General Secretary

1 INTRODUCTION

The Synod theme ‘Letters of recommendation’ invites each of us to reflect on the ways we journey with God’s Spirit in the various responsibilities we have in the life of the Church. The following report provides a brief account of key themes and reflections that I have encountered and undertaken in the role of General Secretary. As with the previous years, undertaking the role of General Secretary in this past eighteen months has contained many uplifting elements. It has also contained some significant challenges that have tested me considerably. From this spectrum of experiences, I offer the following comments in the spirit of God’s faith, hope and love, unconditionally inviting us to respond to Christ’s ongoing ministry and mission, as the Church seeks to faithfully and thoughtfully express the Spirit of the living God in us through worship, witness and service.

2 WORK OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY

Some responsibilities of the General Secretary are primarily listed in section 3.6.3.4 of the UCA Regulations, along with other responsibilities noted throughout the Regulations. Over the years these operational responsibilities have widened to a broader leadership role described in the General Secretary Ministry Profile within the Synod to include the primary purposes of:

(a) providing pastoral and governance leadership and advice to the Synod and its bodies;
(b) ensuring the development and implementation of a focused vision;
(c) providing administration leadership to the Synod office, fulfilling the function of chief executive officer with regard to staff and resources; and
(d) offering pastoral support to the Moderator and others as required.

These responsibilities for the Synod General Secretary are reflected in the Ministry Profiles for General Secretaries across all UCA synods.

This combination of roles, from both the UCA Regulations and the Ministry Profile, leads to a multifaceted range of responsibilities for the General Secretary. The need for a ‘working knowledge’ of each major Synod reporting body is important, along with the need to ‘make connections’ amid the reporting bodies to enhance effective stewardship and communication, as much as possible, across various facets of the Synod’s responsibilities. At the same time, the General Secretary’s role has responsibilities for providing leadership across a complex and dynamic organisation, striving to reflect the foundational and essential ministry and mission imperatives of the Church, and catering for contemporary workplace expectations and wider community compliance responsibilities.

In my report to the 2014 Synod I wrote, “As one may imagine, coming to grips with the breadth and depth of the General Secretary’s role can take some time. After commencing the role in November 2012, the past eighteen months has provided an opportunity to consolidate my learning about the role and begin to understand various personal strengths, challenges, learning areas, etc. within this.” This consolidation has continued over the past months. The experience of just over three years in this role is a solid foundation for the many and varied responsibilities that are intrinsic to undertaking the role. This breadth of responsibilities allows me to listen to and learn from a variety of people across the life of the Church. It also calls me to undertake leadership and strategic responses across the variety of contexts for which the Synod’s ministries and operations have responsibility.

I report regularly to the Synod Standing Committee and to the General Secretary Oversight Group regarding operational, planning and leadership aspects of the role. The General Secretary Oversight Group undertakes an annual appraisal of my ministry and reports this to the Standing Committee.
I undertake regular supervision, use available study leave for continuing education and participate in presbytery-conducted UCA Code of Ethics and Ministerial Practice training.

3 PARTICULAR AREAS OF ACTIVITY

As well as the ongoing operational and leadership matters within Synod-based ministries and operations and Synod-wide involvements for which the General Secretary has responsibility, there are two distinct areas of the Synod’s activities that have required considerable attention throughout the past eighteen months. These areas are:

- the Major Strategic Review (MSR);
- the Synod’s response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Royal Commission).

As I have exercised the role of MSR chairperson (being appointed by the Standing Committee) due to the potential impact on various councils, committees/boards and institutions of the Church, there have been some challenges with providing leadership within some parts of the Church for which I have specific responsibilities. I am deeply grateful for the gracious attitude demonstrated by many people as these challenges have been navigated.

Much of the work of the General Secretary in relation to the MSR and the Royal Commission has been to assist in developing comprehensive responses to these major matters that the Church is addressing. This has added significant extra responsibilities to the General Secretary’s workload, as it has also to the workloads of many other Synod staff, and countless presbytery, congregation and agency staff and volunteers. Both of these very important aspects of the Church’s current life and practice do, however; invite us all to reflect on the way we view our engagement with one another and the world around us. These aspects of the Church’s life and practice come at a time when many internal and external relationships within the Church have been under stress and/or are changing for a variety of reasons. I do consider that the way we as a Church, a body of Christ, work through these significant challenges and opportunities to continually reflect on and renew ministry emphases may provide evangelical (in the fullest sense of the word) contexts for us to engage in fresh words and deeds as occasion demands (Basis of Union, para 11).

Other papers for the Synod meeting will provide detailed information relating to policy, decisions and implementation around the MSR, and the Church’s response to the Royal Commission.

4 REFLECTION

In exploring the notion of Corinthian Church members being ‘letters of recommendation’, Paul speaks of God’s confidence and competence for embodying faith and discipleship. Paul writes that this confidence and competence is given by the Spirit of the living God and therefore is life-giving for all who live in this covenantal relationship. Over the past eighteen months serving in the role of General Secretary, I have experienced much in the Church’s life that has reflected the generosity of the life-giving Spirit. I have experienced this in areas such as the innovation and creativity expressed across the Church’s life in congregations, presbyteries, UCA institutions, and within Synod committee/boards and staff. This has been displayed in all contexts through thoughtful and faithful expressions of worship, witness and service in response to God’s mission. I have also experienced occasions when parts of the Church or individuals, for whatever reason, have not demonstrated a generosity of Spirit toward others. Arising from these challenging experiences, I have observed and experienced people recognising discord, and graciously and prayerfully seeking to heal relationships and committing to share together in the promise of God’s confidence and competence in the service that they are contributing.

We are all aware that the Church is facing challenging times as we seek to respond faithfully to Christ’s invitation to share in God’s mission in contemporary contexts. These challenges are impacting
many of us personally, and they are impacting our shared response to being a Church today, and potentially tomorrow, in a variety of ways. Some are finding these challenges to be life giving. Others are finding these challenges to be extremely disconcerting. Some are feeling a range of emotions across this continuum.

Whatever the case, we are in a Church with a tradition of being reformed and reforming, renewed and renewing. As with other changes in a reforming and renewing Church, we are faced with responding to these challenges, potentially in fresh words and deeds, as a faithful response to the Spirit of the living God, seeking to share the confidence and competence of God in the world in which we find ourselves. Like the Corinthian community, we are invited to dwell in Paul’s encouraging imagery. It is the Spirit of the living God who continues to offer the church hope and direction, and each member is invited to approach personal discipleship as sharing in the ministry of Christ. Perhaps this is an element of what it means to be ‘letters of recommendation’; with this confidence and being guided together to faithfully share in the life giving and transforming hope of the gospel.

5 LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In the role of General Secretary I will continue to undertake the functions noted in the Regulations and the primary purposes within the Ministry Profile noted above (in section 2). There will an ongoing priority on engaging with the key areas of the Church’s response to the Royal Commission and implementation of any MSR-related resolutions. I also expect that the resourcing the Standing Committee’s resolution that in principle the Uniting Church within the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania be incorporated will engage further time and attention from the Secretariat, and the General Secretary particularly. These three elements of focus, along with the broad sweep of other responsibilities, are symbolic of the time and place in which we find ourselves as a Church.

Every facet of the Church is considering its faithful response to participating in Christ’s ongoing ministry and mission. In the future, as each facet of the Church addresses participation in God’s mission, it will be important for us to continue to share our various tasks and responsibilities as inter-related councils. As we follow Christ in the Church’s government, we expect to discern God’s Word and will in the matters for which each council has responsibility and authority, and for the councils of the Church to pay heed to other councils (Basis of Union, para 15). This is intrinsic to the nature of the UCA, and is important to foster in the future as we organise and shape the Church’s service of the Gospel for the sake of God’s mission in the world. The Church’s inter-related government will also need to respond effectively to developments in the regulatory and compliance requirements of civil authorities. As the Church seeks to share in God’s mission in the world and engage with a range of contexts, the UCA’s interconciliar government arrangements are highly likely to be called upon to address internal governance process to ensure that we can respond well to civil regulatory and compliance requirements.

As we look to the future generally, soon after this Synod meeting concludes the UCA will enter its 40th year. As the UCA continues to live out the joy, hope and challenge of sharing in the invitation to be a fellowship of reconciliation, through which Christ may work and bear witness himself (Basis of Union, para 3), there will always be times when we need to pause and reflect on the confidence and competence that God offers us. We are also called to pause and to reflect on what it means for Christ to reach out and command people’s attention in his ongoing rule and renewal of the Church (Basis of Union, para 4). This Synod meeting’s theme ‘Letters of recommendation’ provides a very helpful ‘lens’ to address these core elements of being the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania in 2016 and beyond, as we follow Christ, walk together with the First Peoples, and seek community, compassion and justice for all creation.

6 APPRECIATIONS

The General Secretary has the privilege of engaging with some deeply committed councils, boards/committees, groups and individuals across the life of the Church. I am constantly inspired by
imagination, passion and profound commitment in the contribution of many, many people to the Church’s participation in God’s mission. The dedication of a range of committees that serve the Church in responding to God’s mission in the world through Christ is remarkable. It is a privilege to participate in these committees, and to share in discerning directions for ministry and mission across the breadth of the Synod’s responsibilities. Similarly, so many individuals, whether volunteers or staff, who ‘go the extra mile’ in order to assist the Church to faithfully and thoughtfully worship, witness and serve is something for which as a Church we can give thanks to God.

As Dan Wootton concludes his term as Moderator, it is appropriate for me to place on record my deepest appreciation and admiration for the ministry that he has performed in this role. Dan’s leadership throughout the Church over his three-year term as Moderator has been deeply grounded in his profound spirituality, humility and a desire for the faith of the Church to be compassionate and faithfully expressed in all its actions, processes and relationships. I am personally very grateful for Dan’s wisdom and counsel, as we have reflected together on key themes facing the Church and potential implications for the Synod’s ministries and operations. Dan’s leadership through the challenging three-year period that he has been Moderator is a testimony to the deep Christian spirituality he embodies and his intense commitment to, and love for, the Church.

Synod Standing Committee members (both the elected and ex-officio members, and those associated to participate) have again made a significant and substantial contribution to fulfilling their role to ‘act on behalf of the Synod between meetings of the Synod in respect of any of the responsibilities of the Synod except such as the Synod may determine’ [Regulation 3.7.4.1 (d)]. The Standing Committee’s report to the Synod demonstrates the range of matters that it has addressed over the past eighteen months and indicates the level of dedication by Standing Committee members to fulfilling its responsibilities. The Standing Committee has also met on several occasions for information sessions regarding various facets of the MSR.

The Synod Senior Leadership Team (SLT) is an advisory group for the General Secretary. It comprises the Associate General Secretary, the Synod Liaison Minister – Tasmania, and the senior Directors of the Synod’s ministries and operations. The SLT’s function is in the management ‘sphere’, to assist the General Secretary in managing both operational matters and to provide function-based support across the Church. I am deeply grateful for the SLT’s care and support as some challenging aspects of the Synod’s operational life have been worked through. These deeply dedicated staff support the General Secretary in providing overall leadership to Synod-based ministries and operations. The commitment to the whole, along with each person’s expertise in particular areas, contributes significantly to comprehensive and holistic stewardship of the Synod’s resources and staffing.

The breadth of responsibilities assigned to the General Secretary can only be addressed with any level of effectiveness because of the committed and diligent work of the Secretariat. Each Secretariat member – the Associate General Secretary and administration staff – has some level of responsibility for implementing elements of the General Secretary’s responsibilities. The Synod and the wider Church continue to be very well served by the ministry that each member of the Secretariat offers.

MARK LAWRENCE
General Secretary