience has helped in determining the path forward on completing this work.

## **I. SEPARATION OF PRESBYTERY AND SYNOD IN WA**

Late in 2016 it was agreed by the WA Synod and Presbytery to make a clear separation between these two councils of the church, each with its own distinctive responsibilities. Whilst the precipitating factor was the request from the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (Congress) that they be recognised as a second Presbytery in WA, combining Moderator/Chair as well as General Secretary/Secretary roles were confusing. Even after it became clear that the Congress Presbytery was not going to immediately eventuate, the move to separate Presbytery and Synod still went ahead, mainly because it was recognised that it was necessary for the health of congregations to create a strong presbytery as a separate council of the church. Congregations need an effective presbytery which is active in encouraging, supporting, resourcing and exhorting them to fulfil their calling. The joint roles, meetings and committees were all separated and have continued to operate separately. This clear separation also enabled the Uniting Church WA to return to the pattern of inter-related councils as set out in the *Basis of Union*.

The separation of these two bodies has been a journey rather than a single point of creation. By mid-2017, it became apparent there was a lack of clarity about the distinctive roles of Synod and Presbytery which caused conflict and uncertainty for staff. A joint gathering of Presbytery Standing Committee and Synod Standing Committee was held to review the process, and they agreed that Rev Terence Corkin, former Assembly General Secretary, should be employed as a consultant to advise on the best way to deal with these difficulties.

Terence visited WA in mid-2017, met with key leaders and presented his report to a joint gathering of Synod and Presbytery Standing Committees in September 2017. He advised that more attention be given to the polity of the Uniting Church in Australia and how that was implemented in WA. Arising from his report, Synod Standing Committee asked the Presbytery Standing Committee to clarify the role of Presbytery. After research into the *Basis of Union*, Constitution and Regulations, Presbytery Standing Committee reported to the November 2017 Presbytery meeting on the role of the Presbytery. Subsequently a further joint gathering of Synod and Presbytery Standing Committees was held to discuss committee and staffing structure for the Presbytery of WA and some of which was presented to the February 2018 Presbytery meeting.

In February 2018, Rev Dr Ian Tozer resigned as Secretary of the Presbytery. At its February 2018 meeting, the Presbytery of WA appointed Rev John McKane as Acting Secretary and authorised Presbytery Standing Committee to proceed to create and fill a position for full time Secretary of Presbytery. Whilst the Presbytery had the desire to create this position, Placements indicated we did not have a budget for this position. Soon after Rev Dr Ian Tozer resigned, the position of his full-time Personal Assistant was made redundant. Frances Conchie-Stanley, who had held this position, made significant contributions to the work of the Presbytery, from arranging Presbytery meetings, co-ordinating registrations for Presbytery meetings, taking minutes of Presbytery and Presbytery Standing Committee meetings and following through on matters raised by committees and staff.

The loss of these two paid positions left the Presbytery Standing Committee under resourced and meeting monthly to work through the workload. Both the Chairperson and the Acting Secretary are volunteers who are in full-time congregational placements, one in a rural area, and all the members of Presbytery Standing Committee are volunteers, mostly in full-time placement or employment. Presbytery Standing Committee proposed new rules at the June 2018 meeting to include the chairs of

Pastoral Relations, Property, Strategy and Mission Planning and CEDAL committees as ex-officio members to increase not only the size of the team, but increase the collaboration between the major Presbytery bodies. The lack of staff support, coupled with vacancies in Mission Planner, Pastoral Care and First Third/Uniting Generations, has placed great stress on all members of the Presbytery Standing Committee, especially the office bearers, and slowed our progress in completing the task given to Presbytery Standing Committee by Synod Standing Committee for determining what we needed to be an effective Presbytery.

By May 2018, Presbytery Standing Committee had identified two major areas to resolve in order to successfully complete the separation of Synod and Presbytery. Firstly, the Presbytery of WA needed its own separate budget so it could be in control of decisions such that it could align its spending along the Presbytery strategic directions. The Presbytery had little control over funding decisions of staff, events or resourcing as it had no way of providing input into these decisions. Secondly, the Presbytery Standing Committee is of the view that all staff who serve Presbytery of WA committees and resource congregations and ministers, should be staff of the Presbytery of WA and should be accountable to the Presbytery. It also believes that Presbytery staff need to work together as a team, under the oversight of a team leader, to efficiently co-ordinate the resourcing of services across the Presbytery.

To move forward on these two areas, Presbytery Standing Committee met with Synod Standing Committee in May 2018 where Presbytery Standing Committee presented a report and recommendations dealing with the two issues of budget and staffing. After the joint gathering and a subsequent meeting of Synod Standing Committee, some progress was achieved by making budgetary information available to the Presbytery Standing Committee, but the issues surrounding staffing remain unresolved. At a joint meeting of representatives of Presbytery Standing Committee and Synod Standing Committee on 11 August 2018, it was agreed that Presbytery of WA would have its own defined budget, that Presbytery had authority to develop its own budget and staffing structure in consultation with committees, and that a Presbytery Officer position would be created to fulfil a team leader role.

Presbytery Standing Committee will continue to work to resolve these remaining steps as quickly as possible in order to reduce the stress currently being experienced by staff and to enable the Presbytery of WA to carry out its responsibilities so that it can enhance the mission of the church.

## **2. NEW MODELS OF MINISTRY**

In late 2016, the findings from the review into First Third Ministry were presented to the Presbytery of WA. Based on that review, the Presbytery Standing Committee asked the First Third Committee to develop a new model for First Third Ministry, in collaboration with others, for the Presbytery of WA. At the November 2017 meeting, a new model for effective intergenerational ministry was proposed, with a network of communities championing intergenerational ministry at its core. The Uniting Generations model is about ministry with young people focusing on nurturing and development through resourcing those with a heart for intergenerational ministry. In the new model, the primary role of Presbytery Ministry Agents is to build connections between communities to resource, encourage, equip and mentor each other. The strength of this new model is the shared ownership of the network. The Presbytery of WA agreed by consensus to implement the proposed intergenerational model and the placement of 1 FTE equivalent to resource it.

Also at the November 2017 Presbytery of WA meeting, the Presbytery agreed by consensus to note the Mission Focused Strategic proposed by Strategy and Mission Planning, with a view to prayerfully reflect on them and revisit these goals in a dedicated Presbytery meeting in February 2018. At the February meeting, the Presbytery of WA engaged with the Mission Focused Strategic Goals, with a view to strategically incarnating them in the life of the Presbytery. In particular, the meeting was particularly significant in that it focussed on how the mission of congregations could be enhanced and set the following mission goals. After considering the feedback through the Presbytery meeting, the following proposals were brought and passed by consensus:

*“That the Presbytery of Western Australia request each community of faith, congregation, church council, agency and committee meeting within the Presbytery give the first portion of their agenda at every meeting to consideration of the ways in which their participation in the mission of God is growing the church by:*

- 1. Developing ‘Fresh Expressions of Church’*
- 2. Deliberate, wise and prayerful mission planning and community outreach*
- 3. Working to be part of and create collaborative networks of faith communities.”*

and

*“That Presbytery note that Strategy, Mission and Planning Committee (SMPC), in collaboration with the Commission for Education for Discipleship and Leadership (CEDAL), will do all it can between now and 2020 to encourage and support communities of faith, congregations, church councils, agencies and committees within the Presbytery to:*

- 1. Invite all ministry agents, church councillors and interested members to complete the Mission Shaped Ministry course*
- 2. Aim to have 80% of our faith communities, congregations and agencies in the Presbytery to have developed one or more ‘Fresh Expressions of Church’*
- 3. Support all faith communities, congregations, agencies and committees within the Presbytery to have completed and implemented Mission Plans, including ways that they are reaching out into the community*
- 4. Work with the Council for Mission in establishing at least four creative collaborative networks of communities of faith.”*

### **3. 2019 BUDGET**

On 14 August, a separate budget was produced for the Presbytery of WA and Presbytery Standing Committee was informed that there was a deficit of almost \$500,000 in the Presbytery budget and was asked to work out how it could balance its budget by 28 August. Preliminary discussions were immediately undertaken by the Budget Sub-committee of Presbytery Standing Committee, with detailed discussions with the Synod Chief Financial Officer and Human Resources (HR). Most of the meeting of Presbytery Standing Committee on the 21 August was about the budget. Following that, on Saturday 25 August a day long consultation was held with representatives of all Presbytery of WA Committees, provided opportunity to discuss the budget and staffing situation with Presbytery bodies and get their responses. After this feedback, Presbytery Standing Committee finalised its response to Synod Standing Committee.

This put the Presbytery Standing Committee under extreme pressure for such significant decisions and it has proven impossible to meet this goal within the time frame. \$120,000 was identified to remove from the budget, but further time is needed to restructure committees and supporting staff. The Presbytery of WA is committed to moving towards achieving a balanced budget through identifying possible income streams and reduction in staff and costs, but as Presbytery Standing Committee is committed to working in close consultation with committees and staff, this will take time.

Complicating the budgetary challenges was the first attempt to delineate the budget between Synod and Presbytery. Both parties are trying to reduce their expenses whilst engaging a process of determining the ownership of those expenses and any income. In the first draft, the only income allocated to the Presbytery of WA was the Mission and Service giving from congregations. Presbytery Standing Committee don't believe this is a fair interpretation of how these services were previously funded and are working with the Synod Standing Committee and the General Secretary to resolve this as part of defining a budget for the Presbytery.

#### **4. RECOMMENDATION**

That the Synod of WA endorses the principle that the Synod will continue to provide financial support to the Presbytery in order for it to continue its work of resourcing congregations.

That the Synod of WA commits its Standing Committee and staff to working with the Presbytery of Western Australia, its Standing Committee and staff toward a fair distribution of income to enable the Presbytery to adequately carry out its responsibilities of resourcing congregations in WA.

**Rev Lorraine Stokes**  
[lkstokes@inet.net.au](mailto:lkstokes@inet.net.au)