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**CONFERENCE PAPER  
EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA  
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**Speakers:** Joy Williams, Early Childhood Consultant, Uniting Care Victoria and Tasmania and Barbara Fisher, Children and Family Services Consultant.

**Title of Paper: Planning for Cluster Management of Early Childhood Services – Project of Uniting Care Victoria and Tasmania.**

**Introduction to the Project:**

Joy Williams

**CONFERENCE PAPER**

This paper reflects the Cluster Management of UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania Early Childhood Services. While some of the issues and dilemmas are specific to the Church, the concept and operation can be delivered to the community.

The Uniting Church is one of the largest providers of community services in the children, youth and families in Australia. The Uniting Church has a long-standing commitment to early childhood services for children, and families, particularly those who are vulnerable due to factors such as low income and social isolation. The Church provides playgroups, kindergartens, child care and early childhood mobile services to children and families based on an ethos of honouring the dignity of all people, valuing the importance of children in society and advocating for families and children especially those most disadvantaged.

The Church has an enormous investment in the sixty plus registered early childhood programs that are part of the extensive network of UnitingCare services across the state.

In 2001 the Department of Human Services released the Kirby Review of Preschool Services. One of the key recommendations was the implementation of “Group Employer Models” that allowed the ‘clustering ‘ of early childhood services with a central administration comprising financial and human resource support.

In mid 2002, UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania held a strategic review of its early childhood services.

Three factors stimulated the review:

- A growing number of early childhood services facing uncertain futures due to insufficient income, dwindling numbers on management committees and difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified staff.
- Increasing recognition that the early years are important in a child’s well being and the integration of early childhood services.
- The Victorian Government proposal to introduce new models of management for preschool services.

In order to address the long term sustainability of UnitingCare early childhood services the Strategic Review strongly recommended the development of a UnitingCare Group Employer Model.

Following this recommendation UnitingCare V&T decided that the best way to initiate this model was to use our existing agencies where the infrastructure was already developed and operating.

There were several reasons why it would be useful to link early childhood services to an appropriate UnitingCare agency.

- a) Most Uniting Church early childhood services have been established by and continue to be sponsored by local Congregations. This arrangement still works for many Congregations and is important outreach ministry of the local church.
- b) However some services have experienced difficulties with the traditional Uniting Church model. E.g. a Congregation could no longer find sufficient members who were prepared or able to serve on their local Management Committee and another operating two services were running at a large deficit.
- c) Some struggle to attract parents onto Committees of Management especially to the Executive positions.

- d) The regulatory environment for early childhood services has become more complex over the past decade. This includes for example, the Regulations, Occupational Health and Safety and The Food Act and Industrial. Some members of Management Committees, while keen to support their local service, find the complex and technical knowledge of running a small business now required of a Committee member to be overwhelming.
- e) UCV&T was developing at this time a key focus on the Governance of services. There had been some recent examples of service failure, particularly in the Aged Care sector due to poor service quality and poor management and governance. This could impact on the good reputation of the Church and can result in expensive bailouts.

But there were some dilemmas for *UnitingCare* Early Childhood Services and reasons why they may have been reluctant to consider a Group Employment arrangement were as follows -

- a) Some services would not be familiar with the concept of Group Employer arrangements.
- b) Many had a long and proud history of serving their local community, its families and children. A major concern could be that they will lose their sense of local identity, history and connection to the local Congregation.
- c) Similarly, some would be concerned that the local community would lose control of the direction of the service and its ability to be responsive to the needs of the local community.
- d) It may be a fear that the local supporters would be displaced or discarded in the process.
- e) Others feared that the financial assets that had been built up over many years would be absorbed into the larger organization and may not be available for the future needs of the local early childhood service.
- f) The staff were concerned by the prospect of a change of employer. While they continue to work for the same legal entity, there was some fear that current conditions of employment would not be continued.

Group Employer models were set up in two of the agencies to commence and then gradually the services would be linked in to a total of six agencies. Each agency would have services from at least two Department of Human Services regions. This was a challenge in itself, as each region had its own idiosyncrasies. The government

at the time was providing an additional \$4000 per annum per location, for state funded kindergartens only when they come under a Group Employer.

In 2007 UnitingCare V&T decided to evaluate the Implementation of the Group Employer Model now known as the Cluster Management Model as the Agencies were experiencing critical issues in implementation.

A project brief was developed and was designed to evaluate the experience of UCV&T Cluster Management Agencies, Kindergartens, Child Care facilities and Congregations in the implementation of the Cluster Management Model. The evaluation was to identify what has worked well, the pressure points and improvements which would better support the implementation of this model. A Steering Committee was appointed to manage the project. The Steering Committee was made up of staff of the UCV&T Unit and UCV&T Cluster Management Agency representatives. There were a total of 6 people.

### **Speaker Barbara Fisher, Children and Family Consultant**

#### **AIM OF THE PROJECT**

To evaluate the experience of the six UCV & T Cluster Management Agencies and the Kindergartens, Childcare facilities and Congregations in the implementation of the Cluster Management Model.

To identify what has worked well, the pressure points, the improvements and model which would better support the implementation of this initiative.

The project is to particularly focus on the internal Uniting Church experience and challenges in the implementation of this model.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

During 2006-07 UnitingCare completed an exploratory study in preparation for this larger study which confirmed the identification of the key issues, useful methodological approaches and use of semi structured questionnaires as a workable approach to a further study. This study also identified the key questions to be addressed in the evaluation study.

Given the project resources, consideration of what would work best and the project timeframe, the Steering Group agreed to the following methodology based on an action research approach.

- Interviews with the Director, Assistant Director and Early Childhood Consultant from UVC&T.
- Interviews face to face with agency heads and managers.
- Observations of a UnitingCare Cluster Manager's Meeting
- Questionnaires sent out to all teachers and coordinators.
- Case study approach to congregations – five in all. This consisted of interviews with key persons at each of the congregations including the Minister, and also use of any other data that was available that related to the history and development of the service in that particular parish.

Semi structured interview schedules were developed for use in the collection of data for the project, these were discussed with the Steering Group, modified and then used as a basis for the interviews and discussions.

The exploratory study conducted in 2006-07 confirmed that the key broad areas for exploration with services in a larger study were:

- The impact of centre history, culture and local community
- Effective initial engagement
- Effective transition
- Balancing efficiency and flexibility
- Impacts on the Cluster Management Agency – resources, workloads, identity and reputation.
- Impacts on the Centre
- Role clarification for staff and Committees
- Future planning processes
- Sharing resources, learning and support
- Early Childhood Services as a mission of the church
- Requirements of the services.

Other issues more pertinent to the Agencies and UnitingCare were identified by the consultant and the UnitingCare in their August 2007 draft report. These issues were:

- Property
- Working with kindergarten committees and church councils
- Understanding and recognising the role of the Cluster Management Agency
- Managing conflict within a church structure
- Decision making and strategic planning
- Assets transfer
- Impact of the Synod Decision
- Impact on Agency Reputation
- Impact on Agency budgets
- Resources
- Positive opportunities.

### **Important points raised at the first Steering Group Meeting**

- Keeping kindergartens as part of the community
- UCV&T model and legal implications
- Property issues to be explored and options developed
- Costs of CM
- Role of the church now and in the future
- Charitable status – impact of fee income
- The reasons for the differences in the model across the six UnitingCare agencies.
- The need to be set within the framework of early childhood policy as we understand it and its directions.
- Ensure that the project covers the range of early childhood services, not just kindergartens.

### **THE EVALUATION PROJECT**

#### **The outcomes required of this project were:**

- Development of UCV&T and Synod plans, policies and guidelines to support UCV&T Cluster Management Agencies,
- Facilitate consistency across the network and to enable greater confidence and
- To clarify for UCV&T Cluster Management Agencies their role with early childhood services.

- A consistent and positive experience for early childhood services moving under the Cluster Management Model.

The project was to be completed within a three month period commencing in January 2008, this timeframe impacted on some aspects of the methodology. It was initially planned to conduct group interviews of early childhood staff at their meetings, however this was not possible due to their workloads and the timing of the project, and so individual questionnaires were used instead. The response rate was mixed across the agencies.

The basic questions addressed in this evaluation were as follows:

*What was the background to your move to become a Cluster manager? (This question was put to case study congregation representatives and agency management interviews)*

*What is the current capacity of the UnitingCare Cluster Management Agencies to undertake this role? (This question was included in Interviews with the head office of Uniting Care, agency heads & managers, plus information gained from staff questionnaires)*

*What are the current pressure points? (This question was put to all participants including case studies, interviews and staff questionnaires)*

*What skills, resources, structures and processes are required to implement this model successfully? (This question was put to all participants including case studies, interviews and staff questionnaires)*

*What are the best ways for the UnitingCare Early Childhood Unit to support the Cluster Management Agencies to implement this model? (Interviews with UCV&T Head Office and agency heads, CM meetings, staff questionnaires and case studies)*

*How do the UnitingCare Agencies undertaking this role add value to the delivery of kindergarten and related early childhood services? (Interviews with agency heads & management, staff questionnaires, Case studies)*

*How can this model contribute to the development of new services in communities where demand is growing? (Discussions with UCV&T head office, agency heads, and Steering group)*

*If you were designing and implementing a cluster management model from scratch what do you think would be needed? (All parties)*

## **FINDINGS**

The decision by the Synod IN 2004 to move all Uniting Church early childhood services to cluster management was consistent with the direction of state government policy. The UnitingCare agencies that became cluster managers faced a huge challenge. These were all large agencies that delivered a wide range of family support, aged care and welfare services; - early childhood services formed a very small segment of their total service delivery.

This review demonstrated that the impact of the implementation of the UCV&T cluster management model on agencies, early childhood staff and associated congregations was far reaching and it highlighted the need for a clear and well documented model for cluster management that would help to overcome many of the deficiencies that existed in the system.

The major area of concern by respondents was that of Church property and its management including maintenance. There were underlying occupational health and safety risks and potential costs of major maintenance and refurbishment of old buildings. By contrast modern early childhood services require buildings that are planned for delivering flexible programs and that are of attractive appearance in order to compete for enrolments.

All parties were unprepared for the complexity of the task of cluster management and the need for excellent administration, finance, customer service and human resources staff who have familiarity with the relevant awards and employment arrangements pertinent to the early childhood sector. An enormous amount of good will was lost in the initial stages of the implementation due to lack of resources and knowledge in these areas.

The cluster management model is seriously under-funded and all agencies subsidised the cost of the model – some estimated an additional cost of \$15,000 on top of the funding that was provided by the state government per cluster site. Costs were high especially in the establishment and transition phases. This impacted on coordination and management staff who worked many hours of unpaid overtime in order to establish and maintain services within each agency system. It also impacted on the ability of some agencies to develop much needed IT, administration and support systems.

There was a range of responses from committees. Some were very pleased to hand over the responsibility of management to cluster agencies, while others were confused about their future role and were wary of the outcomes for their centres.

All staff, whether working face to face with children or in management, were challenged by this change. The introduction of early childhood staff, and especially the kindergarten culture, to agencies that have been largely delivering welfare and family support services caused a sharp learning curve for all parties. Associated with this was the introduction of universal services to agencies offering a wide range of secondary and tertiary services to their respective communities. In many instances coordination and management staff had to “make it up as they went along” because guidelines were very unclear or had not been anticipated.

Staff working in the early childhood centres under cluster management experienced loss of the immediacy of committee members being on hand to deal with issues, and had to adjust to dealing with a management which was at a distance from their centre. Often expectations had not been clearly stated and this caused much resentment.

The project revealed a need for training at a number of levels:

- To ensure that all staff understood the cluster management model and the respective roles and responsibilities of all parties
- To assist early childhood service staff to understand protocols for communication with administration as well as their management
- To develop the confidence, skills and focus required of middle management
- To provide flexible in-service and training for early childhood staff working in the centres meeting the needs of both kindergarten and child care staff.

The implementation of early childhood cluster management required an enormous amount of time and energy. In some agencies there was a diversion of time and resources from other programs that the agencies delivered. Some agencies had more congregations and Church property to deal with which added to the range of issues that emerged. It is clear that there was little time initially put into developing agency/congregation relationships where there was an early childhood service located in a parish. There are many underlying issues identified and too little time and expertise to deal with this sensitive area. The creation of a project worker position to work in this area was much needed.

Those congregation representatives, Ministers and others associated with the early childhood service at the parish level who were interviewed, although wary of the changes and fearful of the outcome, on the whole regrettably took up the challenge of change assuming that they did not have any choice. From their perspective relationships with the cluster agencies are very much in the early stages of formation. There remained many issues to be explored and resolved.

The impact of cluster management on the role of the UnitingCare Early Childhood Consultant has caused a shift of relationships from dealing directly with services to dealing with agencies with the exception of Ballarat UnitingCare where the consultant had a dual role of providing the early childhood coordination as well as dealing with the agency from the perspective of the Head Office. There remained a service development role in new areas; however there is confusion in how that position should serve the agencies and how strategic it should become.

It is also apparent in the process of this evaluation that it would be timely to build on the experience of recent years to develop a clearer direction for UCV&T early childhood services. This could be done through a collaborative process of developing a state-wide plan for these services. This is particularly appropriate given the emerging reforms being pursued by the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments.

This project also identified many positive features of the UCV&T early childhood cluster management model.

- Early childhood staff working in cluster services demonstrated an appreciation of the program advice, support and understanding given by agency coordinators and managers.

- Those services located in rural and remote locations appreciated the sense of belonging and networking opportunities provided by their clusters.
- The fact that agencies collect the fees directly was also much appreciated. Some have benefited from the wider range of services that are provided by the cluster management agencies.
- The cluster management agencies have gained a higher profile in the community through their service to the early childhood sector.
- Staff appreciated the security of their employment.
- Gradually documentation such as policies and staff and parent handbooks and resources are being built up at the agency level to support each cluster and to ensure consistency.
- There is great scope for sharing of these resources across the agencies.
- In addition the *UnitingCare* cluster management agencies were receiving enquiries from other community based early childhood services and were growing as some of these services joined their clusters.

Early childhood services operate in a competitive environment and there are many choices for parents to consider when seeking a service for their young children. It is important for the development and growth of the agency clusters that a marketing plan be considered. The overall framework of this plan could be developed at the UCV&T level working in conjunction with the cluster management agencies.

The report contained recommendations under the following headings:

- *UnitingCare* early childhood services strategic directions and model
- Property Issues
- Cost of establishing and maintaining management infrastructure
- Funding the model
- Expertise in early childhood services
- Developing documentation and policies
- Management Training
- Relationships between cluster management agencies and congregations
- Opportunities for community development
- Planning and marketing
- Perceptions of staff
- *UnitingCare* Early Childhood Consultant Role
- Equity

- Early Childhood Policy Developments

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper demonstrates the issues surrounding the implementation of the cluster management model for Victorian kindergarten programs. The *UnitingCare* model differs from most of the other models in Victoria due to:

- the additional layers of management within existing agencies that had a wider purpose;
- the management structure of the Synod
- the co-existence of some of the services within parishes
- the property issues.

There are many issues in common with other models of cluster management in Victoria such as:

- the underfunding of the model
- the lack of preparedness for the time and resources needed to establish such a model
- the range of issues to be worked through in implementing such a major change in management including the human factors.
- Increasing recognition that committees are actually dealing with a small business and that greater continuity of management and technical skills are required to be successful.

Has it been worthwhile and what has happened since the completion of the evaluation?

What have been the lessons learned?

I will pass the lead back to Joy Williams for comment.

## **WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE THE EVALUATION?**

It is strongly acknowledged that managing an Early Childhood Cluster is a very complex process. Agencies vary on their resources and their ability to put in extra to subsidize the Cluster.

Alongside this the relationship with the local congregation adds an extra, often complex layer.

Also bringing in Community Incorporated services adds yet another layer. UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania has commenced an Action Plan to work with the agencies to act on the recommendations.

UnitingCare V&T is now working on who is best placed to take up the recommendations. Some will be the responsibility of the agencies - particularly those relating to the direct operation of the Cluster and services. Others, such as developing a Strategic Statewide Early Childhood Plan will be the responsibility of UCV&T. Also, it is acknowledged that a communication strategy between UCV&T and the services needs to be developed and the Communications area is reviewing existing communications to commence this. A marketing plan for the early childhood services and to market UCV&T as an attractive employer in early childhood is also a role for our Communications Unit.

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania believe the time is right to develop career paths within our network and including life-long learning opportunities and include these within an Enterprise Agreement specifically for UCV&T Early Childhood staff.

The Evaluation has given UCV&T the opportunity to now support the agencies in their policy and process development. Also to be clear by developing Strategic Plans on the ongoing commitment and support for communities and agencies in the establishment of new Early Childhood Services.