

## **An invitation – to consider the future of the Uniting Church as a people of God on the way**

*As we look to the future, what is God saying to us as the Uniting Church about how we order our life so we can be committed to transforming lives and communities in God's love? Be part of the UCA Act2 project as we discern God's way together.*

In the lead up to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly, members of the Uniting Church, its congregations, agencies, schools and Councils, are invited to engage in a conversation about the future to which God is calling our Church.

Throughout 2020, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) has participated in conversations about the future for the Uniting Church, and our responsibility to listen to God's living Word. Just as those who collaborated to bring the Uniting Church to birth, we too are being called to look ahead with faithfulness and openness to confess Jesus Christ, the risen crucified One, in fresh words and deeds, including new, innovative and culturally engaged ways of being the Church.

The Uniting Church has been on a journey since it began 43 years ago. Things have changed, in our Church, in our country and in the world. Whilst Christians make up a smaller proportion of Australian society, Australian Christians are more culturally and theologically diverse than they were at the time of union. Society's attitudes towards Christianity have become more complex and less predictable. It's time to check the health of our Church and ask, 'where is God leading us, what is God calling us to do in this new context and how do we order our lives to best fulfil that calling?'

As the Uniting Church, we belong to the people of God on the way. With the whole church, we are called to be an instrument through which Christ bears witness to himself. We believe we are called to pray for the gift of the Spirit as we enter into a time of self-examination of our life, heeding the invitation of the Basis of Union to consider afresh the ordering of our lives so that we can live out our common commitment to the Church's mission and to demonstrate our unity.

As we do this, we are guided by the vision of the Basis of Union as we embody the rich and diverse expressions of our Church.

### **Strengths and Challenges**

The Uniting Church at its best has many diverse expressions of who it is as a church. As the ASC reflected on this it identified the centrality of Christ, connectedness to the world - particularly local communities, the diversity of our people and our justice orientations as clear markers of our identity. Along with the Basis of Union we have a rich collection of resources to guide and shape our life. These include both those documents that shaped the journey to Union,<sup>1</sup> along with statements such as the Statement to the Nation (1977), the Covenant Statement (1994), The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church (1985), and the revised Preamble to the Constitution (2009) which have continued to shape and define our life.

At our best we have participated in the reconciling work of Christ and been able to harness our inclusivity and diversity to be a risk-taking, flexible and adaptable Church, open to renewal in our

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<sup>1</sup> The Faith of the Church (1959), The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering (1963)

life. However, the ASC also reflected on some of the challenges we are facing as a Church. Externally there is a loss of trust and confidence in the Christian church, this has never been more clearly demonstrated than in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Alongside this has been a declining membership and an aging demographic. This has led to an underutilised property base and a constrained financial environment. These factors are all leading to strains on the structural sustainability of our Church as a whole and therefore our ability to live out our calling. A critical part of this project's work is to understand both the causes and consequences of these strains so that effective solutions can be identified and implemented.

How we respond to these challenges will say something about who we are as the Uniting Church, our identity. We need to stay true to who we are, as we need to open ourselves to God's guidance and direction, recognising that Christ constitutes, rules and renews the Church.

### **What will we be doing? (the task)**

The ASC has discerned the task before us as identifying and implementing sustainable structures, practices and ways of working.

To undertake this work together, we have to have clarity about who we are as the Uniting Church. Having this common grounding as seen in the Basis of Union enables us to engage with one another with a shared foundation, be open to the leading of the Spirit and to look with hope-filled anticipation to the future.

The Basis of Union does lay out some important signposts to guide our consideration of how we order our lives:

1. Christ alone is supreme and constitutes, rules and renews his Church;
2. The responsibility of governing our life belongs to women and men by virtue of their gifts;
3. We are governed by inter-related councils organised locally, regionally and nationally;
4. Our councils have responsibilities both in relation to the Church and the world;
5. Each council is asked to wait upon God's Word and obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight;
6. The relationship between councils is defined by the goal of being united by mutual submission in service of the Gospel.

These principles could lead to a variety of different expressions of how we order our lives. As we explore together both our current reality and our collective future, we are challenged to ask how these principles might shape us. Throughout our Basis of Union there is a clear understanding that our work is unfinished. The final two sentences of Paragraph 15 invites parts of the Church to:

*"...enter a period of self-examination in which members are asked to consider afresh their common commitment to the Church's mission and their demonstration of its unity. The Uniting Church prays that God will enable them to order their lives for these purposes."*

The ASC sees a similar period of self-examination is necessary in our current season.

There are a variety of ways we could explore the ordering of our lives. The ASC has identified structure, practices and ways of working. Structure refers to the formal governing bodies we have including their nature, number, responsibilities and relationship to one another. Practices refer to those formal ways we work captured in our various governing documents such as the Constitution and Regulations, Manual for Meetings, By-laws and other governing instruments. Ways of working refers more to the informal ways we work together and relate to one another across our Church, often uncodified, usually reflecting our different contexts, culture and customs.

The way we order our lives has adapted and changed over time, in response to changes in our context, however this adaptation has involved improvisation within the formal structures of the Church. This is an opportunity to look holistically across the life of our Church at these structures, practices and ways of working.

Finally, the ASC identified three outcomes which were critical to any future structure, practices and ways of working:

1. *Create an enabling environment for local communities of worship, witness, service and discipleship formation.*

There are many diverse local communities of the Uniting Church, however we describe them, engaging in worship, witness, service and discipleship formation. We aspire that more of our local communities, confident in the gospel, are equipped and released for this work. We also know that there is a role the wider Church plays in either enabling or hindering this aspiration.

2. *Foster a cohesive national character of the Church and collaborative ways of working across the Church.*

We are also a national church with collective voice on issues of significance for our nation. To be a truly national church we want to foster a more cohesive sense of ourselves. We also know that as our resourcing context becomes more challenging, we need to build on our current collaborative efforts to build broader and deeper collaboration on the common challenges we face.

3. *Fulfil the Church's legal, ethical and social obligations.*

We also know that the Christian church has failed to meet the expectations it has of itself and the wider society has of it. As a church we are committed to addressing those failings and striving to better meet these legal, ethical and social obligations. This requires us to order our lives in such a way that we can meet those obligations as effectively and efficiently as possible

### **How can you be involved?**

There will be multiple ways you can engage with this conversation, to share your insights, experiences and learnings, and to offer your ideas, expertise and hopes.

There are a few main ways you can initially engage with this project:

1. **Survey** – we'll be surveying as many Uniting Church members and employees as possible to hear from you and for you to tell us what you've already been sharing in your communities about the future of the UCA. These insights will help shape and guide our further conversations. This survey is available [here](#).
2. **Online conversations** – we'll be hosting five open zoom conversations so we can listen to each other about our thoughts and ideas, the challenges we are facing and what the next steps might be. You'll have to register for these as numbers are limited. However, we hope these might also be conversations you have in your local context, and then you let us know what came out of them. These conversations will start soon, so look out for the dates and how to register.
3. **Reflecting on the Basis of Union** – the Basis of Union is the document that guides the Uniting Church. In the lead up to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly in 2021, we want to reflect on it and what it tells us about who we are as the Uniting Church. We'll be providing resources for you to do this, and opportunities for you to feed back to us how this reflection speaks to you about the task we have in this project.

You'll see and hear a lot about this project over the coming months. We hope you'll tell us what you're thinking or talking about with others. If you want to write to us, you can email us at: [uca.act2@nat.uca.org.au](mailto:uca.act2@nat.uca.org.au).

We encourage you to participate and to be part of building a shared vision and future for the Uniting Church.