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New Directions in Theological Education Background Information Paper

The Presbytery of Western Australia is moving in new directions in theological education.

In recent weeks we have celebrated our 40th birthday as a church. In the last 40 years, there is much we can celebrate, but we must also acknowledge that over these years the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has experienced significant decline. At this time, we can either continue down that path of decline, or else we can dream of and plan for a different future, one in which we are open to the renewing work of the Spirit among us. One of the key motivating forces which brought us into union was a desire to engage in mission in the Australian context. If we are to be true to our founders, we need to recapture this vision and renew our commitment to mission. Providing high quality theological education to equip both lay and ordained for missional leadership, able to establish new faith communities, and re-invigorate existing ones, is vital as we move towards the future.

The Commission for Education for Discipleship and Leadership (CEDAL), with support of Presbytery Standing Committee, is planning a new future. At its June 2017 meeting, CEDAL adopted the following principle, “In development of educational opportunities we will give priority to education which will grow the church, rather than manage its ‘decline’.” This will guide all CEDAL’s decision-making on education into the future. Following are some of the new directions in theological education which are currently being implemented.

Focus on Lay Education

In the past, most lay education has focussed on equipping members to lead worship and celebrate the sacraments in congregations who can no longer afford an ordained minister. Imagine the difference if the focus of our lay education was on equipping members to connect with their local communities, develop and implement plans for mission, share their faith with others, enable people to grow as disciples of Christ, provide spiritually discerning leadership in congregations and establish new forms of church. Lay education with a focus on mission is now a top priority for CEDAL.

The high levels of interest in Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses being offered in rural and urban areas indicates a hunger for theological education which both deepens faith and develops ministry skills. This will be expanded in coming years. Education is being offered in both city and regional areas, and use of technology makes it accessible to those in remote locations. Rev Dr John Squires, Director of Education and Formation, has lay education as his top priority and new staff will be appointed to strengthen this area.

Skilling of ordained ministers for mission in our current context

As we seek to turn the church from decline to growth, we need ministers with well-developed theologies of mission, understanding of apologetics, knowledge of world religions and Australian spirituality, as well as specialised skills in evangelism, missional leadership, church planting, discipleship training and organisational change. In a church which is increasingly lay led, we need ordained ministers to have well-developed skills in resourcing and educating lay leaders. These priorities are now shaping our Continuing Education for ministers. To facilitate the implementation of new approaches, ministers will be encouraged to be part of peer groups where they can grow, be challenged and supported as they implement new approaches to ministry.

Re-shaping of our ordinand course to meet new National Standards

[New Assembly National Standards for Theological Education and Formation: Phase 2 for Ordained Ministries](#) came into effect from 1 January 2017. The new Standards make it clear that we must produce ordinands equipped for missional leadership in a multi faith, multicultural Australia. They also require that there is not just one, but multiple pathways to ordination, which take into account the educational needs of candidates, and allow for flexibility and recognition of prior learning and experience. This will allow a much wider range of candidates to undertake study, especially those from the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC), Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities and those without undergraduate degrees. Those who teach or mentor candidates must also display a mature Christian faith, grounded in the UCA. Interstate collaboration between UCA colleges is encouraged, to reduce duplication and enable sharing of expertise between colleges. Implementation of these Standards will require changes in formation of candidates for ordained ministries in Western Australia.

Letting go of the past

In moving forward, often it is necessary to let go of the past. The Presbytery Standing Committee has given notice of its intention to withdraw Perth Theological Hall (PTH) from the Perth College of Divinity (PCD) on 30 June 2018. The PCD is a joint Anglican/UCA body to oversee the theological program at Murdoch University. The PCD has served us well in academic theological education in the past, and the decision to withdraw was made after long and considered deliberations with regret. However, the Presbytery Standing Committee came to the conclusion that the UCA would be better able to meet the new National Standards and respond to the needs of the church, if it withdrew from PCD. Leaving PCD is not without difficulty. We recognise this decision has caused stress for staff and also strained ecumenical relationships. Please pray for all concerned as we continue conversations with staff, our ecumenical partners and Murdoch University.

The journey

The decision to withdraw from PCD was made after long and considered deliberations by a number of Councils of the church.

The Annual Report from CEDAL to the 10th Annual General Meeting of the Presbytery of Western Australia in September 2015 informed the Presbytery that concerns had been raised about whether the PCD was able to meet the needs of the UCA and that conversations have been underway since May 2015 between Anglican and UCA representatives about this issue.

In September 2015, General Council commissioned a research project to investigate a range of options, including continuing with the current PCD partnership, for provision of academic studies for candidates. The report which set out the advantages and disadvantages of both continuing in the partnership with PCD or developing a partnership with an interstate UCA college was presented to General Council in December 2015. Fully aware of the significance of this decision, General Council agreed not to make a decision at that time, but the matter was discussed at a number of General Council meetings during 2016. After the Presbytery Standing Committee was formed in November 2016, responsibility for this matter was transferred from General Council to Presbytery Standing Committee, where it had a high priority.

In March 2016, General Council prepared a document setting out its expectations of PCD and Murdoch if it were to continue in the partnership. This was sent to PCD for response.

In its report to the Presbytery of Western Australia meeting in May 2016, CEDAL reported that General Council was considering, "Whether to continue in a partnership with PCD and Murdoch or whether to enter into a partnership with an interstate UCA college for provision of academic studies." At this same meeting, the General Secretary presented a paper which outlined the pros and cons of these two options and time was allocated for table group discussion and feedback.

The Annual Report from CEDAL to the 11th Annual General Meeting of the Presbytery of Western Australia in November 2016 reported on the response from PCD to the 'Expectations' document sent by General Council in March. While PCD had agreed to some changes, it had also indicated that the other changes requested could not be met and others would be hard to implement. The CEDAL report also indicated that the question of whether the UCA should continue as a partner in PCD was under active discussion.

The Annual Report from CEDAL to the 12th Annual General Meeting of the Presbytery of Western Australia in May 2017 reported that implementing the National Standards under the current partnership with PCD would be difficult and that a different staffing structure was being implemented to meet the needs of the church.

The Presbytery Standing Committee report to the 12th Annual General Meeting of the Presbytery of Western Australia in May 2017 reported at length that implementation of the new National Standards had raised significant concerns about whether these Standards could be met within the PCD structure. As a result, Presbytery Standing Committee had decided not to fill the vacant Systematic Theology position at Murdoch and indicated that discussions with PCD about whether the National Standards could be implemented within the current structure were ongoing. They indicated that in the light of the strategic directions of the Presbytery, Presbytery Standing Committee, "had determined that a high priority needs to be given to the investment of its resources in education that aims at leadership development across the whole Church."

In June 2017, PCD wrote to Presbytery Standing Committee indicating that they felt the discussion about the UCA's relationship with PCD had gone on long enough and demanding that the Presbytery Standing Committee give a clear answer to the question of whether the UCA wished to continue in the partnership or not by 30 June 2017. On 30 June 2017, Presbytery Standing Committee gave notice to PCD of its intention to withdraw from the partnership from 30 June 2018.

What is the future of Perth Theological Hall?

PTH will continue, but in a new form. The top priority of PTH will be on lay education and continuing education for ordained ministers, and new staff will be recruited. In future, PTH will arrange for candidates to enrol in a UCA College for their academic studies. Some of their studies will be face-to-face, some online, and they will also participate in interstate intensives and staff from interstate colleges will visit WA to teach courses open to all. A learning community of staff and students will meet regularly in WA, to tutor, mentor and support candidates. It is hoped that the new approach will encourage more people, especially those who are younger, to offer as candidates for ordained ministries. More than ten people, the most in many years, are currently undertaking a Period of Discernment (POD) indicating that many are still hearing the call to ministry

An informed faith

As we move on, we are reminded that the Basis of Union commits the Uniting Church to be an educated church. It calls all its members and ministers to an 'informed faith' which is based on serious study of Scriptures and is guided by our theological heritage from the early church and the Reformation and Evangelical traditions. It acknowledges the importance of scholarly interpreters of Scripture and affirms insights from literary, historical and scientific enquiry and contemporary thought. It affirms that all members are gifted and called to ministry, that all ministries are part of the ministry of Christ and that all members need to be equipped for their ministries. These remain our firm commitments as we move into the future.

PRESBYTERY STANDING COMMITTEE

4 JULY 2017