

Act2: In Response to God's Call

June 2023



ACT2

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A note about the title of this report

The title of this report is drawn from the final sentence of Paragraph 13 of the Basis of Union,
“The Uniting Church will thereafter provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God’s call to enter more fully into mission.”

It is a reminder that the ordering of our life is in response to God’s call. This report seeks to both reflect and respond to what we have heard as God’s call on our life through our engagement with the Church, our history, our context and the experiences of so many people shared with us across the length and breadth of the country.

A note about terminology

Throughout the document we have sought to use broad language and limit our use of language which carries contextual or historical baggage.

We have used the convention of ‘Church’ when we are referring to the Uniting Church in Australia and ‘church’ when referring to the universal church.

We have used ‘Congress’ when referring to the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.

We have used the language of ‘local communities of faith’ to describe the diversity of communities that gather for worship, witness, service and the making and growing of disciples. These may be variously Congregations, Faith Communities and other groups of disciples. We have used ‘Congregation’ when it is referring directly to Congregations as described in the Basis of Union, Constitution or Regulations.

When describing the current state of our Church, particularly in Section 1 and Section 2, we have tended to use the current names of the councils of the Church: Congregation¹, Church Council, Presbytery, Synod and Assembly.

When describing the potential directions and options, particularly in Section 6, we have tended to use language other than the current names of the councils of the Church. The names proposed seek to reflect the type of council we are describing while inviting people to be free of pre-existing assumptions about particular councils.

Executive Summary

This report is the third report of the Act2 Project, following on from [Considering Afresh Our Life Together](#) (October 2021) and [Act2: On The Way](#) (May 2022). It is the first report since the decisions of the [16th Assembly](#) and the creation of the Act2 Project Unit and Steering Committee.

This report includes:

- A summary of the activities and findings of the Exploration Phase (November 2022 to May 2023).
- A theological reflection on Exploration Phase.
- An introduction to Collection Discernment Phase (June 2023 to November 2023).
- A set of directions for Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship.
- A set of four different options for Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing.

Work continues on all four workstreams. Further opportunities to engage in *Workstream 2: National Identity* and *Workstream 4: Theological Culture and Education* will be forthcoming throughout 2023.

Summary of Activities

Our engagement across the Church has included:

- Direct communication with 1,672 local communities of faith, 187 Church Council Conversation responses received and 10 focus groups held.
- Direct engagement with all 33 Presbyteries including online meetings or face-to-face visits with 22 Presbyteries.
- Engagement with Synods, agencies and theological college leaders through visits to every Synod including over 45 meetings with over 100 people.
- Observing and sharing with the National Conference of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (Congress).
- 46 written submissions from individuals, agencies and councils.
- Data consolidated from across the Uniting Church, other churches and the wider society.

Altogether we have directly engaged over 400 people in conversations about Act2 and received feedback from an estimated 1,500 people across the Church.

Summary of Findings

Find more detail in [Section 2](#) of the Report.

Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith

- We have approximately 1,672 local communities with a typical weekly attendance of 28 people and an average age of 68.
- Worship and pastoral care remain at the heart of local communities of faith. People believe their communities provide a strong sense of belonging and are inclusive.
- Communities of faith are also committed to connecting with their local community.
- Discipleship is both a source of life and a place for further work. There is a deep heart to be a Church that is more able to invite people into life-giving communities of faith and grow them in the way of Jesus.

- Capacity and capability have declined while ethical, legal and social obligations have increased.
- The wider Church is generally seen as a source of support; Presbyteries in the context of general pastoral support particularly in times of transition and Synods in the area of administration.
- Local communities of faith express frustration and confusion at times about the support they receive from the wider Church.
- Local communities see that their primary contributions to the wider Church are financial giving and appointing people to councils and committees.
- Property is now both a significant source of revenue and a burden to maintain for many communities.
- There is an appetite for church planting, fresh expressions and experimentation. Beyond some notable exceptions, this has tended to be relatively small communities. They are neither seeking nor should be expected to replace existing communities.
- Clustering of communities for shared ministry is widespread.
- Closure or amalgamation of communities of faith and property sale has and will continue to be a core part of the work of most presbyteries and synods.

Workstream 2: National Identity

Note that the insights on the role of the National Council have fed into the options in Workstream 3.

- There is deep love for the Uniting Church and what it represents.
- The Basis of Union continues to have value as a foundational document for our life.
- Our commitments to the Covenant, being a multicultural church and seeking justice are also foundational.
- However, in general there is a disjointed view of the public face of the Uniting Church through our physical and digital presence.
- People also appreciate that the Uniting Church is an inclusive church, that despite its difference does seek to hold together a very broad range of beliefs and practices.
- People appreciate the principles that shape how we make decisions - in community with all people, lay and ordained, regardless of gender, gathering to seek consensus.
- There is also an instinctive commitment to the wider community. This is reflected in an ongoing pride in the Uniting Church's extensive network of community services.
- Some lament the decisions of the National Assembly meetings and the impact that has had on local communities of faith.
- Some lament the decline in the capacity of the National Assembly as an institution to undertake activities such as advocacy and international partnerships.

Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing

- People generally consider the underlying principles which shape our governance are sound.
- There is a widespread view that the system is no longer working as designed.
- The reliance on a high number of participants in unpaid roles (office bearers, council members, board members, committee members) is no longer viable.
- The assumption of a high level of collaboration between councils is leading to confusion of responsibilities, inefficiency and slow decision making.
- The intersection of concepts such as oversight, corporate governance, conciliar decision making and individual decision making are causing widespread frustration.
- There is a mismatch between the scope of council responsibilities and the resourcing available.
- Property is a critical issue as an asset rich, cash poor Church where there is significant contest within the Church about the merits of property sales and the distribution of sales proceeds.
- There are significant pastoral, theological and ethical issues at stake in our use of our property resources.

Workstream 4: Theological Culture and Education

Note this workstream is proceeding at a different pace to the other workstreams.

- There is broad agreement about the need to focus on our theological culture.
- The diversity of theological perspectives needs to shape our discussions of theological culture and theological education.
- Theological education shapes our theological culture and needs to support the diverse ministry, mission and discipleship contexts of our life.

Core Commitments

The Church has affirmed that the three core commitments – our Covenant with Congress, being a multicultural Church and fulfilling our legal, ethical and social obligations – are essential and need to be attended to in all of the workstreams.

Next steps

We have now entered Phase 2: Collective Discernment. Between June and November 2023 we are inviting the Church into an intentional period of discernment. To begin this time the whole Church has been invited into a time of intentional prayer – [Uniting in Prayer](#). In this phase we are looking intentionally at specific ideas to address our challenges and take up opportunities.

In particular, we are inviting the councils of the Church to participate in intentional discernment about the directions and options, including by setting aside time within their meetings for this discernment.

Outlined in [Section 5](#) as part of *Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship* is an integrated set of directions designed create a more flexible toolkit to support the effective governance and oversight of local communities of faith to enable them to better fulfill their calling to discipleship and mission.

Outlined in [Section 6](#) as part of *Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing* are four different options for discernment about the best way forward in governance and resourcing to support healthy, sustainable and effective councils of the Church.

Opportunity to share discernment and feedback about the directions will be available from the conclusion of Uniting in Prayer on 22 June 2023. Please provide your submissions and feedback to the Act2 Project as soon as you can and no later than 30 November 2023.

This next phase is an opportunity to invite everyone who calls the Uniting Church home into an intentional period of prayer and deliberation to consider afresh the ordering of our life so we can live out the vision to which God is call us.

In Phase 3: Recommendations for Action we will be looking to develop an integrated set of recommendations across all workstreams for the 17th Assembly in July 2024.

Not everything in this report is easy reading. It is offered in a spirit of deep love for our Church, hope for our future and faith that in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews his Church.

Section 1: Exploration Phase: What have we done?

Throughout the Exploration Phase the Act2 Project has sought to build on the previous work of the Project² by broadening and deepening our engagement across the life of the Church. This has involved an intensive period of engagement throughout the first half of 2023, including:

Direct communication with 2,113 local contacts across 1,672 local communities of faith.

- Online Focus groups with 10 groups of leaders in our diverse communities of faith.
- Direct engagement with all 33 Presbyteries including online meetings or face-to-face visits with 22 Presbyteries.
- Engagement with Synods, agencies and theological college leaders through visits to every Synod including over 45 meetings with over 100 people.
- Observing and sharing with the National Conference of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (Congress).
- Regular fortnightly drop-ins since last November.

We have received the following written contributions:

- 187 Church Council Conversations representing over 254 communities of faith.
- 46 written submissions from individuals, councils and agencies.

We have also worked to consolidate data from across the Church including:

- National Church Life Survey from 2021 (representing 15,606 attenders, 684 churches).
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data from 1976 to 2021.
- Data from the Australian Charities and Not for Profits Commission (ACNC).
- Previous papers, research and papers available from the Assembly archives.
- Strategic planning and change projects from across the Synods.
- Academic research on the theology, identity, ordering and history of the Church.
- Engagement with leaders and material from other Christian traditions including the United Church of Canada, Equmeniakyrkan (Uniting Church in Sweden), Methodist Church in Great Britain, Church of England, Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma and The Salvation Army Australia.

Consistent with the findings prior to the 16th Assembly, this Exploration Phase has deepened our understanding of the shape of our Church, the challenges we are facing, the things that matter to people across the Church and the imperative for change. Below is a detailed synthesis of the findings of the Exploration Phase organised by the four Workstreams and the Core Commitments³.

Section 2: Exploration Phase: What have we heard?

“...meetings that encourage community, and listening to one another in a spirit of openness and humility, are more likely to discern the will of God.”

Introduction, Manual for Meetings

Workstream 1: Local communities of faith and discipleship

Local communities of faith are the beating heart of the Uniting Church, “the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshiping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ” (Basis of Union paragraph 15). In these places of belonging the Word is preached, the bread of life broken and shared, disciples made and true community formed in love and care. They are a visible presence of the church in the local community. We recognise that flourishing local communities of faith is essential for our future. While affirming their significant role in the life of our Church, we seek to reflect the current state, life and significant challenges of our local communities.

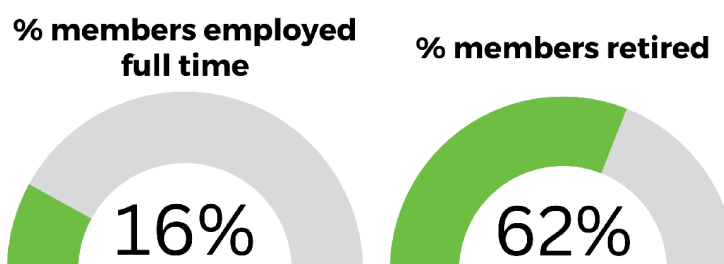
At the time of the 2013 NCLS census of the Uniting Church there were 2,078 Congregations. As part of the Act2 Project, we have contacted every Presbytery and attempted to contact every Congregation. Currently our records indicate approximately 1,672 communities of faith (Congregations, faith communities, communities within clusters). We estimate approximately 380 of these communities belong to clusters.

The commitment of our members to Christ and to one another, many of us living out a life-long commitment.

- Church Council Conversations

In the responses from local communities of faith, most reported an ageing membership and shrinking numbers.

The NCLS bears this out, indicating the average age of Uniting Church attenders is 68 years and 57% of attenders are over the age of 70. A decade ago the typical median weekly attendance of a Uniting Church was 35 people. Today the median is 28.

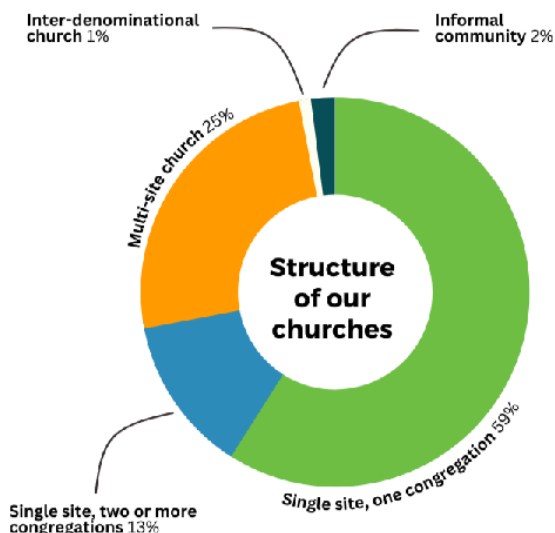


Alongside our worshipping communities is our vast network of community services that are serving local communities. Our services agencies are one of the largest networks of services in the country comprising over 50,000 staff, 1,700 volunteers and 1,634 service locations around the country with government funding the largest source of revenue.

Responses indicate we have few Congregations left which fit into the simple formula of: one Congregation, one minister, one Church Council, funded by the giving of members.

Property income is now a significant source of revenue for local Congregations. While this has relieved some pressures it has created others.

The ability of Congregations to meet the local costs of their life - ministry, administration, insurance, property maintenance - limit their ability to contribute to the wider ministry, mission or administration of the Church.



Life-giving local communities of faith

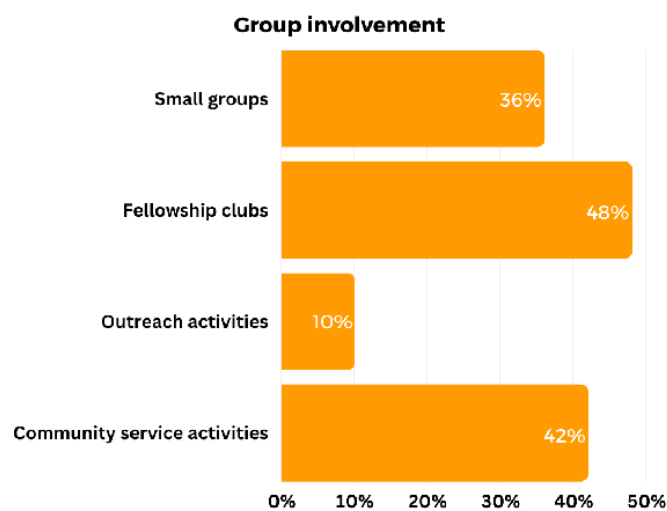
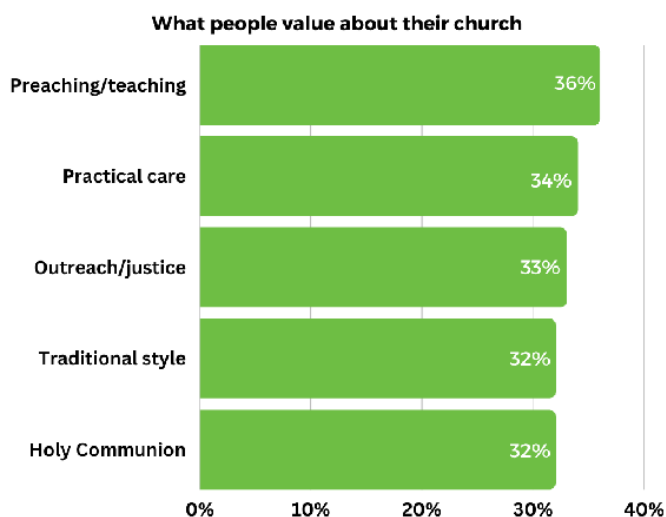
Worship and pastoral care remain at the heart of our local communities of faith. This is reflected in both the Church Council conversations and the NCLS results with preaching and teaching (36%) and practical care in times of need (34%) as the highest responses in what people value about their church.

People also highlight engagement with the wider community as a high priority both in Church Council conversations and in the NCLS results (33%). However, there is also a sense that people are struggling with how to engage with their wider community due to decline in capacity. There is a mismatch between the demographics of many of our communities of faith and the demographics of the wider community.

Discipleship is also both a source of life for our communities and a place for further work. Many identified faith practices such as personal prayer and devotion as a way they express their discipleship along with communal activities such as prayer or bible study groups.

NCLS reports 36% of people are involved in a prayer, discussion or bible study group. This is lower than fellowship groups (48%) or community service activities (42%).

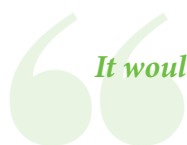
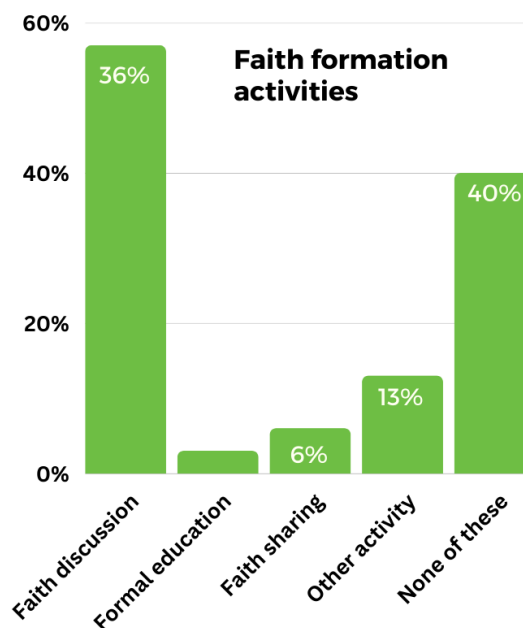
Unfortunately the responses indicate that many local communities of faith see new attenders as potential sources of volunteers to relieve faithful but tired existing volunteers rather than disciples in search of a life-giving community.



Others we have engaged express some concern about the discipleship formation practice within the Church.

Some express concern about what they perceive as a lack of structured and consistent discipleship formation, and some express concern about the nature of the Christian faith we are cultivating. People lament the decline of distinctively Uniting Church discipleship and formation materials that are consistent with our theological culture.

There is an appetite for more work on the issues of discipleship, evangelism and mission however there is a diverse range of perspectives on the relationship between these different concepts.



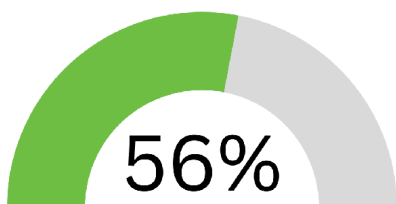
It would help us to have more resources for discipleship development.

- Church Council Conversations

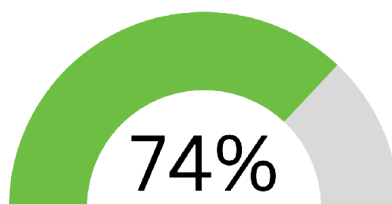
People also put a high value on being a community of faith that is open to diversity and being inclusive. Some point to specific groups they are open to welcoming while others express it as general value of inclusion. This aligns with the NCLS results which put a strong sense of belonging at 93% and an inclusive church at 90%.

Many also identified their Church as welcoming. While NCLS reports that 88% say their church is friendly, only 58% said they would welcome new arrivals and even less were likely to follow up someone drifting away from church (52%).

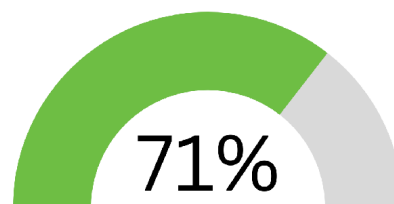
% have run an event to intentionally engage the community in the last 12 months



% provided or run social services or social action activities in the last 12 months



% Agree that their local church is always ready to try something new



Being part of a church family, being supported with love and prayer.

- Church Council Conversations

Church planting, fresh expressions and experimentation has also become more widespread. These have tended to remain relatively small but carry signs of life and hope for the communities which support them, many of which named them as life-giving. As we talked to Presbyteries we found they were eager to support new ministry initiatives however there continue to be challenges in how these communities fit within the existing order of our life.

Communities of faith and the wider Church

Most local communities of faith recognised there is support from the wider Church which does enable them to be life-giving communities of faith.

They describe the Presbyteries as a source of support and encouragement - there in times of crisis, conflict or transition. Some point to the support their minister receives from the Presbytery and the role of the Presbytery in the absence of paid ministry leadership.

They also see the Presbytery as playing a role as an intermediary in areas of administration and compliance and acting as a buffer, bridge or translator for compliance requirements. However, the experience of the value of the Presbytery is very mixed. This may in part be due to how the capacity and resourcing of different Presbyteries across the country varies so significantly.

There needs to be more strategy development between congregations in close proximity, facilitated and encouraged by Presbyteries.

- Church Council Conversations

The Presbytery does appear to be the council where there is the greatest gap between the significant responsibilities they have and the resourcing they have available to fulfill those responsibilities. We heard from some Presbytery leaders challenges in balancing the priority of supporting growing communities, such as our culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, with the reality of the time investment to deal pastorally with communities coming towards the end of their shared life.

Most communities of faith see the Synod as an administrative hub for the Church in areas of property, finance, legal, insurance, regulation, compliance, and communication. While the expertise of the Synod is appreciated by many, people find engaging with Synod processes opaque, cumbersome and convoluted. There is some acknowledgement of personnel and other mission and ministry resources, however this is perceived as secondary to its administration and compliance role.

Agencies and schools registered little mention in the responses other than appreciation for the work they do and a desire that this be better known in the wider community. Some expressed anxiety about their relationship to the Congregations and councils of the Church and the visible connection of agency brands to the Church.

It often feels like the wider church considers local congregations to be of little worth.

- Church Council Conversations

For more details on what local communities of faith value about the Assembly see *Workstream 2: National Identity*.

Local communities of faith identify two main ways they contribute to the wider life of the Church. The first is through their contributions to what most Synods call the “Mission and Service Fund”, the contribution Congregational budgets make to the wider administration, mission and ministry of the Church. The second is through the participation of volunteers in the wider councils and committees of the Church. Some also identify the way they fundraise for agencies of the Church, mainly through inviting members to make direct contributions rather than out of Congregational budgets.

We're challenged by diminishing resources: decline in numbers, participation and finances. Key lay people are aging and are tired. Many have been doing roles for decades, but there is a limited pool of people to draw on to raise up new leaders.

- Church Council Conversations

Challenges for local communities of faith

Communities of faith identified seven key areas that were hard, frustrating or hindering ministry and mission:

- Ageing and declining community of faith.
- Administration and compliance work.
- Decline in volunteer capacity and skills.
- Convoluted, time consuming wider church processes.
- Tired and burnt out leaders and volunteers.
- Effort and cost in maintaining buildings.
- Decline in finances.

Responses from local communities expressed many general concerns about the 'regulations' of the Church. Two specific areas emerged for most criticism: the placements process and property processes. Both were seen as complex, time-consuming, opaque and confusing. Both deserve thorough review and change.

However, they are also symptoms of deeper problems about the patterns of ministry, the reliance on property income, contests over the proceeds of sales and broader issues of limitations on capacity and disconnection.

A current frustration for the Church Council is the lack of progress in calling a new minister resulting in a sense of not knowing where we are heading.

- Church Council Conversations

For example, the challenges in the placement process are symptoms of underlying issues including limited availability of ministers, limitations in ministers' movement to different places, anxiety about the ability to afford paid ministry or the difficulty in negotiating the implications of part-time placements.

Property is often a proxy for missional choices. How a community of faith uses its property says a lot about their missional priorities. It also highlights the different sets of assumptions about the legal arrangements of the Church. The sale of property also leads to contested space around the use of proceeds of sale. This issue is addressed in more detail in Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing.

These issues also speak to more ingrained systemic and cultural norms across the Church. Some of these are not directly due to 'the regulations' but are about how they are implemented by councils of the Church. Some norms, customs and practices have become equivalent to formal regulations. Many made sense in the context they were created, but now simply seem bizarre or unworkable in a different time and place.

When systems are working effectively the detailed mechanics are less important, however when things are not working well everyone is looking under the hood at how the engine works.

There is a further broader point about Uniting Church processes. Most processes assume a high level of collaboration between the councils of the Church. This assumes each council has the capacity, capability and expertise to fulfill those responsibilities and there are effective working relationships across the councils. Our conversations indicate that we can no longer safely make these assumptions.

Problems navigating a very complicated church administrative structure involving the congregation, Presbytery and Synod resulting sometimes in less than satisfactory outcomes. This can have a very negative impact on morale and hope.

- Church Council Conversations

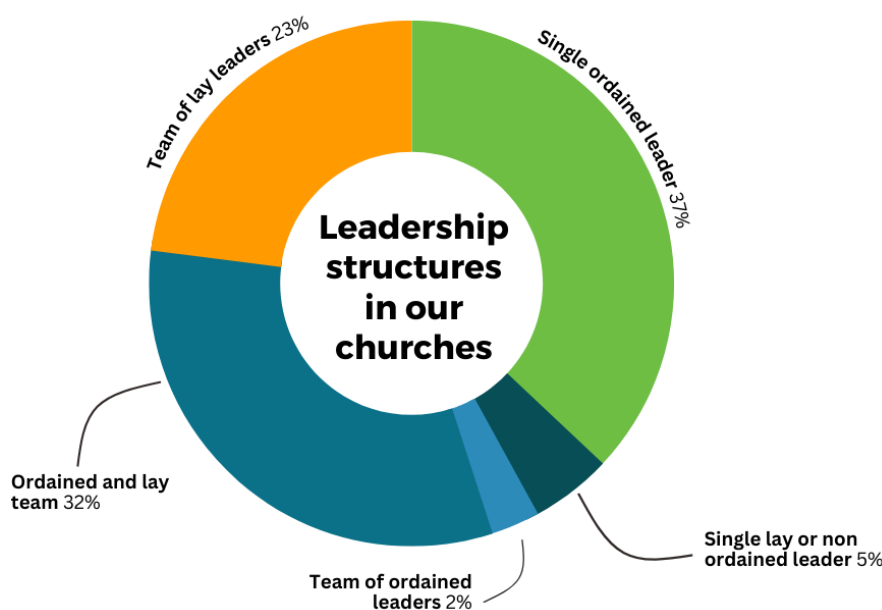
As we have explored what the wider Church can do about the challenges faced by local communities of faith, we are struck by the difficulty many face in imagining what could be different. Clear practical asks include:

- Simplification, streamlining and flexibility in processes and compliance requirements.
- Greater access to information - people, processes and forms.
- Leadership, support and encouragement.
- A greater focus on ministry and mission.
- Contribution of financial support from the wider Church.

These practical suggestions sit alongside a general acceptance that the system as currently designed is not working. Some see places for efficiency in the consolidation of administration. Some are simply looking for the expectations of the wider Church to reduce, however most acknowledge this is often a function of expectations of external legal, regulatory or compliance obligations.

So many smaller congregations like ours are without ministers and that puts too much pressure on lay leaders (who try and do things as if there was a minister) and they burn out.

- Church Council Conversations



A significant number of our communities of faith are shrinking, aging and tired. Property is now a significant source of revenue so despite the burden it presents it is also an economic lifeline. This impacts on the ability of local communities of faith to fulfill the significant responsibilities of being communities of faith.

Capacity and capability has declined at the same time ethical, legal and social obligations have increased. The wider church works to scaffold and manage the risk of this mismatch.

The ability of Congregations to meet the local costs of their life - ministry, administration, insurance, property maintenance - limit the ability to contribute to the wider ministry, mission or administration of the Church. It is both a pastoral imperative and a matter of good stewardship that we address this range of challenges.



We need help with how to handle the grief of what we have lost.

- Church Council Conversations

As the beating heart of our Church, life-giving communities of faith are at the heart of the Act2 Project. However, the way we conceive of, govern and resource them is changing and will need to continue to change.

There will be significantly fewer local communities of faith in our Church in the next five to ten years. How we pastorally and effectively manage that transition along with how we support and encourage those communities of faith that remain will have a significant impact on our collective health as a Church.



*We believe the congregation is fundamental to the success of the Uniting Church.
This is strongly supported in the Basis of Union.*

- Church Council Conversations



Workstream 2: National Identity

The Basis of Union continues to guide our life and is a document which inspires so many in our Church⁴. Many lament the lack of familiarity that people in the Uniting Church have of the Basis, however our experience is that it remains a source of inspiration to so many of our leaders and members. Even those unfamiliar with the document and its contents nevertheless live in a Basis-shaped Church. The images of the Church and words about the Church expressed in the Basis continue to ring down through the ages.

The Basis of Union remains our precious document.

- Church Council Conversations

There are documents to which people have constantly referred throughout our exploration. It is clear these have taken on a significant status in our life which continue to shape our life and our reading of the Basis. They include the [Statement to the Nation](#) 1977; [The Uniting Church Is a Multicultural Church](#) (1985); the [Covenanting Statement](#) (1994); [Revised Preamble to the Constitution](#) (2009).

Throughout our engagement we have heard again and again the same core themes about what people appreciate about the Uniting Church. These are the ones we have heard through the Exploration phase⁵:

- We are in a Covenant relationship with the Congress.
- We are a multicultural Church and seek to be an intercultural Church.
- We are committed to gender equality in leadership.
- We affirm the ministry of every member of the Church, both lay and ordained.
- We are deeply committed to the promotion of justice.
- We value scholarly enquiry and an informed faith, learning from a breadth of theological perspectives and contemporary thought.
- We are called to be a safe Church, providing safe environments for all people including children and young people, so that they may live life in all its fullness.
- We are called to make and grow disciples in local communities of faith and discipleship.
- We are called to serve the world through practical expressions of God's love.
- We engage with our ecumenical partners in seeking unity with other Churches.
- We seek friendship and understanding with people of other faiths.

The wider church reminds us that we are not alone but part of a network of worship, witness and service

- Church Council Conversations

For most of our Church's history, we have proudly declared we are the third-largest denomination in Australia. This is based on the religious affiliation results of the Australian Census which bears little relationship to the health and vitality of our life as a Church. NCLS data would indicate in terms of regular church attendance we rank as fifth largest. Irrespective of the data source, the decline in affiliation or attendance is unmistakable, borne out by the feedback from every part of the Church.

As a whole Church we have struggled with our identity as we have sought to hold together a broad range of contexts, beliefs and practices. There is a beauty in our diversity but it has not been without its challenges. While many people project their own theological outlook onto the whole Church (i.e., "most people in the Church believe something similar to what I believe"), the reality is we are still a very theologically diverse Church.

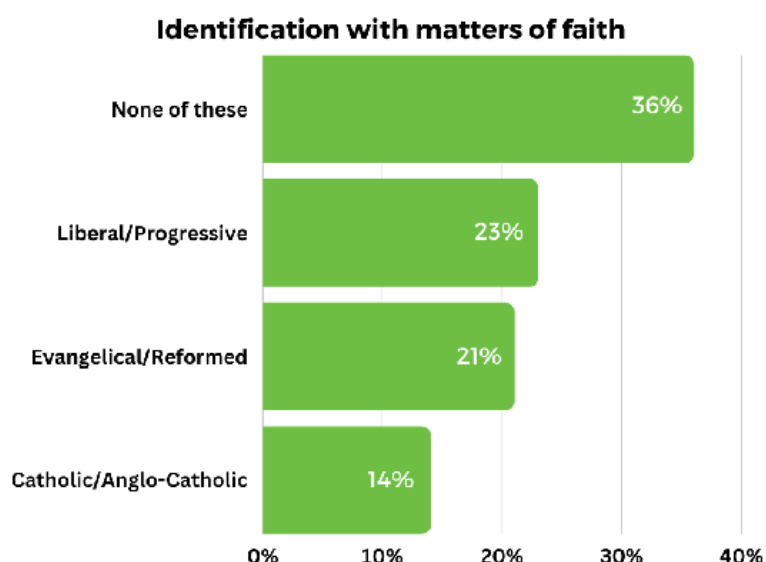
Our identity as a whole Uniting Church informs and shapes the way so many people think about our national identity and national work. The two most prominent themes reflected across all our engagement is the role of the national Church, particularly the role of the National Assembly, in casting an inclusive vision of the Church and being a voice for social justice in the Australian society.

We especially value the UCA commitment to unity in diversity, while recognising how difficult this can be (and always will be). We realise this can be targeted as a weakness by some, however sometimes our points of vulnerability are also our greatest strengths – that is the way of the Gospel!

- Church Council Conversations

Alongside these shared markers of faith and identity, there are very practical barriers to how we shape our collective life together. The public expression of the Church is disjointed. People lament the lack of identification of some parts of the Church with the “Uniting Church”. The review of the web presence of our local communities of faith indicates a very small minority present an accurate and up-to-date picture. Many of our “Find a Church” pages on wider Church websites are of little use to a faith seeker.

Some lament the decline in the Church’s voice in Australian society. This is partly about the way the Church has shifted from the centre of society to the margins in a post-Christendom era. Some also attribute this to a decline in focus and resourcing for this area of national work. There is a sense of disagreement about how and where this voice should be used.



The Assembly is perceived as primarily responsible for the Covenant with the Congress. In the responses from local communities this was a highly valued part of our national life and work. The work of the agencies is also still a highly valued part of the work of the Assembly. Many respondents specifically reference the work of UnitingWorld, Frontier Services and the work of UnitingCare agencies which is perceived to be a national effort across the country. The responses affirmed the Assembly's role in relating to the CALD communities within the Uniting Church, including through the National Conferences, and in promoting our multicultural and intercultural identity and commitments.

It is an inclusive, justice seeking, life empowering example of Christ at work in the world.

- Church Council Conversations

While the responses from local communities reflected significant support for the inclusive vision the Assembly has cast for the Uniting Church, there is a dissenting view that the Assembly has pursued priorities they believe are remote from and out of touch with the lived reality of local communities of faith. There is no doubt our deep theological disagreements cast a long shadow over our Church and the work of the Assembly.

Overall, the Assembly is considered institutionally small and remote from many local communities of faith, particularly with the declining financial resource base for the work of the Assembly staff and agencies. However, it does have important responsibilities in relation to matters of faith and our identity as a Church.

Pockets of the Uniting Church remain deeply upset with the decisions of the Assembly in relation to human sexuality and marriage. However, they tend to be getting on with ministry and mission in their own local context. A small number hold the view that much of the wider Church, including the Assembly, is of little value to local communities of faith.

The insights from the work in Workstream 2: National Identity have shaped the thinking about the place of the National Council within the options offered as part of Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing.

Irrespective of the options within Workstream 3, there remain wider opportunities to strengthen the national identity of the Church both in our sense of ourselves and the way we are perceived within the wider Australian society. Further work is required in how best to achieve this.

Churches have traditionally been a voice to government and the community on social justice issues, with agencies well placed to be active participants and thought leaders in this space.

- Church Council Conversations

Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing

Governance

Our engagement across the Church indicates that people generally consider the underlying principles which shape our governance to be sound. There are some who question the need for an inter-conciliar structure, however most accept that it is a core part of our identity and can work effectively.

People also appreciate the principles that shape how we make decisions – in community with all people, lay and ordained and regardless of gender, gathering to seek consensus. While people are sometimes frustrated by the practice of our decision-making – with some wishing people could exercise more personal authority and others suspicious of individual authority – they acknowledge the principles are worthwhile, if not always outworked well.

Although there is strong commitment to these foundations, there is also a widespread view that the system is no longer working as intended. Most say the current set of councils was designed for a time and a Church that no longer exists. Now they encounter too many layers, inefficiency in decision making and overly complicated processes.

The increased use of mechanisms which had previously been considered for use in exceptional circumstances, points again to a system under stress⁶. Councils which have been established under the same regulations look vastly different from one another in size and scale. Many of the smaller or more geographically remote councils have simply found it impossible to implement the detailed requirements of the regulations in relation to committees and other structures.

As a Church we have attempted to expand the range of voices and perspectives in our decision making, however this has not always been successful. While the ideals of our inter-conciliar and consensus decision making are an equal voice for all, the reality is some voices still hold a more prominent place than others. We heard this is particularly the case for CALD communities, younger people and people from new communities.

Our councils of the Church... do they all look the same?

We currently have six Synods and 33 Presbyteries. Some Synods have a handful of staff whereas other Synods stretch to an array of staffing Boards, committees, and functions. Synods have between about 50 communities of faith and over 400 communities of faith. Some have a deeply integrated large community service agencies while others have a diverse collection of smaller community service agencies. Some of our Synods cover multiple jurisdictions with multiple legal and policy environments whereas others are contained to a single jurisdiction.

Some Presbyteries have personnel of more than ten while others run entirely on the contribution of people in other ministry roles. Some cover thousands of kilometers across metropolitan, provincial, rural and remote contexts while others are contained within one part of a metropolitan centre. Some have more than 100 communities of faith while others have less than 20. Some have accumulated substantial financial reserves while others live on an annual budget with limited financial buffer.

As outlined in Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship, there is a high level of assumed collaboration across the councils. This is most acute between Presbyteries and Synods where the interplay of ‘oversight’ and ‘general oversight’ is significant.

Some are eager to drive a dualistic distinction between ‘ministry and mission’ on the one hand and ‘administration and compliance’ on the other.

Some are eager to drive a dualistic distinction between ‘ministry and mission’ on the one hand and ‘administration and compliance’ on the other. Generally, the sense is ministry and mission decisions should be made ‘close to the ground’, while administration and compliance can be ‘centralised’. However, we have also seen how inter-dependent these concepts are and that separating them can often exacerbate already complex and disconnected decision making.

‘Oversight’ has been a fascinating concept to explore with people. While there are some who think it is completely unnecessary, most believe that within the Church a measure of oversight and accountability is necessary. However, most would observe that it is currently not well exercised.

Some perceive ‘oversight’ as controlling and overly driven by compliance, lacking a focus on encouragement and support. Others experience a lack of oversight in their day to day life and only engaging when there is a conflict or a crisis.

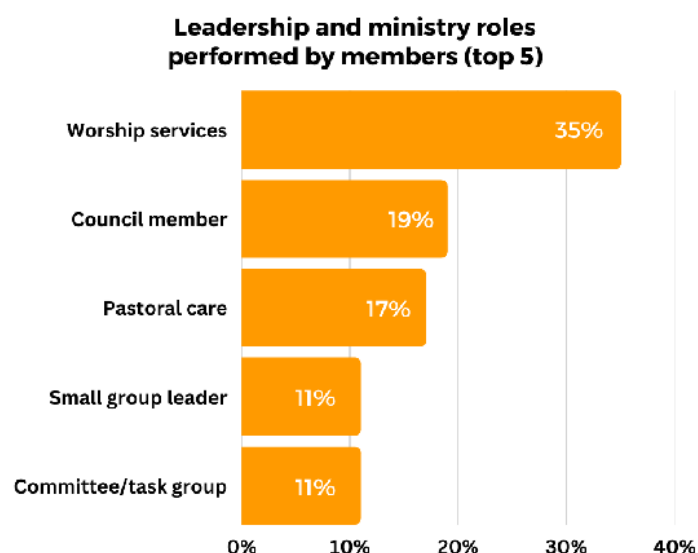
Some experience ‘oversight’ as imposing a hierarchy on what they consider to be a ‘non-hierarchical’ structure. However, others point out that an inter-conciliar Church while not strictly hierarchical does create relationships of accountability and authority in the interests of the wellbeing of people, communities of faith and the whole Church.

A recognition that Presbyteries, Synods, and the Assembly are not there to compete with each other or the Congregation, but are there, each with a part to play, in providing an appropriate framework for the work of the Congregation to be successful.

- Church Council Conversations

Make the focus of the whole church on the congregation, supporting its ministry and mission. We are becoming more top down focused, rather than congregation focused with interrelated councils in support.

- Church Council Conversations



An inter-conciliar approach to decision-making has created cultural norms around collective decision making over individual decision making. This has meant the use of committees as a ubiquitous tool in our decision making rather than empowering individuals to make decisions. Even individuals who have authority feel reluctant to exercise it without reference to a wider group. Some call for much greater empowerment of individuals to exercise authority including through longer terms for some positions and greater delegation. However even those that advocate such an approach believe it should be attached to effective accountability mechanisms.

In many parts of the Church, corporate governance principles are in widespread use. To some, this feels at odds with the objectives and values of the Church. This leads to frustration about the councils of the Church whose membership can stretch into the hundreds. The Church has also prioritised diversity and representation, while some others are looking to prioritise skills and expertise. Finding ways to value all of this in one governance system has proved challenging and complex.

We look for a willingness by those beneficiaries of the current arrangements to challenge the status quo in search of a better outcome for the UCA.

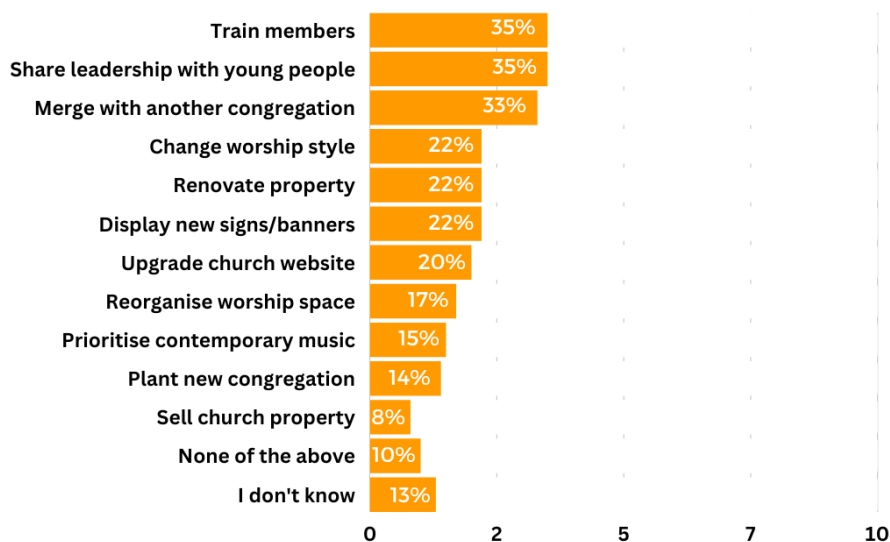
- Church Council Conversations

Agencies across the Church experience frustration with how the governance of the Church functions. As they have transitioned to skills-based boards (in some instances remunerated) they struggle with the conciliar and legal structures of the Church. In most cases agencies are searching for healthy and effective ways to be better connected to both the Congregational and conciliar life of the Church. There is a sense that the health and growth of the agencies may be a benefit which can be shared with the whole Church in ways that extend beyond finances, including a greater role in the conciliar decision making of the Church.

The organisational model entrenched in the Regulations and Constitution is one of a different era... The concept that any business can hold the same structure over a 45-year period and be successful and remain relevant needs to be challenged.

- Church Council Conversations

Would you support any of these significant actions in the denomination?



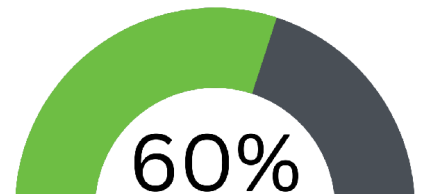
Resourcing

Many of these governance challenges are associated with the overall decline in the life of local communities of faith. We can no longer assume there is a ready pool of volunteers to sustain our governance. Many would say we are wearing out the willing. Alongside this the overlap in membership of so many parts of our Church leads to concentration of decision-making in a few. The Church prides itself on the principle of being 'lay led'. However, in local communities with a minister in placement communities of faith look to them as the "go to" on almost all matters. Those without a minister in placement simply struggle to distribute the responsibilities across already overloaded volunteers. This reality cascades into the wider councils of Church.

There is much work on the shoulders of a few. Our Ministers, other leaders and our one administration staff member. Like many congregations, we are highly committed but as a group we are ageing. Those who are available and able to work are tired from overwork.

- Church Council Conversations

% members who perform at least one leadership or ministry role



It has become increasingly difficult to fill Boards of agencies and schools with suitably qualified members of the Church. It has also become difficult to fill voluntary office bearer roles within Presbytery or synod committees. This has led to remunerated leaders and staff finding themselves filling the gaps that arise. This leads to tensions between personal and corporate leadership, and between those we employ for their professional skills and those within our Church with a deep sense of our ministry and mission.

Even in Synods with larger staffing structures, there is very little economies of scale with most staff being individual specialists. Many observe significant duplication in roles across Synods and believe this is a place where efficiency could be achieved through consolidation. However, attempts at collaboration in the past have not been all that successful.

Most Presbyteries would have at least one person in a role similar to 'Presbytery minister' and some more than one. Some observe that the responsibilities of a Presbytery extend beyond those typically within the skill set of a minister. Others have observed that Presbytery minister roles are drawing high-quality ministers out of local communities of faith.

While the focus of many conversations about 'resourcing' in the Church has tended to revolve around property and finance, the reality is that both our greatest asset and our greatest crisis in resourcing is in our people. Just as life-giving communities of faith are sustained by faithful and passionate disciples, so too are healthy, sustainable and effective governing councils sustained by people with capacity and capability.

I travel far and wide across our Church, and without our faithful, capable and diligent congregational leaders (both lay and ordained), we would be nowhere as a Church. Yet, we don't properly value our local leaders.

- Written Submission

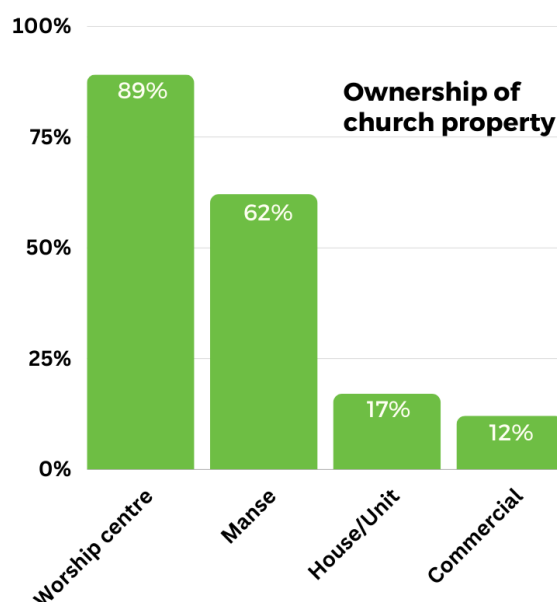
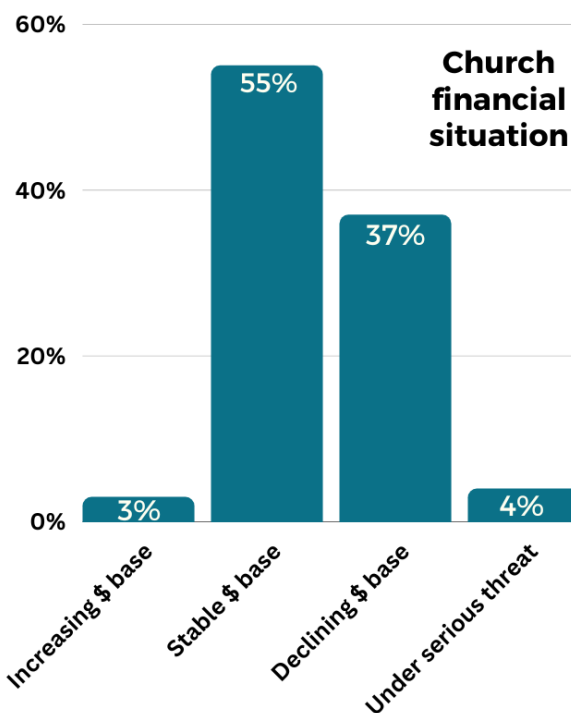
While the focus of many conversations about ‘resourcing’ in the Church has tended to revolve around property and finance, the reality is that both our greatest asset and our greatest crisis in resourcing is in our people. Just as life-giving communities of faith are sustained by faithful and passionate disciples, so too are healthy, sustainable and effective governing councils sustained by people with capacity and capability.

Financial resourcing remains a significant challenge across the life of the Church. It has become a truism to say we are asset rich and cash poor. This has meant the wider life of the Church has gone in search of new revenue streams.

Agencies are largely self-funding, either through government income or fundraising. Synods have different financial models however the common feature is a significant decline in reliance on giving from local communities of faith. Some have entered into support arrangements from agencies, schools and other institutions. All have some kind of income from investments as a core revenue stream. Presbyteries have tended to have a mix of funding from Congregations and the wider Church. Some are building significant reserves from proceeds of property sales to sustain and grow the work of the Presbytery.

In the context of declining financial resources, property has become a significant issue within the whole Church. Our covenant with the Congress acknowledges the dispossession of land at the heart of colonisation. Our weekly prayer for the offering often acknowledges that everything we have comes from God, our creator. The economics of the Australian property market has exacerbated the unjust distribution of wealth in the Church. Even within our Church property is the responsibility of communities of faith formed generations ago, irrespective of their current size.

However, when it comes to the real property assets of the Church and what to do with them we tend to live out of different values and assumptions.



We are cash poor and asset rich - it is ok to use the assets, particularly the property assets, that we do have rather than just sitting on them.

- Written submission

For many local communities of faith property is an asset, an economic life-blood and a burden all at once. The suitability and maintenance of many buildings is an acute issue in many places. This is borne out by regular discussions of insurance, building regulations, property leasing arrangements and heritage listings. This is absorbing significant effort across many Church Councils, most Presbyteries and all Synods.

Alongside this, emerging new communities, including CALD communities and church plants, are looking for a place to call home as they grow.

According to the NCLS 8% of Church attenders support selling church property. However, throughout the Exploration Phase we encountered people who constantly pointed to sale of property assets as essential to the ongoing financial sustainability of the Church and future ministry and mission opportunities.

Be serious about the redistribution of resources across the life of the Church. Something is clearly broken with our system. There is very little understanding that we are jointly involved in the mission of God together. Instead, dollars speak, and we patch protect to the detriment of our future.
- Church Council Conversations

Different parts of the Church have responded to this challenge in different ways. However, there are common themes in this challenge and the contested space this represents. First, property matters involve three councils of the Church, each with different responsibilities and imperatives which creates significant confusion and takes significant time. Property transactions generally involve a peculiar entity – a statutory property trust. Different parts of the Church understand this mechanism in different ways and its implications for who gets to make decisions and how the councils constituted under the Constitution and the boards, committees or other governing entities interact with the property trusts.

Second, different people within that system believe they have a role in the use of any underutilised property or proceeds of sale. Various contested imperatives include:

- Meeting current and historical obligations.
- Fulfilling our responsibilities to Congress.
- Funding our institutional infrastructure.
- Funding mission resourcing.
- Utilising for ministry and mission.
- Providing a physical home or funding new missional opportunities or community services.
- Providing a physical home for communities of faith without a building, such as growing CALD communities and church plants.
- Financially maintaining a local community's ministry and mission.

Our congregation has very modest funds, and our property only provides a modest income, however we are a church with potential. In an ideal world the income from assets across the Synod would go to congregations who have growth potential and can provide mission to the community.

- Church Council Conversations

There are deep pastoral and practical considerations at play. Many communities of faith with declining people and finances are sustaining their community through property income. Church leaders across the country are struggling with how to faithfully honour communities whose life is coming to an end, while investing in new and emerging communities. The place of property in this conversation is significant. A collective imagination is required for this to become a life-giving conversation for our Church.

Workstream 4: Theological culture and education

This workstream is proceeding at a slower pace than the others in recognition of both the limitations on resourcing and the specialised nature of some of this work. Therefore, this report provides a brief summary of what we have done and what we have heard. However further work is required to move forward to the final outcomes envisaged by this workstream.

We have proposed a working definition of theological culture as:

“The theological culture of the Uniting Church is that network of practices, institutions and texts which resource, sustain and extend the Uniting Church’s particular conversations, doctrinal decisions and prophetic speech about God, Christ and the world.”⁷

We are [inviting papers](#) from theologians and others across the Uniting Church and offered a series of questions to encourage reflection. We are inviting this through until September 2023 and have approached all of the Church’s theological colleges to contribute.

Alongside this we have met with each of the leaders involved in theological education across our Synods and colleges to discuss the workstream and to hear their insights and feedback.

Across the breadth and diversity of our colleges, the following themes emerged:

- There is broad agreement that theological culture is the right frame for this workstream.
- Theology across the Uniting Church is very diverse and a national framework for the provision of theological education should not seek theological conformity.
- There is recognition of the role theological colleges play in shaping the theological culture within their own contexts.
- Theological education needs to support ministerial and lay leadership along with discipleship formation, especially for growing, new communities where leadership emerges from within the community.
- Theological education needs to be closely linked with contexts of ministry to provide for effective integration into ministry practice.
- Any change in the structure for the provision of theological education needs to maintain and enhance the diverse context of ministry across the Uniting Church.
- Investment in theological education is a resourcing choice. The sustainability of theological education is not the same as ‘self-funding’.
- Living out our commitments as a Church, particularly the Covenant with Congress and being a multicultural Church need to be deeply embedded across theological education.

We have not one but many theological cultures. We need to celebrate this. We are very diverse, but there is in that diversity, a range of depth of allegiance to the UCA ‘brand’. We need to be careful of pushing this one too hard if we are to be open to diversity..

- Church Council Conversations

Core Commitments

Our Covenant with Congress

Throughout the Act2 Project, as with our whole life as Church, we are called to walk together as First Peoples and Second Peoples from many lands. As we shape the ordering of our life, the Covenant with Congress is essential. As Congress continues to explore its own life, we have worked to identify those things which continue to need to guide us in light of the Covenant and the Preamble.

The history of this land we now call Australia, a small part of which is contained in the Covenant and Preamble, continue to have implications for our life as a nation and the Church.

We recognise that Congress continues to seek self-determination over its own life and ministry with First Peoples. Alongside this it is a partner and participant in the decision-making of the councils of the Church.

Congress has different expressions of its life in response to the different contexts of its ministry around the country. While historically there has been a tendency for Church and Congress structures to mirror one another, this need not be the case as we both seek the best way to order our lives in response to our ministry and mission needs.

While the Covenant began between the Congress and the National Assembly, covenanting needs to remain an ongoing process throughout the Church's life. This is our collective responsibility as a whole Uniting Church and should not be seen as the province of only the Assembly and Congress.

All of this has implications how we live out our mutual relationship and mutual accountability with one another, including identity, governance and resourcing. As Congress and the Uniting Church both continue to reflect on the shape and ordering of our respective lives we will need to continue to keep open the space for exploring together the best way to live out our Covenant. This open space for conversation will be important as we consider the directions and options, particularly for *Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing*.

Our Multicultural Church

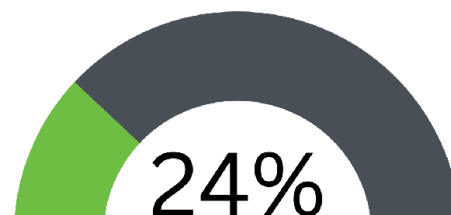
We declared in 1985 that we are a multicultural Church⁸. Time and again we have both reaffirmed and built on that commitment as we aspire to be an inter-cultural Church. How this multicultural nature manifests itself continues to change. It includes monocultural CALD communities worshipping in language, multicultural communities participating in cross-cultural ministry and mission together, new communities of migrants forming communities and seeking recognition within the Uniting Church and various cultural groups sharing the one property in a variety of arrangements amongst so many other expressions.

At various times the Church has tried to find better ways of recognising, supporting and resourcing CALD communities but we have struggled with this task. Parallel networks, structures and ways of relating such as National Conferences, multicultural committees, staffing and experiments with culturally-based structures are all expressions of those attempts. Property has been a contested space, demonstrated through the various attempts to broker property sharing arrangements with varying degrees of success.

Some of our structures and practices have been slow to adapt. As CALD communities of faith are bucking the trend in terms of size, growth and vitality, we have found Presbyteries have tended to focus on the normative experience of aging declining communities.

Ministry pathways whether through the ordained ministries, Ministry of Pastor or Reception of Ministers process have continued to be source of frustration. Pathways into leadership in different parts of the Church have been challenging for many CALD leaders, balancing the responsibility to their communities with offering leadership to the wider Church.

% attenders born overseas



Both of these commitments remain absolute touchstones for our identity as the Uniting Church in Australia and need to shape us as we seek to respond to God's call to enter more fully into mission.

Legal, ethical and social obligations

The fulfillment of our legal, ethical and social obligations is both a 'given' and one of the most vexing issues facing our Church. As we have listened across the Church we have found the accountability for many of these obligations largely rests with Synods but the wresponsibility for implementation rests with local communities of faith.

There is a perception that agencies, institutions and schools tend to be doing this well due to staffing and skills-based boards. However local communities of faith with volunteers are struggling with the way we are currently seeking to fulfill these obligations.

Synods describe seeking to fulfill these obligations through resourcing and encouragement, believing they lack the levers to ensure compliance. Local communities of faith describe feeling overwhelmed by paperwork and frustrated by what they perceive as inefficient and unnecessary processes.

At this point in the project, we consider the following areas to be the most pressing:

- Safeguarding requirements for children and vulnerable adults.
- Building safety and property insurance.
- Workplace health and safety.
- Working conditions including remuneration, employment/placement conditions, onboarding and other people and culture practices.
- Management of finances.
- The role of the property trust and its relationship to other governance and legal entities.
- Directors' duties, fiduciary obligations and obligations under the Charities Act.
- Relationship of responsibilities between the councils .
- Relationship of ministry agents to the Church, including matters of discipline.

While many of these derive from external legal, regulatory or compliance obligations, how we choose to fulfill these obligations is an expression of what we value (our ethical obligations) and how we are perceived by the wider society. This core commitment is at heart a matter of faith - it is about how we bear witness to Christ.

As we work through directions and options, particularly in Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship and Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing, we need to both continue fulfilling our obligations in those ways that are effective, and consider better ways where this is creating a burden or drawing energy and focus away from our ministry and mission.

We have therefore developed a draft set of principles to guide us in thinking about how the Church could better fulfill our calling as a Church to our ethical, legal and social obligations:

1. Enable healthy and safe ministry and mission: Fulfilling our obligations in a way that enables the kind of ministry and mission to which we believe we are called.
2. A Consistent standard: Applying common standards across the Church and only varying where absolutely necessary.
3. Efficient administration: Administration which is focused on the simplest, lightest, most streamlined processes possible.
4. Proportionate to the risk: Approach with a risk-based approach to standards and administration, focusing effort and resources where there is the greatest risk.
5. Alignment of accountability, responsibility and capability: Assigning responsibilities and resources to maintain consistent alignment between accountability, responsibility and capability.

Conclusion

Across Australia there is deep love for the Uniting Church. There is still a compelling vision for why the Uniting Church in Australia exists and its role within the Church and the society in Australia. At its heart the Uniting Church is an inclusive church, that despite its differences does seek to hold together a very broad range of beliefs and practices. The description of the Church in the Basis of Union continues to resonate along with the centrality of the Covenant, our commitment to be a multicultural church and our pursuit of justice. The way we govern and make decisions is also a hallmark.

However, the shape of our Church is not as so many imagined it would be when we formed in 1977. We have struggled to come to terms with the decline in the size of our local communities of faith alongside the significant growth in our agencies. Deep in our hearts we know we are not the Church we began nor are we the Church we hoped we would be. We have struggled to collectively imagine a life-giving future for ourselves.

The reality of our local communities is clear from the data, the lived testimony of Church Councils and the descriptions of the wider Church. The people and financial resources invested in maintaining communities and fulfilling the obligations is crowding out energy and effort being invested in discipleship and mission. Communities of faith coming to the end of their life will be a part of our future. This trend will continue in many places for the foreseeable future. It needs to be done thoughtfully and carefully however it cannot be avoided.

Clustering, linking and sharing amongst communities of faith will also be part of our future. This should and will continue to be a part of establishing structures and ways of working that creates life-giving and healthy ministry and mission. It needs to be done in a way that aligns governance, resourcing, ministry and mission. However it is not a substitute for hard conversations about communities of faith, particularly in close geographical proximity where their life as a community is coming to an end.

Conversations about communities at the end of their life should not marginalise investing in and supporting church planting, fresh expressions and experimentation. These new expressions of communities of faith need to be supported and encouraged by the wider Church. In most instances, these communities are relatively small and this will impact on the models of governance, resourcing and ministry adopted. We must both ensure communities are life-giving, healthy and effective while not expecting them to simply function as a replacement to existing communities of faith.

Meanwhile, many of our agencies and schools have continued to thrive and grow, fueled by government funding but also responding to ever changing policy and regulatory environments. Ensuring that the agencies for which we are responsible are well governed while fulfilling our shared mission remains a priority. However, the strains and tensions within our communities of faith and councils mean we need to rethink how we do this.

The current capacity and capability of our local communities has an impact on a wider church conciliar and committee structure which has relied on the contribution of people in unpaid roles and financial contributions from local communities of faith.

It is no longer possible within the financial and personnel resources of the Church to sustain the structure of the wider Church that we currently have. Across the breadth of the Church, we believe there are a significant number of councils which can no longer fulfill the responsibilities assigned to them. Even parts of the Church which feel relatively secure are reliant on a shrinking base of resources.

Each of these councils in their own way are seeking to find contextual solutions. However, the widespread evidence of this problem points to fundamental systemic issues which we need to address collectively. The risk of not doing this is further resources drawn into managing crises, heightened conflict and further burnout of our people.

Choosing not to address these issues systemically will not maintain the status quo. Significant structural change in our life is inevitable. Choosing to address these issues together gives us an opportunity to continue to be a truly national Church, shaped by our theological culture and in service of shared ministry and mission.

The situation in we find ourselves has been coming for many years. We may struggle to engage in conversations about the viability and sustainability of our Church however collectively ignoring these problems will not make them go away. This report seeks to take a long loving look at the reality of our life. It does not seek to shy away from the hard truths but nor does it believe there is no hope. Rather than be hostage to this reality, the truth can set us free, if we face it and respond with courage.

The affirmation of the 16th Assembly's decision that this work was both urgent and important is borne out by the lived experience that people from across the breadth of the Church have shared with us. The opportunity to seize this moment of importance and urgency rests with us all collectively as a Uniting Church so we may better live out the ministry and mission to which Christ has called us and nurture health and vitality for the inheritance of the next generation of the Uniting Church.

Section 3: Theological Reflection

The Uniting Church will...order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission..
Paragraph 13, Basis of Union

As we move to think about the future shape of the Church it is important to ground our thinking. This project is grounded in prayer and attentiveness to the leading of the Holy Spirit. We are guided by the faith and unity of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as described in the Basis of Union. We are also shaped by our core identity markers as the Uniting Church, expressed in the Basis of Union and in the foundational commitments that have defined and shaped our life together over many decades.

As a Uniting Church, we do not claim to be the whole church, simply one part of the church, in one part of the world. This is most clear within the Basis of Union through our commitment to the World Council of Churches, to a special relationship with Asia and Pacific (Paragraph 2, Basis of Union). We know we are incomplete, and we celebrate that. Our baptism is into the church of God not the Uniting Church.

As the Uniting Church, we have struggled with what holds us together. Is it simply an accident of history and our interconnected legal arrangements or is it something more? Through history, the Protestant tradition of which we are a part, has divided over differences of belief and practice. The unifying force for most has been common beliefs and practices. Yet we sit within a uniting church which has sought to overcome differences in beliefs and practices to bear visible witness to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

So, what is it that holds us together? Jesus Christ, the risen crucified One who we confess as Lord. This is not an easy unity, our differences of belief, practice, culture, history have all challenged that unity. Therefore, it is only through Christ we can and will find the source of our unity.

We are, however, also located within a particular time and place. We acknowledge that history brings change (Paragraph 4, Basis of Union) and in fact we look forward to our end! We have continued to grapple with our own time and place through responding to the invitation to enter a Covenant relationship with the First Peoples in this land⁹. We recognised that we could not truly be a Church in these lands we now call Australia without acknowledging the reality of the history of a relationship to First Peoples.

We have continued to build on this, changing the Preamble to our Constitution, writing into our law the history of our country, our Church and the relationship of First Peoples and Second Peoples from many lands¹⁰. We acknowledged Second Peoples did not have a monopoly on truth, rather we could learn from the wisdom of First Peoples. We have acknowledged First Peoples as sovereign.

We have also recognised that we are a multicultural Church. This has led us to recognise that our commitment to transcending cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries (Basis of Union, Paragraph 2) does not mean the elimination of difference. The diversity of cultural and linguistic communities reflected in the Church is a gift of God enriching us all. We have continued to grapple with what it means to be a truly inter-cultural community. We have grown to recognise the colonial roots of our missionary activity not only in Australia but across the world, including with our partners in Asia Pacific¹¹.

As we shape our life, we are deeply informed by the principles outlined within paragraph 15 of the Basis of Union. We make decisions in community, not just on our own. We make decisions through listening to God and one another.

We recognise we may not possess all the wisdom and that others in other councils may have wisdom for us¹². This has shaped us in our embrace of consensus decision-making; a means by which we may more deeply listen for God's call to us in the voice of one another, as we build community together, be shaped by prayer and the Word and listen, learn and discern together. It is almost as if God's gift of consensus decision-making was essential for an inter-conciliar Church in this land.

The Basis of Union offers us rich images of the Church. Three are of greatest relevance to the Act2 Project.

A pilgrim people

[T]he Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come.

Paragraph 3, Basis of Union

No image has been invoked by more songs, meeting themes or strategic planning documents than this. Yet it appears our life has become far too weighed down by baggage for us to be truly pilgrims. Travelling communities around the world travel light. If we want to live out this image, we will need to find ways of living as a community which equip us to be people of the journey. Courageously leaving behind that which burdens us so that we might travel more lightly.¹³

Most obviously this relates to our physical property. In our search for a space and place in which we can grow and sustain communities of disciples, we have allowed property to become a burden. As we discuss the implications of releasing ourselves from that burden, we squabble over the economic spoils. We continue to grapple with the colonial history of the land on which our buildings now sit.

How might we be shaped by the wisdom of the First Peoples about land as the ground of our being and source of life? How might we learn from the experience of so many of our CALD communities that have migrated to this land from homelands and found a new place in which to shape life together?

It may also be our law which has become a burden and the custom and practice we elevate to law. We are now burdened by the customs and practices which arose from the wisdom of our predecessors to order a Church we no longer are. As we seek to fulfill the law, might we need to find less legislative language and more stories of wisdom? Can we lean into our practices of making decisions together, informed by our faith and identity, rather than trying to legislate and regulate?

Travelling communities also find themselves often on the margins of the society. Despite our founding as a Church in 1977, post the peak of Christendom in Australia, we have adapted slowly to the post-Christendom age and the implications for our role within the broader Australian society. We have struggled with our marginalisation which we often confuse for persecution. Rather than embrace this location as closer to Jesus' location in society, we have too often clung to the last relics of our Christendom influence.

As we lament the loss of our voice at the centre of our society, could we instead embrace our presence on the margins as a more significant source of legitimacy in our voice in our national life?

The Holy Spirit

The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life; it also confesses that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.

Paragraph 3, Basis of Union

In this image we recall the very earliest community in the church. This community formed through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that gathered, broke bread, prayed, held everything in common and gave to those in need. This early community need not be viewed as a utopian ideal. The Epistles make it very clear that the early life of the church was not easy. The Council of Jerusalem demonstrates deep divisions in the community.

However, we are probably spending more time in rooms with our doors closed, than around the table breaking bread together. We have allowed the parochial culture of our wider society, entrenched in stereotypes and fueled by politics, to define how we relate across the geography of this vast continent. It takes courage to step over the boundaries of safety and familiarity we have created for ourselves.

We have certainly struggled with the vision of a 'common wealth'. The contests we have over access to property and financial resources suggests we have not fully grappled with the implications of the sources of our wealth or the radical call of Jesus in relation to earthly possessions. Yet the gift of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of our consensus decision-making which provides a process by which we seek to collectively discern the Spirit's leading.

How do we unlock the doors on our lives and our treasure to better participate in our collective ministry and mission together?

The Body of Christ

[A] body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole...

Paragraph 3, Basis of Union

Recalling again images from the New Testament, particularly 1 Corinthians 12, we are given a rich image which speaks to our respective gifts and role within our life together. However, in contrast to the image in 1 Corinthians, we seem to spend time seeking the place of honour - defining our role as the most important within the body.

Some of us think we are part of the 'beating heart' of the Church or the 'hands and feet'. Too often in our life we have felt the fragility of our part of the Church. Much like the skin we have felt wounds resulting from pain, sometimes healing, many times scarring.

Rather than embrace this fragility we have tended to assert our own significance, often at the expense of other parts of the body. We also seem all too eager to amputate other parts of the body we do not value as highly as ourselves. We seem reluctant to enter into the sufferings of others. It takes courage to enter into the sufferings of others within the community of the Church.

When one part of the body hurts, do we all hurt? The image of the body is fragile, inter-connected, and inter-dependent. As we think about the shape of our life together, how do we embrace our inter-connected fragility?

We look forward with hope to what God may be doing in our midst, and we enter into a period of collective discernment about our life together. As we consider the directions and options laid before us:

- How do we find ways to lay down burdens we have been carrying for too long?
- How do we find ways of more deeply entering into fellowship with one another?
- How do we find ways to be a more inter-connected and inter-dependent body?

As we embrace the reality of our fragility and marginality within the life of the Australian society, we can imagine our life differently. So many within our Church feel a deep sense of grief for a Church that no longer exists. However we have always anticipated our end as a Church, knowing that we did not have a continuing city.

As people of the way of Jesus, disciples of the risen crucified One we need not change simply to avoid death. Were the Uniting Church to die as an institution, God would do a new thing. Our calling and opportunity is to do a new thing now which lies before us; to enter more fully into the vision to which God has called us as a Uniting Church in Australia.

Section 4: Introduction to Phase 2: Collective Discernment

June - November 2023

We have now concluded [Phase 1: Exploration](#) which has stretched through the first half of 2023 and builds on the work undertaken prior to the 16th Assembly. We have listened for the voices of the Church across the length and breadth of the country – to our diverse contexts, for our joys and sorrows, and our hopes and fears for the future.

A new phase

We have now entered into the [Phase 2: Collective Discernment](#). Between June and November 2023 we are inviting the Church into an intentional period of discernment. To begin this time the whole Church has been invited into a time of intentional prayer, [Uniting in Prayer](#). This is shaped by our patterns of discernment, which encourage prayer, worship and community building as part of any collective discernment process.

This new phase is a time for imagination. We have heard through the Exploration Phase the challenges we face and the opportunities that lie before us. In this phase we are looking intentionally at specific ideas to address our challenges and take up opportunities. Work is continuing across all workstreams.

How can I engage?

We are inviting the councils of the Church to participate in intentional discernment about the directions outlined in Section 5 as part of Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship and the options outlined in Section 6 as part of Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing. We are specifically asking councils of the Church, Church Councils, Presbyteries and Synods, to set aside time within their meetings for this discernment.

For the directions and options, we are asking you to think about:

- How might this make a difference in our context within the Church?
- How might this make a difference to our life together as a Church?
- What are the opportunities this might offer us?
- What are the risks we need to think about?
- What things would we need to think about if we implement this?

You may find there are directions and options that you are warm to and find resonate with your experience. You may also find directions and options that you are cool to or raise significant concerns. This is important and we want to hear both. You may also find that these directions and options spark other ideas for you, adaptations of existing directions or options, or totally new ideas. We want to hear this also.

How can I give feedback?

Opportunity to share discernment and feedback about the directions and options will be available from the conclusion of Uniting in Prayer on 22 June 2023. Following this, all details for engaging in Phase 2 will be found on the [Act2 website](#). Please provide your submissions and feedback to the Act2 Project as soon as you can after that and no later than 30 November 2023.

What comes next?

At the conclusion of Phase 2: Collective Discernment we will move into [Phase 3: Recommendations for Action](#) (November 2023 - July 2024). Once we have heard from the breadth of the Uniting Church about the directions and options we will be looking to develop a way forward. The goal of Phase 3 is to have an integrated set of recommendations across all workstreams for the 17th Assembly in July 2024.

This may involve undertaking more detailed investigation of some directions and options, including expert advice, and the development of a possible implementation roadmap. Depending on the specific recommendations will depend on what further engagement or decisions are required of the wider Church.

All of this is open to the Spirit's leading and the way that emerges through the collective discernment of the Church.

Section 5: Directions for Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship

Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world.

Paragraph 15, Basis of Union

Our insight from our exploration and listening is that the structures and practices which cultivate life-giving communities of faith are:

- Communities orient their life towards discipleship and mission.
- A ministry and local governance arrangement which is healthy, sustainable and effective.
- Area councils¹⁴ having the capacity and capability to work with local communities of faith on being lifegiving.

We recognise that how this is done varies from place to place, however there are some systemic ways we could better support this. Considering this, we have sought to identify directions we could take as a whole Church that would better enable local communities of faith. The focus of these directions is primarily on local structures and practices. The question of oversight and wider Church support is picked up in *Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing*.

Communities of faith need different governance, ministry and resourcing arrangements depending where they are on their journey. Currently we have relatively rigid structures which do not account for the degree of variation in our communities of faith. Significant adaptation and innovation has occurred in parts of our Church.

This set of directions seeks to recognise the need for that adaptation and innovation, and create a more flexible toolkit for local communities of faith and Area Councils to use in shaping the right arrangements for the context and to best enable ministry and mission.

Direction 1: Encourage local communities of discipleship and mission

This direction is the anchor and imperative for all the other directions. Reimagining local church governance structures must be attached to refocusing the work of local communities on ministry and mission, and away from being overwhelmed by administration and compliance.

If the directions outlined only lead to more efficiently run communities and not to more life-giving communities of faith, mission and discipleship, then we will not have fulfilled our purpose.

- (a) Cultivate a structured and consistent approach to local communities of faith making and growing disciples through a vibrant theological culture.

Local communities of faith and discipleship are the heart of making and growing disciples. However, the set of institutions, texts and practices that the wider Church provides and cultivates can support that work. This direction is closely connected to Workstream 4: Theological Culture. Core to this is the recognition of the diverse forms of community which the Uniting Church has within its midst.

Reliance on training people for the ordained ministry as the primary mechanism of wider Church support for discipleship formation, is not consistent with the Church we now are. Therefore, our theological culture is going to need to be more dynamic and responsive to the Church we are.

Imagine...

Imagine throughout the season of Lent and Easter each year communities of faith across the Uniting Church engaging in periods of discernment through intentional shared prayer, bible study, mission in their communities and engagement with issues of justice for our world. Where communities of faith where baptisms – of children and adults – are a point of community celebration on Easter morning. Where people new to communities learn about the life and way of Jesus. Where people who have worshiped all their life discover new things about the faith. Where integrational conversations are fostered. Where people of all ages and abilities find ways to witness and serve in their communities. Where the love of God is so visibly present in a community of faith that it overflows into the wider world.

- (b) Encourage structures and practices which enable all expressions of the Uniting Church within a local community to participate in shared ministry and mission.

In many communities across Australia there are diverse expressions of the Uniting Church through various communities of faith, agencies, schools and other expressions of our corporate life. However, in many instances this is disconnected without a shared sense of ministry and mission. If we are saying we want to cultivate life-giving communities both within the Church and the wider community, then a shared approach ministry and mission will better enable that goal.

While historically many of the service agencies arose out of local communities of faith, there are now a diverse range of governance arrangements to ensure healthy and safe ministry and mission. Fresh approaches to partnership could enable both shared mission and a more unified witness to the wider community.

Imagine...

Imagine a shared ministry and mission location in a vibrant hub at the centre of a local community. There is a worshipping community and a community service run out of the same location. The upstairs space is used for worship, training and shared community events. Downstairs is a community services hub with offices and meeting rooms used to run services during the day and for Local Council meetings, bible studies and discipleship courses in the evening. The local leaders of the Church and the community service meet together quarterly along with the Principal and Chaplain of the local school to discuss and plan shared ministry and mission priorities.

Direction 2: Align with the vision of congregations in the Basis of Union

- (a) Align our regulatory arrangements for all communities of faith with the vision of Congregations as described in the Basis of Union

The Basis of Union describes Congregations as:

“the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ.”

It describes the responsibilities in the following ways:

“Its members meet regularly to hear God’s Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world.”

This is a compelling and life-giving vision. These are the communities into which people are called and grown as disciples. Significantly it does not say much about many of the normative assumptions we have about what a Congregation looks like.

It describes a wide variety of expressions of the Church which are currently not designated as ‘Congregations’ by Presbyteries under the regulations. The most obvious example is faith communities. The definition of faith community expressed in the regulations (Reg. 3.9.2) and as observed practically in the life of the Church would meet the Basis of Union description of a ‘Congregation’.

- (b) Develop guidance for recognising communities of faith that focuses on the responsibilities of Congregations as described in the Basis of Union

There are many groups of people recognised as ‘Congregations’ by a Presbytery which it would be difficult to conclude that they fulfill the definition and responsibilities as described in the Basis. Many for instance are no longer able to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church due to size, capacity or capability. Some report the only activity they undertake is worship. This need not mean that the Church ceases to take pastoral responsibility for communities. However it does mean we need to find other ways to recognise, support and connect people and communities within our Church in a way that lives out the vision of a ‘Congregation’ as described in the Basis of Union.

For much of our life, we have talked about different forms and patterns of life for local communities of faith. There are many examples of this - new church plants, online communities, CALD communities. However, it has often happened in spite of rather than because of our institutional structures and practices. In many cases these pioneers have felt either stymied by our systems or that they simply go around the systems.

These directions seek to provide a description of how we could shift the focus of our structures and practices to help more, and hinder less, the transformation that needs to and is in fact already happening in our local communities of faith.

Imagine...

Imagine one larger regional community of faith, three smaller communities of faith and two church plants, one in a local school and another of new migrants have all joined together under a shared Local Council. Each community elects two members to participate in the shared Local Council. They have been able to call three ministers with diverse skill in placement who work in a team across the diverse communities. Along with an administrator who works to manage all the administration compliance requirements across all the communities. All the communities gather quarterly for worship and sharing. Once a year they spend a whole day together exploring their shared ministry and mission priorities. Each community has some delegated responsibility for decisions that only affect their community.

Direction 3: Support fit-for-purpose governance arrangements

- (a) Establish a regulatory and guidance framework for fit for purpose local governance arrangements for communities of faith

The Basis of Union describes the local governing council as having the following responsibilities, *“building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining its members in hope, and leading them into a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world.”*

It was always envisioned that this local governing body would be for a Congregation or group of Congregations. However, the drafting of the Regulations create the impression that the normative structure is one Congregation with one Church Council.

Alongside this, the responsibilities of Church Councils are vast. Local responsibility for property, finance and administration now include a wide range of compliance functions in relation to people, property and finance.

Despite the assumption of this normative structure, shared governance arrangements are widespread. The Area Council of the Church responsible for recognising communities of faith and approving local governance arrangements needs greater flexibility, guidance and support to establish fit for purpose governance arrangements.

Currently the leading driver of clustering arrangements appears to be to pool sufficient funds to afford ministry. However there needs to be greater scope for Area Councils to work with local communities of faith to make determinations about the appropriate local governance arrangements, in line with the capacity and capability of various communities. This should encourage and support shared ministry and mission.

- (b) Provide for an Area Council, subject to consultation, to vary the scope of responsibilities of a Local Council

The current arrangements mean that when a Presbytery recognises a Congregation, a significant amount of responsibilities flow from that recognition to the Congregation and its Church Council. There is currently a mechanism under Clause 70 of the Constitution for Congregations and Church Councils to ‘refer powers and responsibilities’ to a Presbytery (or another body).

However, when a Congregation or its Church Council is no longer able to fulfill some responsibilities, there is limited scope for a Presbytery to determine that another body is better able to fulfill those responsibilities. Current arrangements encourage action only in response to a crisis or conflict situation. Often greater flexibility and earlier intervention may avoid the need for more drastic action.

Alongside this there are some communities which have grown to be significantly larger than the typical size of a Congregation. However, the scope of responsibilities and the amount of flexibility and autonomy provided to Local Councils tends to be based on some normative assumptions. There should be an imperative to align ministry arrangements (whether an individual ministry agent or a ministry team) with a Local Council and to avoid a ministry agent being expected to work across multiple Local Councils.

This should not occur through replacing one set of prescriptive regulations with another. Regulations should change to enable this. Greater flexibility on the means of appointing a Local Council to oversee a group of communities of faith should be recognised, while retaining the principle of communities of faith appoint their own leaders. There are a variety of mechanisms available beyond the regulations to support imaginative ways of arranging local governance.

This direction is designed to allow an Area Council, subject to consultation, to vary the responsibilities of a Local Council. This could mean that if a Local Council can demonstrate capability or capacity and a need to have additional responsibilities (e.g., financial, property or personnel matters) an Area Council could provide that flexibility. Conversely if an Area Council determined a Local Council could no longer fulfill one or more of the responsibilities, it could refer those responsibilities to the Area Council or another body either temporarily or on an ongoing basis.

- (c) Provide for the appointment of people from an Area Council to a Local Council

Currently there are certain circumstances in which people from the wider church can be appointed to a Local Council (e.g., during a ministerial vacancy, when designated a Parish Mission). There may be other circumstances in which this is an appropriate mechanism to assist a local community, particularly during a time of crisis or change. Limits ought to be placed on such a mechanism, with careful thought about safeguards and time limits.

Except in exceptional circumstances, such an approach should only be for a season. The goal should be to move towards a situation where local governance arrangements can be managed without the ongoing involvement of members of a Regional Council.

Direction 4: Recognise there is a time for everything

- (a) Simplify the pathways for new and emerging communities of faith to be recognised and participate in the life of the Uniting Church

Currently, people planting new communities or seeking recognition of communities of faith by the Uniting Church describe a lot of challenges in doing so. Creating pathways that allow communities of faith to be welcomed, recognised and invited to participate in our shared life is essential for the season we are in as a Church.

Efforts have already been made to establish mechanisms for property sharing such as for CALD communities. However, these pathways could be simplified so that new and growing communities can retain their focus on ministry and mission. There is a sense often that we are anxious to ensure communities are 'Uniting Church' enough, which has tended to mean 'our' experience of the Uniting Church. This limits both our vision of the diversity of what the Uniting Church already is, and the diversity of what the Uniting Church could become through encouraging new expressions of the Church.

Such simplification would include areas such as recognition of communities and ministry leaders by Area Councils, accessing property and other resourcing and participating in the responsibilities and decisions of the wider life of the Uniting Church.

Imagine...

Imagine a new community forms in a local café, exploring faith together on a Wednesday evening. They are made up of a diverse range of people from a variety of ages, mostly under the age of 50. They are looking for a place to belong and connect to the wider Church. The approach the local Uniting Church that welcomes them and introduces them to the New Communities Minister of their Area Council. Over a period of a few months, they discuss together their community's hopes and dreams with the Area Council. The Area Council recognises them as a community of faith. As the community grows and new children arrive in their midst, the café no longer fits them. A community of faith that is closing welcomes them to use the church building which is more suitable for the growing community. Some in their community have extensive experience in child safe practices so the Area Council welcomes their expertise in overhauling the entire Area Council's policies and practices which becomes a model for other Area Councils. Some other people in the community are capable musicians who write modern, authentic worship songs which become favourites across the Uniting Church through their new website – Sing A New Song.

- (b) Ensure Area Councils are equipped to pastorally and effectively fulfil their responsibilities regarding the dissolution and amalgamation of local communities of faith

No part of the Church has an inherent right to exist in perpetuity. There are times when it is no longer healthy for a community of faith to continue. Some communities will reach this conclusion on their own or with the support of their Area Councils. Others will not wish their community to come to end or to amalgamate with another community. Others will resist any such change.

Ultimately the responsibility for these decisions does rest with the Area Council.

It should be carried out with care and pastoral sensitivity, however it should not be avoided simply because it may be difficult or give rise to conflict. Failure to make these decisions in a timely way rarely leads to them not needing to be made at all. However, Area Councils need to be equipped with sufficient resources to fulfill this responsibility effectively.

Section 6: Options for Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing

...will order its life in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission.

Paragraph 13, Basis of Union

In considering Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing, the Act2 Project has listened to the various context, imperatives and ideas from across the life of the Church. In the Collective Discernment Phase this workstream outlines various options arising from that work, and the consideration of other models and approaches from other Churches.

Our goal is healthy, sustainable and effective councils able to fulfill the responsibilities entrusted to them.

This includes the fundamental imperative articulated by the 16th Assembly decision to:

“identify ways to strengthen and develop the local expressions of worship, witness, service, and the making and forming of disciples, in the various forms of communities of faith.”¹⁵

Various options were considered. Those that have been chosen for further consideration by the Church met the following criteria:

- Consistent with the feedback from across the Church from diverse contexts.
- Consistent with the scope and mandate of the 16th Assembly.
- Consistent with our foundational principles about governance in the Uniting Church.
- Represented a credible option for addressing the challenges identified.

Each option proposes changes to the conciliar arrangement of our Church's life within the continuing inter-conciliar model described in the Basis of Union. It does not assume changes to the agencies and institutions within those councils. Changes to the conciliar structure may bring opportunities for changes to those institutions and agencies but it is not assumed.

We also affirm that Congress is free to develop their own structures which may not mirror those of the Uniting Church. As an expression of the Covenant we will need to work together with Congress on how it will relate to each council of the Church.

It is also clear that councils have been an important means of creating shared identity, culture and mutual support and encouragement. The important role the wider Church plays in those aspects of our shared life can continue. However, it may be that these are achieved, for example, through networks of common interest or shared context which are not linked to a specific council.

Each of the models assumes some key changes are required within the councils of the Church:

1. Council responsibilities

- (a) respective responsibilities of the councils need to be sharpened and clarified. Although the description of our inter-conciliar structure found in the Basis assumes each council has a set of responsibilities allocated to its oversight, the regulations assume significant collaboration in some core areas (e.g., property, placements).

While we need to encourage a more connected Church where we communicate, listen, consult and share this should not lead to confusion and ambiguity about where responsibilities lie.

- (b) Councils are encouraged to take greater accountability for the exercise of the responsibilities allocated to them. Many councils and officers within councils are currently reluctant to exercise responsibilities or unsure about the scope of their responsibilities. This includes cases of conflict, ministry transition, property or when a community or council was struggling to fulfill its responsibilities. Hard conversations are avoided due to concern about conflict or confusion. This has tended to delay the inevitable.
- (c) Councils need the resources, capacity and capability to fulfill their responsibilities. There are considerable differences in the resources and capacity of councils with the same set of responsibilities. Paradoxically this is leading to more work for those councils as the struggle to fulfill their responsibilities and find themselves only responding to the most urgent issues. There is currently not sufficient resources for many Presbyteries and some Synods to fulfill their responsibilities. Any change in the governance model must address this mismatch.
- (d) Councils should be given the freedom to establish structures (e.g., committees) and processes within their council which enable them to fulfill their responsibilities. Many councils have exercised a degree of discretion in how they organise the life of their councils. This should be encouraged and the prescription currently laid down in the regulations should be removed (e.g., Pastoral Relations Committee, Presbytery Property Committee, Assembly Finance, Audit and Risk Committee).
- (e) Councils should utilise the delegation of responsibilities to groups or individuals to exercise those responsibilities on behalf of the council with appropriate safeguards and accountabilities. Conciliar decision making does not remove the need for personal decision-making authority, rather the authority is exercised within the parameters laid down by the council. There is reluctance from individuals to exercise authority leading to both frustration by individual office bearers and personnel and councils feeling like they are spending too much time endorsing decisions made by individuals. Every council needs to ensure they are providing clear scope for officer bearers and personnel to exercise their responsibilities.

2. Council arrangements

- (a) Councils need not be organised on a geographical basis. ‘The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering’, when describing the shape of the councils, says clearly: “the present geographical basis must not be considered sacrosanct.”¹⁶ Non-geographical council arrangements may be a life-giving way of ordering the life of the Church that can maintain the inter-connectedness of the councils.
- (b) Personnel (Ministers and staff) for councils need not be centralised and when covering vast and diverse contexts should be strategically dispersed to support those contexts. One common concern about any change to the existing council arrangements is the loss of local personnel through geographic consolidation. This should be discouraged. Fewer councils need not mean centralization of personnel resources.

3. Resourcing

Resource sharing (both personnel and finances) across councils should be considered necessary and desirable.

Shared services across the Church should be encouraged to achieve efficiencies. Personnel should be able to easily work across multiple councils using flexible approaches to placement and appointment. There is a greater need for sharing financial resources to enable ministry and mission where there is need, responsibility and opportunity. In this we will need to consider as careful stewards how we deal with the proceeds of property sales as one significant source of resources for our Church. It is essential to fulfilling our current and historical obligations, maintaining a truly national Church, addressing the economic inequities within Australia and fulfilling our calling to a common life together.

4. Subject to review and change

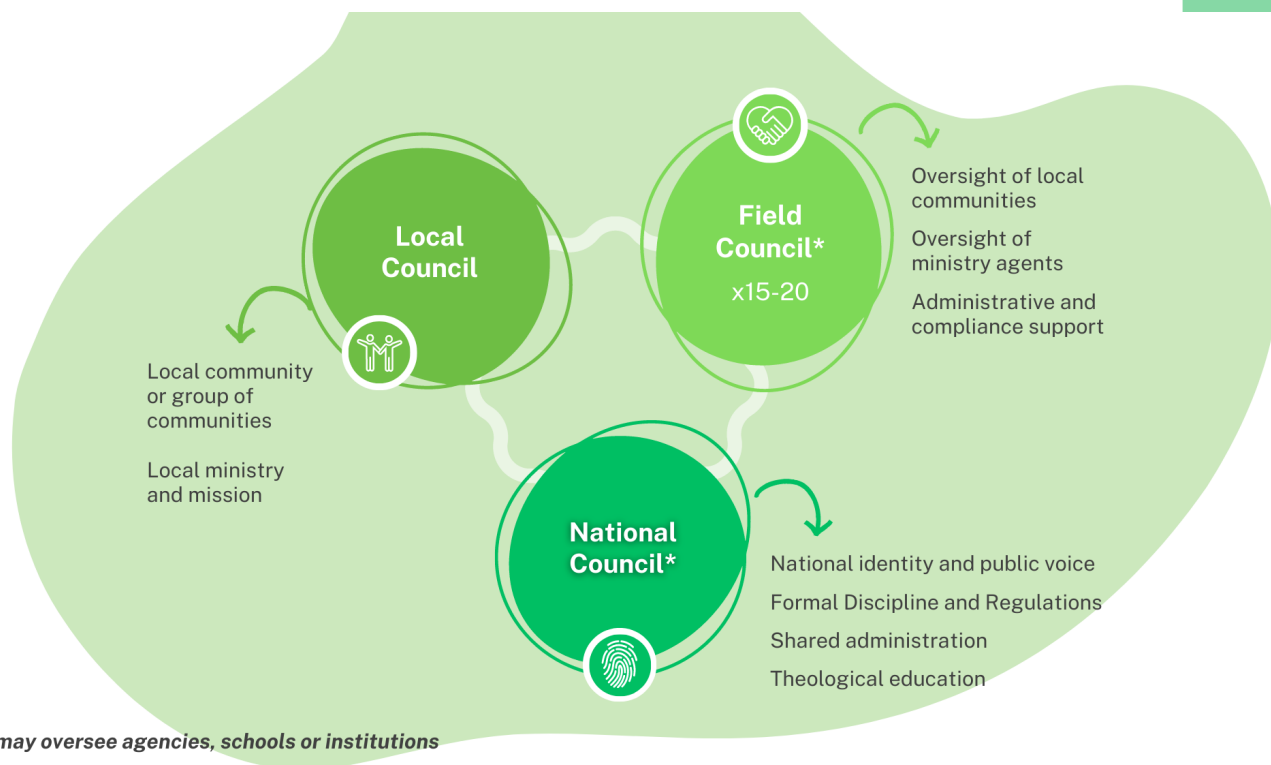
Structures should be thought of as for a time only, and open to regular review and change to respond to changing circumstances. The Basis of Union is very clear that the ‘law’ of the Church is not fixed and unchangeable but open to constant review. This is both our written law, and the way law is expressed through our structures and practices. Any model we adopt needs to be the best model we can currently identify for responding to God’s call and entering into mission in this particular time and place. But whatever the Church determines, it needs to be flexible to better enable healthy ministry and mission.

Implementation considerations

All four options include significant implementation considerations for existing councils’ responsibilities, resourcing and ways of working. We know this can cause concern for those already working within existing councils, fulfilling important roles on behalf of the Church. Disruption and change are also likely even within our current governance and resourcing arrangements. We have not sought to map every responsibility or function of every council within the options, rather we provide overall descriptions of role and responsibilities.

We have undertaken some initial analysis and exploration of the implications of the various options, including consultation with some other churches and institutions that have pursued similar changes. It is likely that implementation will involve tradeoffs between the effort required (including the investment of financial resources) and the impact that can be achieved. Further detailed work will be required in *Phase 3: Recommendations for Action*.

These options are offered to encourage the whole Church to imagine how our life could be different. Each in their own way seeks to address the various challenges and opportunities identified throughout the Act2 Project. No option is perfect, each one involves choices and trade-offs. We are seeking to discern the way forward to which God is calling us.



Option 1

This model envisages three councils¹⁷. A Local Council with oversight of one or a group of local communities of faith. This is the assumed Local Council model for all four options. The Field Council is a council focused on both ministry and mission and supporting Local Councils to fulfill their obligations. The National Council would have responsibilities for both matters of identity and administration.

Local Council

This council will be responsible for the day-to-day governance and oversight of a community of faith or a group of communities of faith. It would be responsible for:

“building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining its members in hope, and leading them into a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world.”

Basis of Union, paragraph 15b

It would be responsible for the day-to-day life of communities of faith including worship, the sacraments, pastoral care, local mission and administration. It would also be responsible for areas of property, finance and compliance depending on the capacity and capability of the Local Council.

It is anticipated most Local Councils would align with a ministry position or team of ministry positions. It is also anticipated that each Local Council would have resourcing for at least one administration position. Creating a Local Council for multiple communities of faith would be encouraged.

Field Council

This council would be responsible for:

- Oversight of local communities of faith.
- Oversight of those called to the specified ministries.
- Support Local Councils to fulfill administration, such as property, finance and compliance which is directly related to their local ministry and mission.
- This council would also be responsible for matters which were beyond the capacity and capability of Local Councils¹⁸.

- Oversight of some schools, colleges, agencies and other institutions depending on the scale and scope of their operations. (*see also: National Council*)

It is anticipated there would be about 15-20 Field Councils.

National Council

This council would be responsible for:

- Matters of core identity.
- Public voice and advocacy.
- Amending regulations subject to the Constitution.
- Oversight of national agencies.
- Shared administration where context is less relevant and efficiencies could be achieved.
- Standards and oversight of theological education including the governance of theological colleges.
- Formal discipline procedures.
- Oversight of some schools, colleges, agencies and other institutions and other institutions based on the scale and scope of their operations. (*see also: Field Council*)

Rationale

This is the most ambitious option proposed. It seeks to address most fundamentally the overlapping layers within our current governance structure. This option replaces both the Synod and the Presbytery with a new Field Council with an integrated set of responsibilities. It also seeks to consolidate to the National Council many of those administrative and compliance functions which are currently fulfilled by most Synods. It seeks to honour the Basis of Union's description that we are governed locally, regionally and nationally.

Opportunities

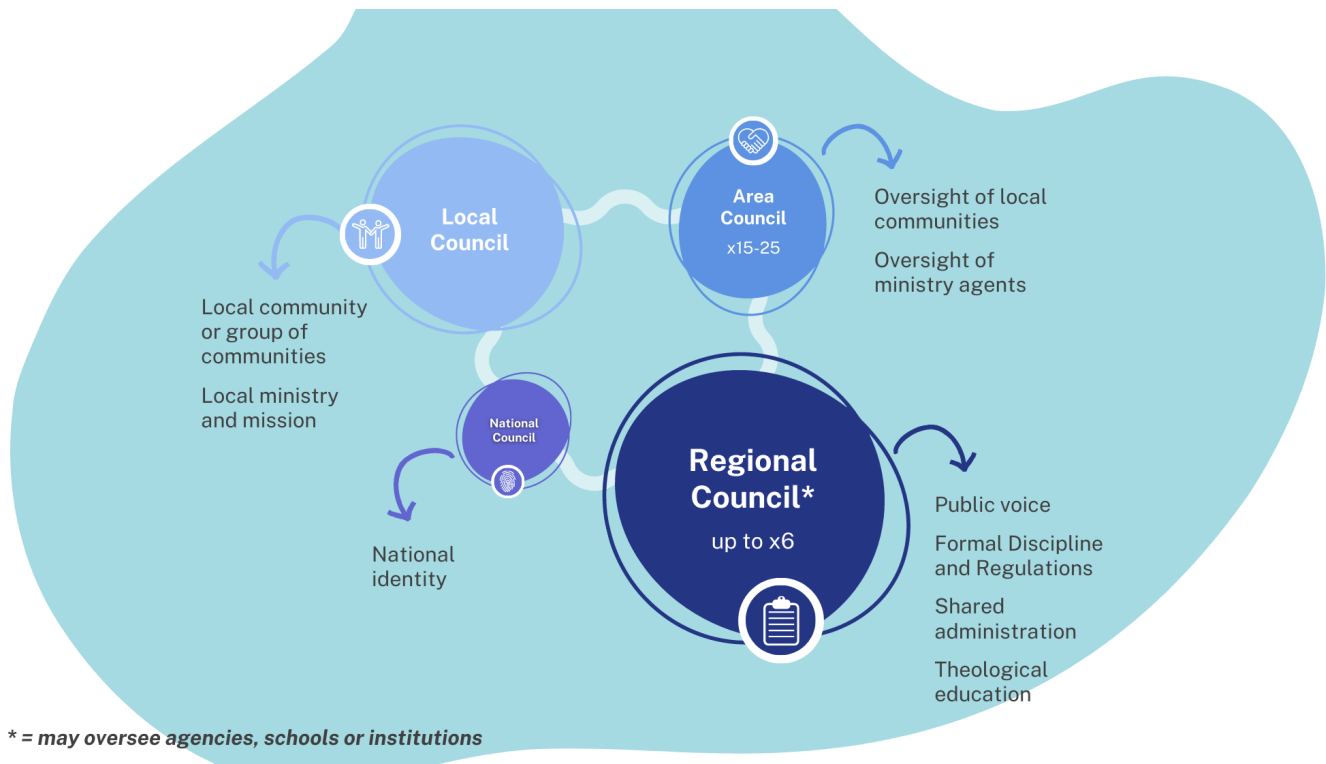
This option seeks to provide a significantly simpler and lighter model. It anticipates resourcing through Field Councils which would be both closer to the ground than most Synods and greater than most Presbyteries. It also presents the potential for significant efficiencies through the creation of a national administrative function, reducing duplication. It would also strengthen our national identity and the relationships we hold nationally with Congress and our international partners. It would represent a decisive break from the existing governance structure and invite a complete reimagining of the shape of all our councils in response to our significantly changed context.

Risks

This presents the most significant change management task. It would involve significant work to establish the new legal and operational arrangements of this model. While an approximation of this model may be able to be achieved under the existing Constitution, full implementation would likely involve constitutional change and significant legal work to manage the Property Trusts or move to a new legal structure. Alongside this the change management required to integrate people, processes and systems would also be significant. While there are potentially significant benefits in the final state, the transition costs would likely be substantial.

Implementation Considerations

- This option is likely to take the longest in terms of implementation with a period of transition over at least six years.
- The size and shape of Field Councils needs to ensure they are close enough to have effective oversight while also having the resources to fulfill their responsibilities.
- It would require a collective commitment across the councils of the Church to work through complexity and find workable solutions.
- Achieving efficiencies in administration is a goal of this option however it requires effort to align systems and processes well.
- This option would involve the greatest impact on personnel. To manage the transition functions and responsibilities would be consolidated over time.
- This option would have the greatest implications for the oversight of agencies and schools which currently relate to the existing Synod structures.



Option 2

This model envisages a very small National Council with strong Regional Councils focused on administration, with Area Councils focused on the oversight of local ministry and mission.

Local Council - as described in Option 1 (see page 49).

Area Council

This council would be responsible for:

- Oversight of local communities of faith.
- Oversight of those called to the specified ministries.

It would not be responsible for any matters of administration such as property, finance and compliance. This would be handled by the Regional Council directly with Local Councils. It is anticipated there would be about 15-25 Area Councils.

Regional Council

This council would be responsible for the administration of the Church, including:

- All matters of property, finance and compliance.
- Amending regulations subject to the Constitution.
- Public voice and advocacy.
- Standards and oversight of theological education including the governance of theological colleges.
- Formal discipline procedures.
- This council would also be responsible for matters which were beyond the capacity and capability of Local Councils¹⁹.
- Oversight of schools, colleges, agencies and other institutions.

Regional Councils would be responsible for their own financial sustainability and for collaboration with other Regions in areas such as theological education and formal discipline procedures.

It is anticipated there would be up to six Regional Councils, however there could be a reduction in those councils through bilateral arrangements between Regional Councils, endorsed by the National Council.

National Council

This council would be very small with a small staff secretariat. The National Council would only respond to requests from other councils to address matters of core identity or constitutional in nature. It would delegate its responsibilities under the regulations to Regional Councils. All existing national agencies would shift their oversight to one of the Regional Councils or become self-funding national collaborations.

Rationale

This option seeks to leverage the most significant existing source of institutional strength in the Church, particularly the Synods. Aligning regulatory and administrative responsibility within Regional Councils and relieving the Area Council of administrative functions reduces overlap and creates efficiencies. The most significant role the National Council plays is in its three-yearly meetings in session and therefore little resourcing is required nationally outside of those meetings.

Opportunities

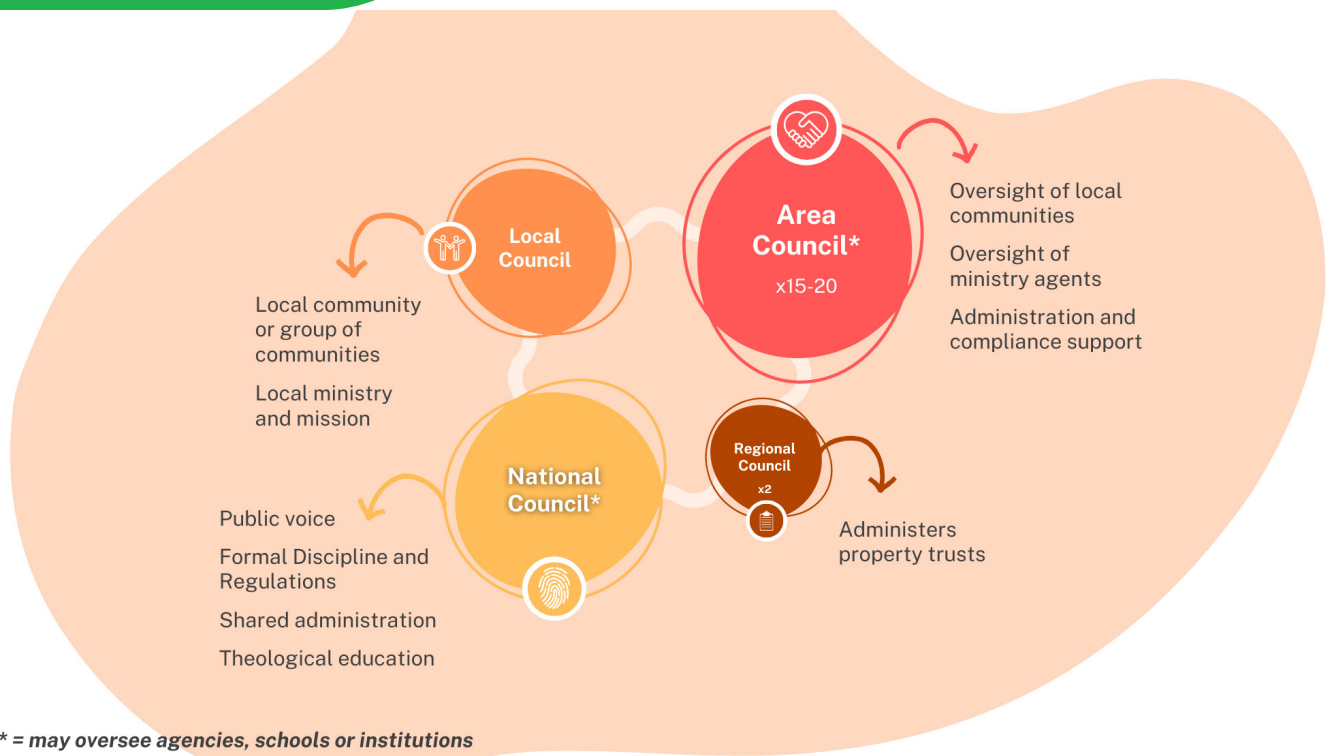
Area Councils are relieved of many of their administrative functions allowing them to focus on supporting local communities of faith and ministry agents. Regional Councils developing contextually relevant regulations provides flexibility and innovation without seeking national consensus. Voice on national issues could occur on behalf of any part of the Church in response to local issues, led by the Regional Council. The savings from a smaller National Council could be invested in local ministry and mission or in strengthening the administrative support to local communities of faith.

Risks

The national voice of the Church may be diminished. The National Council is already relatively small and so the savings may be relatively limited allowing for limited re-investment. Duplication across the councils of the Church continues. State-based culture becomes more entrenched making collaboration more difficult, and our Church more fragmented. Regional Councils which cannot find a sustainable funding model may struggle to find alternative arrangements. Divergence in regulation creates confusion and limits coherence across the Church. Relationships held by the National Council such as with Congress and international partners become harder to maintain.

Implementation Considerations

- This would likely take the shortest time to implement and could be achieved within three years.
- Determining how many Regional Councils could be sustained under this model is a foundational consideration.
- While not needing constitutional change, it would need significant negotiation between councils.
- The process of delegating regulatory and other responsibilities from the National to Regional Councils would need to occur through a phased transition.
- Negotiation would be required about which administrative responsibilities currently undertaken by Area Councils would be assumed by Regional Councils.
- Transfer of oversight of national agencies would involve finding willing Regional Councils which also maintained the national scope of the agencies.
- Depending on the appetite for national collaboration, there would be negotiation about establishing and resourcing national collaboration mechanisms.



Option 3

This model envisages four councils, a strong Area Council with a combination of ministry and mission responsibilities and some administrative and compliance responsibilities. It envisages two relatively small Regional Councils covering significant geographical areas. The focus of these of the Regional Council would be on the core functions associated with administering State and Territory Property Trusts. The National Council with responsibilities for both matters of identity and administration.

Local Council - as described in Option 1 (see page 49).

Area Council

This council would be responsible for:

- Oversight of local communities of faith.
- Oversight of those called to the specified ministries.
- Support Local Councils to fulfill administration, such as property, finance and compliance (directly related to their local ministry and mission).
- This council would also be responsible for matters which were beyond the capacity and capability of Local Councils²⁰.
- Oversight of some schools, colleges, agencies and other institutions depending on the scale and scope of their operations (see also: National Council)
- It is anticipated there would be about 15-20 Area Councils.

Regional Council

This council would be responsible primarily for:

- Administering the Property Trusts.
- Distribution of resources across the Area and National Councils so they can fulfill responsibilities.

It is anticipated there would be two Regional councils with boundaries determined in a way that ensured there was equality in the distribution of resources between the two.

National Council

This council would be responsible for:

- Matters of core identity
- Public voice and advocacy
- Amending regulations subject to the Constitution.
- Oversight of national agencies.
- Shared administration where context is less relevant and efficiencies could be achieved.
- Standards and oversight of theological education including the governance of colleges.
- Formal discipline procedures.
- Oversight of some schools, colleges, agencies and other institutions and other institutions based on the scale and scope of their operations. (*see also: Area Council*)

Rationale

While retaining the four councils, this option seeks to achieve the benefits of a strong Area Council with direct oversight of local communities of faith and the benefits of consolidating national functions. This seeks to achieve many the benefits envisaged by Option 1, without the disruption of shifting to a three-council model. The two Regional Councils could each include a significant economic hub on the Australian eastern seaboard to allow for redistribution across the Region. Through limiting the scope of the responsibilities of a Regional Council, the vastness of the geography and context covered by the Regional Council can be managed.

Opportunities

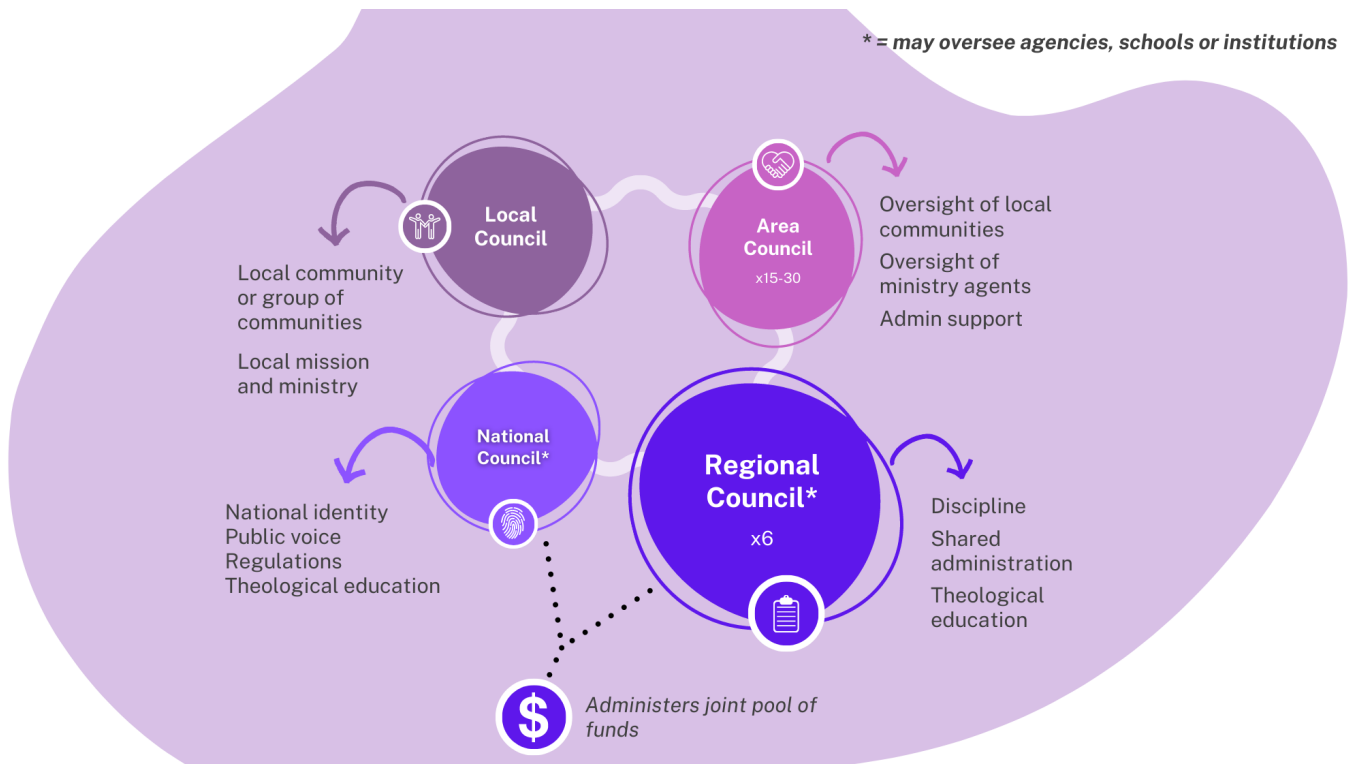
It anticipates resourcing through Area Councils both closer to the ground than most Synods and greater than most Presbyteries. This presents the potential for significant efficiencies through the creation of a national administrative function, reducing duplication. It would also strengthen our national identity and the relationships we hold nationally with Congress and international partners. It could likely be implemented within the existing Constitution.

Risks

Without careful management there is a risk of Regional Councils exercising cultural influence across vast and diverse parts of the country remote from the local context. There is also the possibility of entrenching the cultural distinction between the two regions. It may also not resolve the overlap of responsibilities between existing councils, particularly in areas of property.

Implementation Considerations

- This option is likely to take between three to six years to fully implement.
- This option would involve significant negotiation between the councils.
- The size and shape of Area Councils needs to ensure they are close enough to have effective oversight while also having the resources to fulfill their responsibilities.
- Establishing the right shape of Regional Councils would be important for economic equality.
- Negotiation would be required about which responsibilities remain with Regional Councils to fulfill obligations to the Property Trusts and which could move to Area/National Councils.
- Achieving efficiencies in administration is a goal of this option however this requires effort to align systems and process to not replicate current duplication.
- This option would have implications for the oversight of agencies and schools which currently relate to the existing Synod structures.



Option 4

This model envisages four councils in fundamentally the same form as they are now. Its key feature is the creation of an effective national resource redistribution mechanism. All Regional Councils would contribute to a national pool of funds. Potentially other councils and institutions of the Church may also be asked to contribute. This would be administered by a joint National-Regional Forum. This Forum would be responsible for agreeing the contribution of resources from various parts the Church and the distribution resources to Councils to the fulfill their responsibilities.

Local Council - This council would be as described in Option 1 (see page 49).

Area Council

- Oversight of local communities of faith.
- Oversight of those called to the specified ministries.
- Support Local Councils (shared with the Regional Council) to fulfill administration, such as property, finance and compliance directly relate to their local ministry and mission.
- This council would also be responsible for matters which were beyond the capacity and capability of Local Councils²¹.
- It is anticipated there would be about 15-30 Area Councils.

Regional Council

This council would be responsible for the administration of the Church including:

- Matters of property, finance and compliance (shared with Area Councils).
- Governance of theological colleges.
- Formal discipline procedures.
- Oversight of schools, colleges, agencies and other institutions.

Regional Councils would collaborate with other Regions in areas such as theological education, formal discipline procedures. It is anticipated there would be six Regional councils.

National Council

This council would be responsible for:

- Matters of core identity.
 - Public voice and advocacy.
 - Amending regulations subject to the Constitution.
 - Oversight of national agencies.
 - Standards for theological education.
-

Rationale

This option seeks to sustain the current structural arrangements based on the vast and diverse geographical context of the Australian continent. It seeks to address the inequitable distribution of resources without the disruption of significant structural change. The pooling of resources is to enable redistribution to support those parts of the Church ministry and mission needs more resources than can be generated locally. The new joint National-Regional decision-making forum is designed to be a new institution within the Church to cultivate a more whole of Church approach to resourcing. There would still be scope for some consolidation of functions via shared services arrangements, through greater collaboration across the existing conciliar structure.

Opportunities

This model would minimise disruption to the existing structures of the Church by focusing on the redistribution of resources to sustain the various councils. It would harness the existing working relationships and retain the councils and leaders which have developed a deep understanding of their contexts. It will minimise the disruption of significant structural change on an already stretched Church.

Risks

This model is unlikely to achieve a significant resource (financial and personnel) dividend for ministry and mission. There may not be sufficient funds to provide adequate funds for all councils. It also does not address the current overlap of responsibilities between the councils. While all models assume some clarification of responsibilities, the lack of structural changes limits the levers to enable those conversations. This model also would continue to entrench existing cultural divisions across our diverse geography.

Implementation Considerations

- This option could be implemented within the three years.
- The most significant issue with this option is the creation of the joint National-Regional Forum and pool of funds for resource redistribution.
- It would include deciding who from across the Church is expected to contribute to the mechanism and how contributions are to be determined.
- It would also include the basis for determining distributions from the national pool of funds.
- It is designed to be a cooperative mechanism however, there may need to be consideration if disputes arise.
- While this assumes six Regional Councils it is possible the pool of financial resources may not be able to support this number. This may also impact on the number of Area Councils with this model.

Endnotes

- 1 There is debate about whether the Congregation is a council. This report takes no view on that question.
- 2 Considering Afresh Our Life Together (October 2021) and Act2: On The Way (May 2022)
- 3 For more on the Workstreams and Core Commitments [see here](#).
- 4 For more reflections on the Basis of Union as it relates to the Act2 Project see Rev Dr Geoff Thompson's, Our Life Together: Reflections on the Basis of Union, November 2021.
- 5 Many of these are reflected in the Act2: On The Way Report to the 16th Assembly.
- 6 For example, Clause 70, Constitution (Transfer and Delegation of authorities and responsibilities); Reg. 3.6.2(d) (Moderator appointing Presbytery Chairperson); Reg. 3.10.1. (Exemption and Alternative Regulations)
- 7 [See here](#).
- 8 We Are A Multicultural Church, 4th Assembly, 1985.
- 9 Covenanting Statement, 7th Assembly, 1994.
- 10 Revised Preamble to the Constitution, 12th Assembly, July 2009.
- 11 For more on both Covenanting and Multicultural Church see Michelle Cook, "The Ecclesiology of a Covenanting and Multicultural Church" in Uniting Church Studies Vol. 24 No. 2, December 2022.
- 12 Manual for Meetings, approved by the Assembly Standing Committee, November 2014.
- 13 For a vivid image of the lightening burden of travellers see Rev Prof Andrew Dutney's blog 'A fellowship of reconciliation,' 'A pilgrim people.' 16 April 2013. He recounts the story of German backpackers tearing out pages from their guide book once they had left a place to which they did not plan to return.
- 14 At the moment the Area Council role is fulfilled by the Presbytery. Note that in the Options under Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing outlined below in Option 1 the council responsible for direct oversight of local communities of faith is called the 'Field Council'. In all other options it is called the 'Area Council'. For simplicity we have used 'Area Council' for all of the Directions in Workstream 1.
- 15 [See here](#).
- 16 p. 149, Robert Bos and Geoff Thompson (eds), "The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering". In Theology for Pilgrims: Selected Theological Documents of the Uniting Church in Australia, Uniting Church Press, Sydney, 2008.
- 17 There is debate about whether the Congregation is a council.. For the purposes of these options the Congregation is not counted as a council.
- 18 See Direction 3(b) for a description of how this may happen in an individual Local Council.
- 19 See Direction 3(b) for a description of how this may happen in an individual Local Council.
- 20 See Direction 3(b) for a description of how this may happen in an individual Local Council.
- 21 See Direction 3(b) for a description of how this may happen in an individual Local Council.