

Presbytery of Riverina

Wagga Wagga Uniting Church Mission Study

Presented to Church Council
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Mission Study Team Report November, 2015

Introduction

As we come to deliver the Mission Study Team Report there are some things that need to be said at the very beginning. The first, and most important, is to acknowledge the faithfulness of many people, both in leadership and in participation in the life of the congregation. Those of us who are representing the Presbytery want particularly to offer support and encouragement, giving thanks to God for your life and witness in this place. We do this with great sincerity, noting and understanding what it has meant to be engaged in the process of building and what it means to be active in the service of the broader community for love of Christ and love of neighbour.

With this being said we are going to outline:

- the process in which we have been engaged
- some things that we think would be helpful to consider; and then we will turn to
- our recommendations.

Purpose and Process - Doug

The purpose of the work we have been undertaking has been to consider the ministry and mission opportunities and needs of the Wagga Wagga Uniting Church Congregation and to enable the congregation and the presbytery, together, to assess future staffing and leadership needs.

There have been formal meetings with: the Reverend Moese Taufa; Youth, Children and Family worker, Cindy James; Office manager, Barbara Geale; Cross-cultural Tertiary worker, the Rev Daniel Yang and Chairperson of the Church Council, Robert Fraser. Confidential conversations have also been had with a small number of members of the Church Council who took advantage of the invitation to meet with the Rev Gereldine Leonard representing the Mission Study team. Conversations have also been had with members of the wider congregation. An analysis of the congregation's finances in relation to mission and placement possibilities will be conducted by Mr Peter Andrews and will be available at a later date.

Definitions of the Church and Mission

As the Mission Study team did its work it became apparent that there was a need for clarity about what we mean when we talk about the church and about mission and so we agreed on the following:

The Church, at this time and in this place, is like a little outpost of the kingdom of God in hostile territory. Things have changed, we are not at the centre of our community anymore and so we have to understand ourselves differently and do things differently while at the same time maintaining the integrity of what it is to be Christian people. We agreed the church is created to be a light in the darkness and that no matter how imperfectly, the kingdom of God that Jesus spoke about should be clearly seen in its life and activity, in the way that we relate to one another and in the way that we seek the good of the other over our own advancement, even our own life. Additionally, we felt it important to distinguish between service, which is a necessary, and wonderful expression of our gratitude for the loving-kindness of God toward us, and mission in which we play a part.

Mission, we agreed, originates in God's desire to be reconciled with the whole creation. As we join God's mission, our part is to share our lives with one another in relationships of equality. Fellowship of this kind opens the way for deep life-giving relationship with God. It also opens us to deeper relationships with one another - relationships in which both parties contribute to the healing and the dignity of the other.

We agreed that our enquiry should not be based on the fearful and faithless act of worrying about numbers, or targeting people as subjects of conversion to our way of doing things, or even the quite worthy ambition of serving our community, but on how we can best live in authentic response to the God who has given our lives meaning and purpose. In this report then, our aim is to ask how the congregation can best develop a community which is an alternative to the broader community - one with the healing, restoring, life-giving, holy friendship of Jesus at its heart.

Feedback from meetings with staff and others

The one thing that seemed clear from the various meetings with staff and others was that there was no coherently stated, well understood, commonly owned statement of the church's purpose and mission. The minister currently in placement has been working out of the Mission and Vision statement on the church's website: *Living the Love of Jesus through the joy of worship, sharing of faith, humility of service, care of people and the challenge of learning*. There also exists a mission and objectives statement as an addendum to the 2014 *Life and Witness Consultation* report which presents a separate mission statement for

each worshipping group. The confusion that this logically creates was evident. Each member of staff, for example, had a different view of the qualities or the type of ministry person that was needed for the future of the congregation.

Feedback from the various meetings revealed a general feeling of tiredness and a sense of being dispirited. The Mission Planning Team wants to reflect back to you that this is a normal occurrence after a long-term building project is completed and at the end of a long-term placement. We also want to say these feelings do not necessarily last forever.

Meetings with various people also revealed concern about the underlying conflict that has been part of the life of the congregation for some time and the Mission Planning Team thought it wise that this reality should be named with a view to its being addressed. The feedback received indicated that conflict was damaging at a personal level for those involved, that it consumed a great deal of time and energy and that it inhibited the congregation in its ministry and mission. Added to this was a sense of grief at the loss of the past. In some cases there was a feeling of being disenfranchised in decision making and let down by the Presbytery and the Synod which were both seen as interfering in congregational life and failing to do their part in the preparation of ministers with the capacity to grow and to care for congregations. While there were other positive inputs these are mentioned here because they are things the team felt needed to be addressed.

A Way Forward

As it considered these and other matters the team felt it was vital that the congregation name an overarching mission objective which was held in common. This might be expressed differently in different places, but would give the congregation both a common focus and a group identity. A comparison of the mission plan of each of the worshipping groups was made looking for a common link. The information, set out in the following table, was drawn from the 2014 report of the congregation's Life and Witness Consultation and is presented to give an idea of what each group saw as its way forward.

Pilgrim	Wesley	Wesley Korean
Focus – Working with diversity inside and outside the church, lay ministry leadership	Focus - Hospitable worshipping community, ministry with people aging in homes and retirement villages etc	Focus - evangelism
Work toward a diversity of Worship services.	In a targeted way growing attendance to 85 by 2016	Worship, service, fellowship and commitment
Train people to lead worship	Growing Leadership for worship services	Cross cultural youth group based around music
Home groups for building Community and growing faith eg Alpha	Support members with home groups and pastoral care Pastoral care for nursing homes.	Supporting small congregations
Identify Cross cultural leaders	Supported playgroup	Supporting the Indian Community locally and abroad
Supported playgroup in partnership with Uniting	Establish a Day Care centre offering carers respite	
Multi-cultural/Cross Cultural	Re-energise School for Seniors	
	Targeting young people	
	Strengthen links with Wesley Korean	
THE PLANNING TEAM'S COMMENTS		
ALMOST EVERYTHING ON PILGRIM'S AGENDA IS INTERNAL. THESE ARE IMPORTANT BASICS FOR A WORSHIPING GROUP ESTABLISHING AN IDENTITY. BEGINNING TO WORK WITH UNITING CARE TO DEVELOP CONNECTIONS EXTERNALLY. A COMMITMENT TO CROSS CULTURAL MINISTRY POSSIBLE MISSION FOCUS: A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS OF EQUALITY WITH THE COMMUNITY OF ASHMONT AND GLENFIELD	THE REACH IS BROAD (too broad?) A CLEAR EMPHASIS ON THE LATTER STAGES OF LIFE – WITH THE NOTEABLE EXCEPTION OF THE PLAYGROUP - IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WESLEY WORSHIP GROUP TO BUILD BACK FROM ITS CURRENT AGE RANGE – SPECIALISING IN THIS END OF LIFE. A COMMITMENT TO SUPPORT CROSS CULTURAL MINISTRY THERE ARE SOME THINGS AT ODDS. THIS GROUP HAS A STRONG SOCIAL JUSTICE/SERVICE FOCUS WHICH IS NOT MENTIONED IN THIS STATEMENT POSSIBLE MISSION FOCUS: SENIORS, LATER LIFE.	FOR A SMALL GROUP THIS IS A WIDE FOCUS. PEOPLE ARE TIRING. THIS SEEMS THE OBVIOUS YOUTH WORK OF THE CONGREGATION CAN THIS GROUP BE PERSUADED TO FOCUS ON CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY WITH YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS? A CROSS CULTURAL CONGREGATION – KOREAN REACHING OUT TO ITS ANGLO-CELTIC NEIGHBOURS POSSIBLE MISSION FOCUS - CROSS-CULTURAL YOUTH/YOUNG ADULTS

The one element which was common to all was a commitment to being a multicultural church. It should be noted that there are two definitions of multicultural running in the Wagga Congregation. One focused on bringing together people from different backgrounds and the other based on ethnic groups meeting separately but crossing those boundaries for some things together. There is a separate, language based, group for Koreans because there is a Korean speaking minister and there are also gatherings in which various ethnic groups are part of a dominantly Anglo-Celtic worshipping group with English as a common language. After discussion the Mission Planning Team opted to use the term *culturally inclusive* in its recommendations relating to the multicultural nature of the congregation and its mission aims. The term *culturally inclusive* is a less contested concept that more fully embraces diversity.

The team also recognised that there are lessons to be taken from what has already happened in terms of multicultural ministry. A lot of energy, physical and emotional has been invested in various refugee groups. For various reasons many have left the congregation – moving to other towns, moving to language-based churches in Wagga, joining congregations which offered advantages for their children and so on. There is specific research in this matter available from UnitingCare which may be helpful to the congregation in reflection and future planning.

Regional Church

In the feedback there was a deal of confusion about the term regional church. Initially the impression was that despite calling itself a regional church, there were in reality, three neighbourhood congregations (Wesley, Pilgrim and Korean) in the sense that:

- each was still trying to offer something for each stage of life; and
- in the expectation that the minister would visit, and lead worship etc. (There has been a deal of discontent about the sharing of the minister of the word across the various worshipping communities during the past 12 months.)

The team is of the opinion that some of the discontent around leadership of worship could be addressed by timetabling. Additionally the congregation has an extraordinary number of people with formal theological education who are currently an under-tapped resource.

Addressing Conflict

The team felt it important for the Uniting Church in Wagga to address the confusion/discontent that arises historically, from the fact that there are five worshipping groups across two locations and the tendency to act, or to think, as though there are three congregations. The team did give consideration to the idea of falling back to two congregations, but came to the view that this would be a backward step, leaving two weakened groups. We encourage the leadership to continue the development of a single regional congregation. Meetings, for example, should be held where there is space rather than turn-about, so that gradually thinking is changed. The team is confident that some of the difficulty in identifying and operating as a regional congregation could be overcome by the adoption of a common focus such as becoming a culturally inclusive church and being guided by a mission focus rather than by the sometimes competing demands of each worshipping group. The music based youth group is a good example of working out of a common mission focus. It is a culturally inclusive activity of the Wagga Congregation led by the people most equipped for this ministry using the most appropriate premises.

The Hub

There was reflected a clear lack of understanding of the Hub proposal. It is the understanding of the Mission Planning Team that the Hub project, which has been explored with the Synod and UnitingCare, may be revamped so that the relationship between the congregation and UnitingCare can continue at a local level and that future shared projects would arise out of the congregation's missional objectives. Taking these things into consideration the team saw a future for the Wagga Congregation as a Regional church defined in geographic terms, functioning as a centre of education and encouragement for smaller congregations in the vicinity and working with UnitingCare on projects that arise because of a local relationship.

Holding the Vision

The 2014 Life and Witness Consultation report drew attention to the role of the Rev Geoff Flynn in holding the disparate nature of the congregation together. He has been spoken about as "the holder of the vision, dragging us all along." This was described as a positive, but it also has a downside. If one person holds everything together and carries the vision what happens when that person is withdrawn? The Mission Planning Team wishes to encourage the Church Council to further embrace its role as the keeper of the congregation's vision.

Leadership in Mission

During the conduct of the study the team became aware of the importance of the work in culturally inclusive ministry of the Rev Mosese Taufa and felt it important that the congregation explore with him the possibility of an extension of his placement. When it came to a consideration of the stated aims in mission of the various worshipping groups the team felt that while there was a desire to reach out to people, there was little understanding of how this could be accomplished. It was recognised that the Korean group under the leadership of the Rev Daniel Yang, had these skills, the sharing of which would be of value to the rest of the congregation. The team felt there was also great value in recognising and supporting the Rev Yang in his ministry. It was also felt there was a need to look again at the way in which the congregation engages in children and family ministry and related staffing and to explore whether some of the administrative tasks such as preparation of the preaching plan, WH&S and

compliance matters currently undertaken by the Minister of the Word would be better undertaken by others, including the office manager.

Recommendations

In arriving at the following recommendations the Team felt there was an order which should be followed reflecting the need for **healing, learning and growing** into a vital regional church.

1. Healing

The team recommends that the first order of priority should be the spiritual healing of the congregation.

2. Learning

That the congregation agree to the overarching missional objective of becoming a culturally inclusive congregation in the knowledge that this will happen in different ways and at different locations and develop a mission plan to this end.

To this end it is recommended that the church council, on behalf of the congregation:

- a. explores with the Rev Mosese Taufa the possibility of an extension of his placement with a commitment to return the focus of his ministry to the development of a culturally inclusive congregation and seeks the Presbytery's agreement to that extension; and
- b. explores with the Rev Daniel Yang ways in which it can support his application for admission as a minister of the **Uniting** Church with a view to the continuation of his ministry in Wagga. It would be expected that the Rev Yang would contribute both in the development of a culturally inclusive church and in equipping the congregations for mission and that the broader congregation contribute to his financial support.

3. Growing

It is further recommended that the Church Council on behalf of the congregation:

- a. conducts a review of existing staffing arrangements taking into consideration the need for a part-time pastoral care worker/co-ordinator tasked with ensuring the ongoing equipping of the congregation in pastoral care.
- b. Transfers responsibility for a number of administrative functions, including preparation of the preaching plan, WH&S and matter of Compliance from the Minister of the Word;
- c. Explores ways in which the theological expertise within the congregation can be better harnessed;
- d. Generally develops the lay ministry of the church; and
- e. Seeks ways to work and worship in a more united manner.

Before making its final recommendation, it needs to be repeated that the Team has approached its work on the basis of the ministry and mission needs of the congregation and not on its capacity to finance ministry. It should also be understood that the recommendations so far project an increase in staff/ministry hours available to the congregation.

4. In light of all of the above, it is the final recommendation of the Mission Planning Team that the placement previously occupied by the Rev Geoff Flynn be not filled.