

PROPOSAL 6

Endorsement of Presbytery Standing Committee decision regarding Perth College of Divinity.

That the Presbytery of Western Australia:
 endorse the decision to withdraw Perth Theological Hall from the Perth College
 of Divinity from 30 June 2018.

Rationale

The decision for the Uniting Church to give 12 months' notice of its intention to withdraw from the Perth College of Divinity (PCD) was made after long and careful consideration by the councils of the church over the last 2 years. It was a difficult decision, made with regret, as our partnership with PCD and Murdoch University has served us well in the past and there are undeniable benefits in this relationship. Those who made the decision were fully aware of all the benefits of the relationship and the impact a withdrawal would have on staff and our ecumenical relationships. Attempts were made to work out a way in which UCA could remain within the partnership but in the end, Presbytery Standing Committee felt there was no option but to withdraw.

The question of the relationship between the UCA and PCD has been a matter under consideration for some time. This matter was first raised by the 2013 Assembly Visitation of PTH which in its report recommended that the relationship between the Perth Theological Hall (PTH), Perth College of Divinity (PCD) and Murdoch University needed to be reviewed.

In response to this recommendation General Council and later Presbytery Standing Committee made several attempts over a two year period to engage in conversation with our Anglican partners within the PCD to clarify relationships and ensure that the UCA perspective was heard, understood and responded to.

Several challenges have emerged out of this process of review. The first challenge was the fact that there were no representatives appointed by CEDAL or General Council on the PCD Board. This meant that initial conversations had to happen outside of the PCD Board and were eventually disbanded as they had no decision-making power.

When PCD did eventually agree to General Council appointing UCA representatives to the PCD Board other challenges emerged. It was discovered that the PCD Board was operating outside of its Constitution and had been doing so for some time. The confusing and contradictory nature of any documentation about the role of the PCD and its relationship with Murdoch, and the way that matters in the original agreement seemed to have been changed over time (such as increasing the areas of study from 5 to 6) without consultation with the UCA, was also challenging.

In 2016 General Council presented to the PCD Board a document outlining 10 Expectations that the UCA wanted to see fulfilled within the PCD/Murdoch partnership. In its response, the PCD indicated that some of our expectations could not be met, and most other concerns were referred back to the UCA to deal with internally. In the end, only one of the 10 Expectations was acted on by the PCD Board. A request that the UCA expectations in relation to courses be raised directly with Murdoch was rejected. One frustration has been that all communication with the university must be via PCD, so the UCA has had no way of raising its concerns directly with Murdoch.

It has been very difficult for the UCA to get its voice heard on the PCD Board. At times decisions have been made without consultation with the UCA and at other times, the clearly stated position of the UCA has been ignored or over ruled.

All our staff at Murdoch are employed under joint contracts with the university and the UCA. As a result when there is a staff vacancy a joint UCA/Murdoch Selection Committee is appointed. When the Systematic Theology position became vacant, the UCA indicated that it was a requirement of the UCA that the appointee should be not only a Christian, but firmly grounded in UCA theology and ethos. However it was made clear to us that the university would not accept either faith or church affiliation as selection criteria as this would put the university in contravention of equal opportunity law. The UCA was caught between needing to adhere to the National Standards in relation to qualities expected of staff, and the demands of the university. As a result of this the Presbytery Standing Committee made the decision early in 2017 to not fill the Systematic Theology position under these conditions.

However in making this decision the Presbytery Standing Committee made it clear they were not wanting PTH to leave PCD and wanted the Murdoch Theology program to continue. What they wanted was for alternative means of funding the Systematic Theology position to be explored and conversations between UCA and Anglican representatives were set up to discuss options for filling this position by 1 January 2018. It was clear from these conversations that only one alternative was acceptable to PCD – that is, that the UCA reverse its decision and agree to fund a joint Systematic Theology position.

When the Presbytery Standing Committee refused to do this, the PCD wrote a letter to the UCA on 16 June this year demanding that the UCA either re-commit ourselves to the partnership, and agree to fill the ST position, or else give notice of our formal withdrawal from PCD by 9 am on 30 June 2017. It was in response to this ultimatum that the Presbytery Standing Committee gave 12 months' notice of our intention to withdraw.

At this point much still needs to be worked through. In the next 12 months we will need to negotiate with PCD and Murdoch about such issues as use of the Murdoch Library, use of the Worship Centre, future of the International Theologian Fund and other matters. The partnership with PCD and Murdoch University has served us well in the past. It is regrettable that the decision to withdraw was forced upon us. Having heard the reasons for this and the sequence of events, we ask the Presbytery to endorse this decision of the Presbytery Standing Committee.

MOVED: REV DR IAN TOZER

SECONDED: REV BEV FABB