

4 December 2015



Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of Western Australia

Members of Presbytery

This letter was originally sent to the General Council. It was distributed to all members of the Presbytery Standing Committee (PSC) earlier this year. It was considered by the PSC as it made its final decision about appointing a Lecturer in Systematic Theology and is distributed with the permission of Professor Loader.

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Dear Rosemary,

I am writing to the General Council in my capacity as Principal of the Perth Theological Hall and ask that you forward this letter to its members. I am very aware that our church is needing to make strategic decisions, especially given the issue of stewardship of resources and the realities of our budget prospects in coming years. I write this without knowing the full extent of those challenges and therefore acknowledging that the reflections below have to be put within that broader context.

General Council instituted a Strategic Planning Task Group to bring recommendations to its December meeting about options for how we can best provide theological education into the future. Because the Task Group did not include anyone from the Perth Theological Hall, the main provider, or with extensive experience in the provision of theological education, I offered my resources and was invited to have a meeting with the Task Group to discuss the issues. Given, however, the importance of the issue and the responsibility which the Hall has carried over the years for theological education, I have decided that it will best serve the task of the Council if I also write directly outlining the issues as I see them.

My primary recommendation is that as long as it proves sustainable, we continue to work with the current ecumenical arrangements which undergird the churches' theology program through Murdoch university. I make this recommendation on the following basis:

- The UCA is committed through its Basis of Union to the study of Theology, both for sustaining its identity and for meeting the challenges of the future as a pilgrim people. This will increasingly include lay theological leadership of dispersed congregations and faith communities, resourced by well educated ministers in regional resourcing roles. Retaining a centre for the study of Theology in WA in all its remoteness needs to remain a high priority.
- Face to face learning is still for most people the optimum learning context for theological education, lay and ordained, given its existential and formational nature, and in the light of extensive experience of the limitations of alternative modes.
- The reality is that the optimal learning context is not possible for some and a strength of the Murdoch arrangement is that the churches' theology program can offer all its units on line using the sophisticated structure that only a large organisation such as a university can afford.
- The churches' theology program at Murdoch is unique within Australia in offering students and staff the major advantage of studying ecumenically and on a modern secular university campus with values close to those for which the UCA stands. Ecumenical teaching elsewhere has collapsed back into separate denominational seminaries, losing the achievements of the ecumenical movement which gave us the UCA and remains central to its identity.



- Costing cuts might well mean that we can in future offer only 3 x 0.6 teaching staff for the program, but for that to gain a whole Theology program with 6 staff and the university funding 40% of staff costs is excellent economics.
- Beside this, Murdoch provides the following at no cost: staff offices, computers, academic secretarial staff, academic administrative management, teaching space, teaching equipment and infrastructure, library housing, staffing and a contribution towards purchases, office for the Hall, Internet, staff professional supervision, educational and research training.
- To forego so much would also entail major loss for the church (and churches) in WA, for which having a centre of theological teaching and research is a major resource and helps mentor and influence offerings in other institutions.
- The churches' theology program serves not only the academic formation of candidates, of whom there are few, but also lay theological education, one of the Synod's strategic priorities, at tertiary level, as well as continuing education of ministers and training of chaplains.
- The presence of the theology program on campus is a source of major outreach to students in other disciplines, who can take advantage of its presence to bring an informed approach on both theology and religion to their professional careers in the community, and many of them to their exercise of lay leadership in the church. At last count ca 90 people were connected with the theology program through its various units and courses.
- The churches' theology program at Murdoch has won national recognition for teaching excellence and this week the Australian Research Council ranked it at level 4 ("above world standard") for research excellence, ahead of Melbourne University of Divinity, Flinders and Charles Sturt, all of whom were ranked 3 ("world standard").
- It is incumbent on our Synod as part of this ecumenical partnership not to make any unilateral decisions, but to consult with partners should it find itself in a situation of no longer being able to sustain its level of contribution. A unilateral withdrawal would have the effect of collapsing the whole arrangement. We should cooperate together to try to sustain it as long as this proves to be possible and, when it ceases to be, should that happen, to plan together about the next steps.
- The immediate challenge to sustain the program is to appoint a systematic theologian to the position vacated by Dr Alex Jensen. This offers the church a unique opportunity to appoint someone with strengths both in academic teaching and research and in servicing with emerging needs of the wider church.

I submit these thoughts for Council's consideration, aware of the crucial role which the Perth Theological Hall has played in our church in the past over many decades and can play in the future.

Yours sincerely,



Revd Emeritus Professor Bill Loader, FAHA
Principal