

ACT2:

CONSIDERING AFRESH
OUR LIFE TOGETHER



Introduction from the General Secretary

Thank you to everyone who participated in phase one of the Act2 consultation. The Act2 survey and national conversations provided us with rich data and insights into how members, congregations, groups and Councils are travelling. Phase one showed us that the UCA has many strengths, and there is a strong commitment to our Church and to the future.

Alongside this was a clear acknowledgement that we are facing many challenges, both internally and externally. As we look to the future and consider afresh our life together, it is obvious we can't stay the way we are. We need to be open to what is required to be the Church God is calling us to be, as we focus on growing and nurturing life-giving local communities of faith and hope.

We appreciate you taking the time to read this paper. You will see what we have heard in phase one of the consultation and that we offer some conclusions. Please take the time to respond to the online questions so we can hear what you think.



Colleen Geyer
Assembly General Secretary

The Context

In 2020, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) recognised that we as a Church are living in a time of significant change, opportunity and challenge. Determining to heed the invitation of the Basis of Union to consider afresh the ordering of our lives, Act2 emerged. The Act2 project is a recognition that both the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and wider Australian society have changed radically in the 44 years since Union. It is an opportunity to find what we need to do, or how we might need to change to live out our common commitment to the Church's mission and to demonstrate our unity as the People of God.

The ASC believes that the UCA has many evident strengths, and over its life, has listened carefully to the voice of the Spirit's leading and continued to boldly develop its unique identity within the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic church in Australia. However, the ASC also reflected on the significant issues which have faced the UCA and continue to present the Church with very real challenges and questions at this time.

The ACT2 project was conceived by the ASC as a way of **identifying and implementing sustainable structures, practices and ways of working**¹.

In considering this, the ASC determined that there were three critical outcomes to address:

1. *Create an enabling environment for local communities of worship, witness, service and discipleship formation,*
2. *Foster a cohesive national character of the Church and collaborative ways of working across the Church, and*
3. *Fulfil the Church's legal, ethical and social obligations.*

Members of the ASC have received feedback from UCA members, ministers and communities struggling with aspects of the Church's life as they seek to live out their calling as faithful disciples. Many of these issues have also now been heard through the Act2 consultative process. If you've been part of the Uniting Church for any time at all, perhaps you too have heard (or told!) stories like these...

With a creak and then a loud clatter, the guttering ripped off the church hall and fell to the ground. Dorothy shrieked as she jumped back, almost tripping over Neville's feet. "Yep," he said, "I figured it was about to fall. I told you we needed to get that fixed." Dorothy shook her head and wondered, where was the Church Council going to find the money to replace the guttering when they were still paying off repairs from last year? In the past there would have been working bees and young men from the congregation pitching in to

¹ 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 uncoded, usually reflecting our different contexts, culture and customs.

ensure that the property was kept in shape... But none of them were young anymore. Neville and Dorothy felt like the 'young ones' on Church Council these days, and she was 71, Neville a few years older. Dorothy felt like the Council should be talking about the future of the congregation, maybe following up some of those Presbytery questionnaires about their mission or vision, but somehow the Council never got to those kind of issues. They had enough on their hands dealing with the finances and ever-present property issues. And nobody was very clear on exactly where such a discussion should start? Should they try to do something themselves, or approach the Presbytery or perhaps the Synod for help? Dorothy had hoped that Chris, who joined the Council last year would bring some new ideas, but last week he had resigned. "I'm so sorry, I really appreciate you all, but my boys just feel so alone as the only children in the congregation and I really feel like I have to take them somewhere that they can mix with other Christian kids. We'll pray for you." Neville interrupted her train of thought. "I can't help thinking that this building and land could be better used in some creative way — I remember someone talking about the need in the town for a new day care centre. It would be great to work collaboratively on some missional project, but I just don't know how such a conversation could start, or who to speak to about it." Dorothy was about to respond, when another section of gutter collapsed.

Kemala looked at the letter from the Presbytery one more time. It had taken every bit of her concentration to read the dense English but she thought she understood it now, and was a little stunned. The letter informed her that the Indonesian congregation to which she belonged had one month to ensure that all their equipment, supplies and belongings were packed up and taken away from the church hall they had called home for the past six years, because the property was to be sold. In a daze, Kemala dialled the number of the Church Council secretary of the Anglo congregation with whom they shared the property. She quickly came to the point — "Tom, did you know about this? What's happening to your congregation?" To Kemala's shock, Tom explained that the Anglo congregation had instituted this sale, which had been in the planning for 6-9 months. They were planning to merge with another nearby congregation and were allowing the Presbytery to use the sale proceeds toward a project for housing for tertiary students. "But why hasn't anyone spoken to us?" Kemala asked. Tom cleared his throat awkwardly, "Well, we thought it was better coming from the Presbytery, given it's a legal thing." Kemala felt like crying. She, and other elders from her congregation had met almost every month with members of the Anglo Church Council for the past six years. The first meetings had been tense, but Kemala had thought they were developing a relationship. She had taken at face value the comments about 'welcome', 'partnership' and 'being a multicultural church'. And now this! Kemala guessed that she would have to take this up with the Presbytery, but had little faith that anything would change. After all, it had taken 12 years for the Presbytery to work through the convoluted process of recognising and accepting her group as a congregation of the Uniting Church. And the Presbytery still hadn't responded to her letter about the joint mission they wanted to begin with another Indonesian congregation across the city. Informal conversations

with Presbytery Relations Committee (PRC) members had informed Kemala that this was problematic because the other congregation was in another Presbytery and there were concerns about where insurance liability would sit. Kemala steeled herself, and reached for the Presbytery address directory.

Mary sighed and looked down at the half-completed six-page financial return. In the other room, she could hear the rest of her family watching a movie and laughing. She wanted to join them but was spending another evening doing work for the Presbytery. Mary wasn't even the Presbytery Treasurer, but the Treasurer had asked for help and Mary had volunteered. As her headache started throbbing, Mary threw the form down, on top of the letter from the National Safe Church Unit about online Child Safety training. Mary had no idea how she would corral the many volunteer workers in their congregations into sitting down for this training. Half of them refused to even receive her Presbytery meeting minutes by email. Mary was aware that she also hadn't read the papers for the upcoming PRC meeting. How had she gotten trapped into that committee as well as Standing Committee and now the new 'revitalisation of the Presbytery' task group as well? As one of the only people involved in Presbytery leadership who was still of working age, Mary felt a sense of pressure to step up and take some load from the ageing retirees who filled most of the positions. But she was also aware that unlike some of the committee members, she also had a part-time job, as well as her family responsibilities! Sometimes she had to use her annual leave to attend the day long Presbytery meetings held on a weekday. As her mind drifted over the likely agenda for PRC, Mary felt bad about the fact that she still hadn't completed the Working With Children Check audit process. She didn't know where to start, to be honest. The Presbytery records were so patchy. It wasn't for lack of desire to record things properly, but they were unable to afford any paid administrative staffing. Different records were scattered in various places and occasionally lost altogether. Picking up the financial return again, Mary idly wondered whether she would have the time to prepare a sermon for her rostered Sunday this month.

Some of the challenges and opportunities facing the UCA might be illustrated in the case studies above!

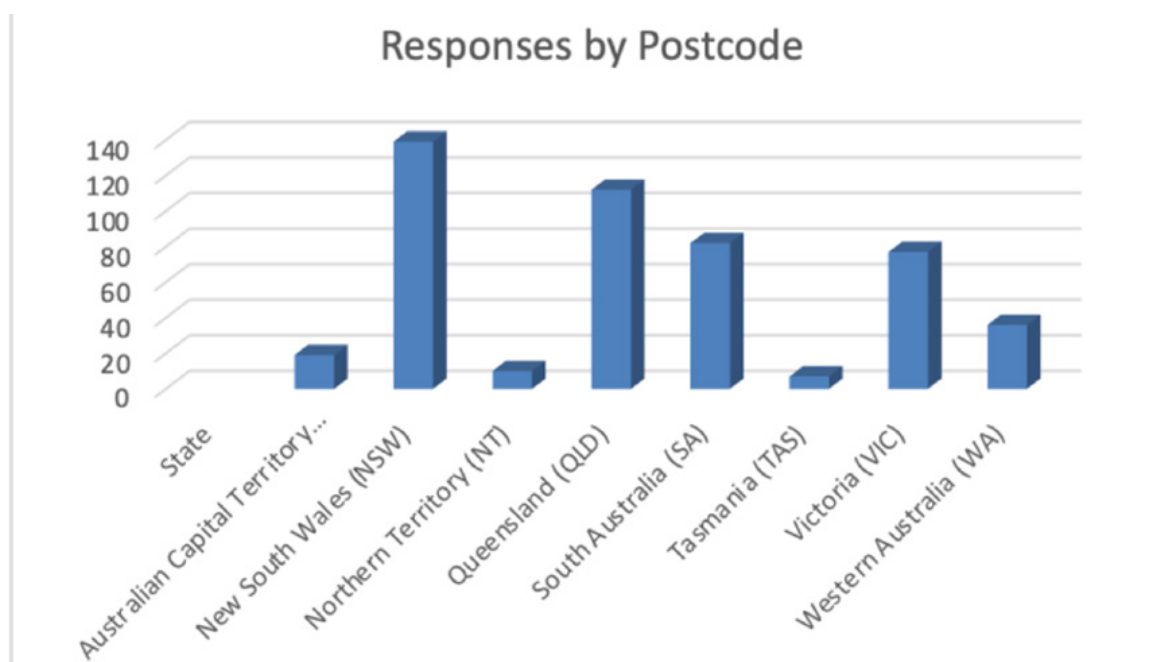
The ASC was keen to ground its thinking about sustainable structures, practices and ways of working in broad feedback from members of the Church and so this shaped the creation of an online survey and a series of online conversations during the first half of 2021, which were the first engagement in the process of discernment with the wider Church. The purpose of this paper is to feed back to the Church some of what we have heard through this process so far, as well as a sense of what we think this might mean for our future structures, practices and ways of working.

The Survey

Demographics

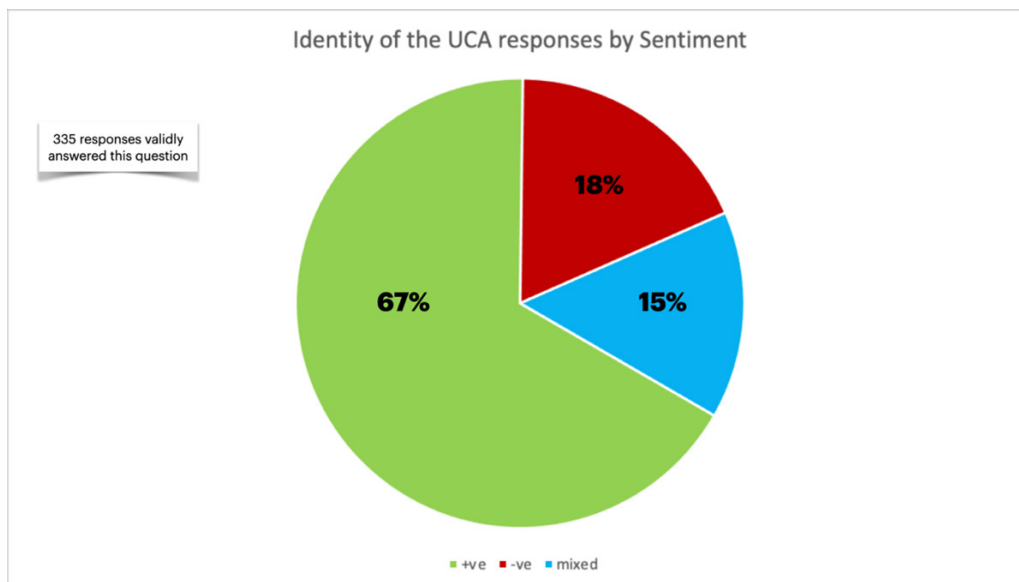
The Survey was made available for approximately five months, from December 2020 up until April 2021. During this time a total of 626 people filled in some or all of the survey. Of this number of responses, more than three-quarters (77%) identified themselves as individual members of the Church. About 15% identified themselves as an employee of the Church or one of its schools or agencies. The remaining 8% identified as a person responding on behalf of a larger group — a Congregation, Church Council, Presbytery, Synod, School or Agency.

A significant number of respondents (144 out of 626) declined to provide a Postcode, but of those who did, the spread from geographic states can be seen below.



Identity

One of the survey questions asked responders, "In light of the Basis of Union, how would you describe the identity of the Uniting Church?" A total of 335 responses gave answers to this question. Responses were divided into three categories — responses which were positive about the identity of the Church, those that were negative, and those which evidenced mixed feelings about the Church. As can be seen from the graph below, nearly seven out of ten responses were positive, with the remainder split fairly evenly between negative and mixed responses.



Some Typical Examples of Positive Characterisations of the UCA

"The Uniting Church is an amazing, diverse, community of God's people bearing witness to the renewing love of Jesus Christ in Australia. At its heart is its every member ministry, equality between women and men, its focus on social justice, its open Communion table and its Covenant relationship between First and Second Peoples. At its best, it is a living organism of inter-conciliar structures that allow each member to express their gifts in the body of Christ in a non-hierarchical structure, eschewing the corporatisation that would diminish the identity of the Church as a whole. The Holy Spirit sustains our pilgrim people on the way."

"Australian! The Uniting Church in Australia has in my opinion done more than any other Christian denomination to boldly address moral issues in a contemporary way. I refer to women in ministry; compassion to drug addicts; inclusion of LGBTI people and loving them into the kingdom; ordination of LGBTI members; climate change; social justice. A church truly representing contemporary Australian values."

"The UCA is a church of the now, with relevancy and interaction in local community, statewide community and nationally. We pilgrimage together, as the whole people of God, welcoming diversity of humanity and so, hold theological and lived-faith expressions with breadth and depth that reflects intergenerational, multicultural, equality of leadership across all people and ages, and gender diversity. We stand in faith through solidarity with matters of justice and peace, particularly Reconciliation with our First People's through respect and deep listening, welcoming all God's family through ecumenical and multi-faith expressions, and education that enriches faith, life and community, locally, nationally and globally."

"An entity peculiar to Australia, with a unique opportunity to provide a model for life lived deeply, faithfully and inclusively, showing this country how to be truly cross generational, cross cultural and generous in acceptance of

difference, not only of language, culture and race, but of physical and mental capacity, respecting gender difference, but intolerant of violence, both physical and mental."

"Embodying Christ's message of love and compassion through actively seeking justice for all and talking courageous decisions that make clear that God's love, grace and mercy extends to all of creation."

Some Typical Examples of Mixed Characterisations of the UCA

"A mish/mash of people, some poles apart but willing to work together (when necessary) for the benefit of others and God's glory. Sad, battered and bruised but with many rays of hope and determination shining through."

"UCA inherits the rich traditions of the 3 joining churches. Less liturgical and more down to earth than Anglican and Catholic but more theological than Baptists. Open to charismatic gifts but these are not central. At best, an inclusive church welcoming people who are evangelical or liberal, traditional or progressive, activist or conservative. At its worst, a struggle for primacy between these alternative views. Strives to be democratic but is far more bureaucratic. Claims to listen to all the voices but when the issues get passionate the majority silence the minority."

"We like to talk about being a Pilgrim people, willing to leave behind structures that no longer serve us. We like to talk about being open and inclusive. We are a mixed bag on this."

"The Uniting Church in Australia is in transition, it has been finding its way and is growing into a culturally diverse and inclusive church as a people of God. However, in regional areas we have different struggles and the welfare arm of the church is an imperative support in our communities as we deal with crises such as drought, fire, COVID. Many of our Congregations in our region are faithful to the church, however as they age are struggling to maintain governance, buildings, ministry."

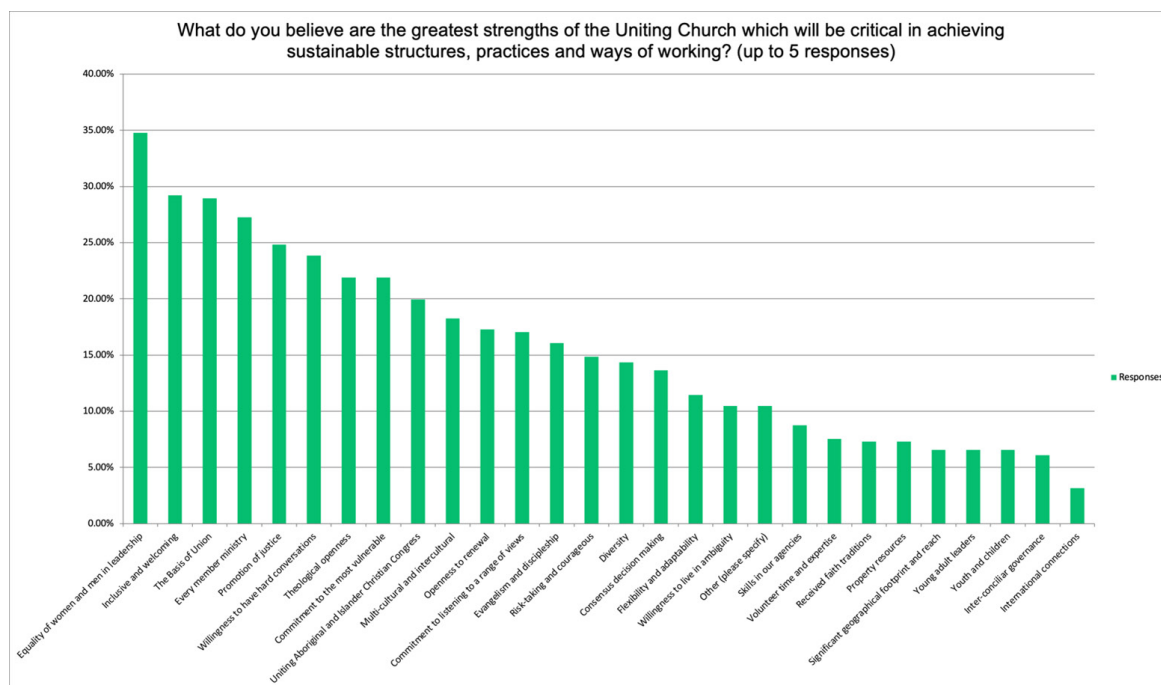
"A church with theological perspectives and an understanding of the Gospel that are, if not uniquely, certainly well placed to engage with 21st century context and thought. This is evidenced in the various statements of the church. It is a church that is doing many good things with members who struggle to articulate what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It is also a church that has a polity that is overly cumbersome and ways of being church that are probably unfit for our times."

Some Typical Examples of Negative Characterisations of the UCA

"Lost its way. Leadership of the UC has lost its core values and needs to return to focusing on growing the Church by bringing people into a relationship with God through salvation in Jesus. Every generation has to be born again, God doesn't have grandchildren. The UC is losing membership in Australia faster than any other denomination. While social issues are important and part of our Christian faith leading people to Jesus should be our core activity not social issues."

Strengths

One of the questions asked about the strengths of the Uniting Church and the responses can be seen in the graph below.



If the responses to this question were divided up on the basis of whether the responder had answered the 'Identity of the UCA' question positively, negatively or mixed, some slight variations could be seen.

The top 3 strengths identified by positive responders were:

1. "Inclusive and welcoming"
2. "Equality of women and men in leadership"
3. "Basis of Union" and "Every member ministry" (tied)

For those who had a mixed view of the UCA, the top strengths were:

1. "Equality of women and men in leadership"
2. "Commitment to the most vulnerable"
3. "Willingness to have hard conversations" and "Multi-cultural and Intercultural" (tied)

For those who had a negative view of UCA identity, the top strengths were:

1. "Equality of women and men in leadership"
2. "Willingness to have hard conversations"
3. "Basis of Union"

Issues to address / Audiences to Address

Responders were given a range of issues and asked to rank these issues in terms of their importance in achieving the ASC's three desired outcomes (listed above on page 3).

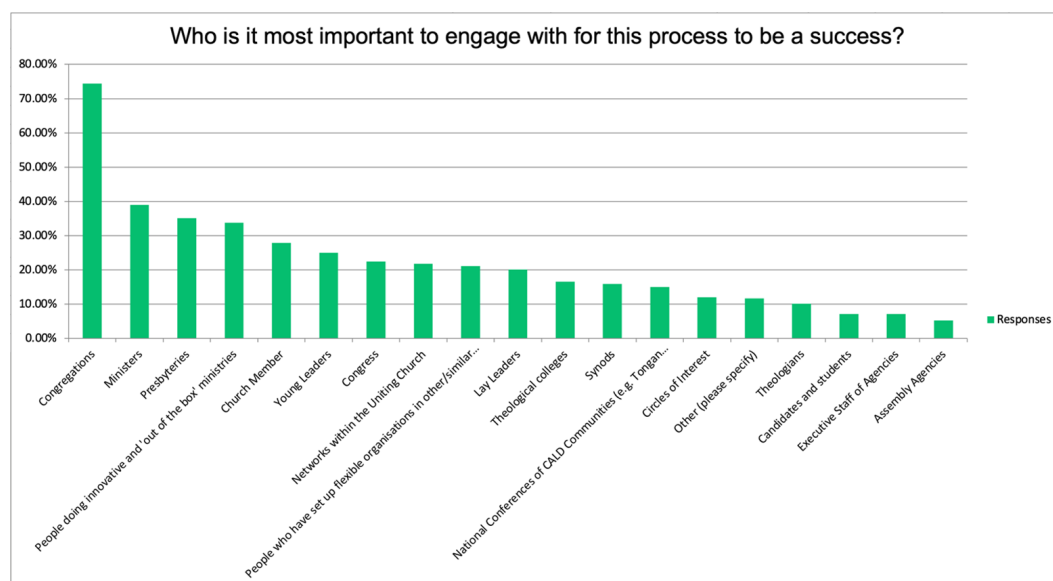
The following table shows the top answers, categorised into issues of a similar type.

Top 10 Issues to Achieve the Three Outcomes (Grouped by Topic)

Enabling Environment for local communities		Foster Cohesive National Character		Fulfil legal, ethical and social obligations		Total Respondents	
Building and finding sustainable ways of supporting new models of being Church	131	Whole of Church vision and strategy	97	Relationship with social services agencies	77	Building and finding sustainable ways of supporting new models of being Church	172
Loss of confidence and focus on the gospel and mission	117	Clarity on the Church's theological identity	81	Cumbersome and complex governance structures and requirements	62	Loss of confidence and focus on the gospel and mission	150
Encouraging and equipping young leaders	111	A stronger voice in the public sphere as a Church	80	Addressing our environmental sustainability	61	Encouraging and equipping young leaders	150
Membership decline and age profile	87	Loss of confidence and focus on the gospel and mission	63	Fixing over-governed and costly structure	51	A stronger voice in the public sphere as a Church	129
Maintaining space for a diverse points of view while living together well	69	Maintaining space for a diverse points of view while living together well	57	Sustainability of the Assembly in exercising its various responsibilities	50	Whole of Church vision and strategy	126
Property resources misaligned or underutilised	66	Internal conflict, difficulty maintaining unity in diversity	56	Councils under-resourced for undertaking the matters allocated to their oversight	49	Clarity on the Church's theological identity	126
Addressing the general post-Christendom anxiety that we're a dying Church	63	Diminishing of the voice of the wider membership in our decision making about directions of our life and mission.	56	Structure and regulations is not fit for the Church needs today	47	Maintaining space for a diverse points of view while living together well	119
Diminishing of the voice of the wider membership in our decision making about directions of our life and mission.	55	Building and finding sustainable ways of supporting new models of being Church	54	A stronger voice in the public sphere as a Church	46	Cumbersome and complex governance structures and requirements	114
Building an attractive model of church	54	Relationship with Congress	51	Clarity of roles of various councils and governing bodies	42	Diminishing of the voice of the wider membership in our decision making about directions of our life and mission.	113
Fixing over-governed and costly structure	49	Addressing the general post-Christendom anxiety that we're a dying Church	48	Too many councils and committees for the size of the Church	41	Relationship with social services agencies	111

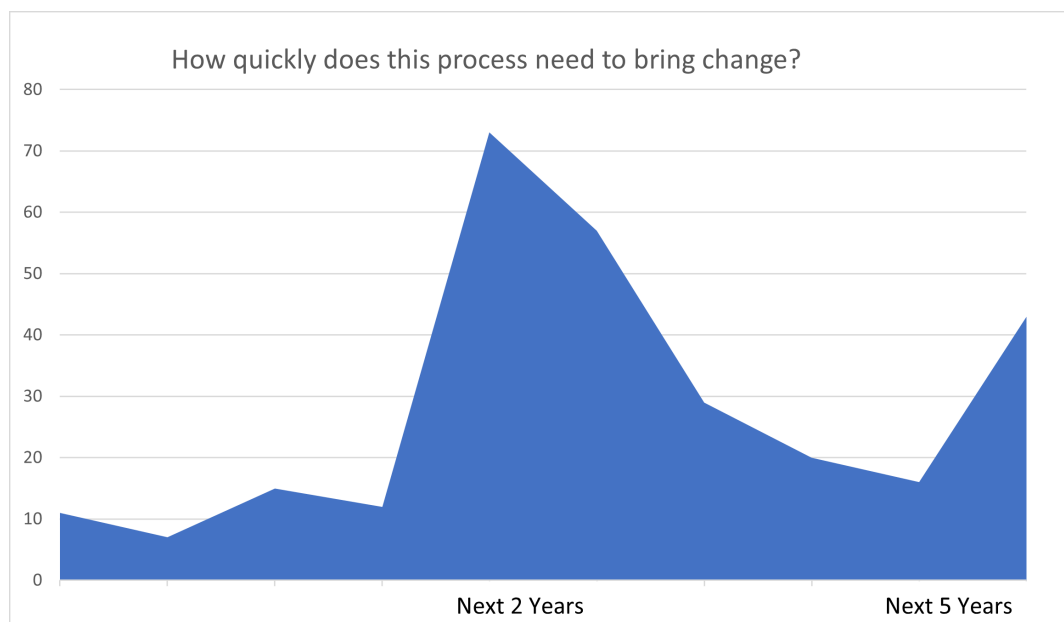
Topic Groups: Structural issues Property/Finance/Resource Issues Issues of Vision/Identity/Communication Other Issues

Responders were also asked who were the most important audiences to be engaged in the process if it was to be successful. As can be seen below, Congregations were by far seen as the most critical, with Ministers as the second most important audience.



Urgency

When asked about the urgency of this project, a clear majority indicated a time frame of around 2 years.



The Conversations

In addition to the survey, a series of six Zoom conversations were held — most were open to people who had expressed an interest, while one was specifically called as a gathering of UCA community service agency leaders. A number of common themes arose from these conversations. Many of these were similar to the survey data above. Some of these have been illustrated in the case studies at the beginning of this paper, or below. Feedback encompassed the following broad areas:

Strengths

- Our membership and its diversity, faithfulness and wisdom
- Commitment to justice and engagement with the marginalised
- Openness to new ideas, questioning and scholarship
- Consensus and the inter-conciliar structure
- Priority on the relationship with First Peoples
- Deliberate focus on the intercultural nature of the Church

Challenges

- A lack of relevance to the community and especially to younger generations
- A loss of trust in the Church
- Inability to communicate the gospel, to share faith or to articulate the ethos and values of the Church
- Lack of ordained leadership, issues in providing training of lay leaders, lack of younger leaders
- Restrictive and 'siloe'd' structures, too many 'levels'

- A sense of growing burden caused by increasing workload regarding compliance and governance requirements
- Lack of appropriate resourcing for different Councils of the Church, especially presbyteries
- Financial and demographic decline
- Issues related to property, buildings and maintenance
- Relationship of community service agencies with the wider Church
- Establishing a shared vision for all members, councils of the Church and agencies

One particularly significant insight arising from the summarisation of input from the conversations, which we have tried to capture in the case studies at the beginning of this paper, and below, is that the structural burdens of the Church are affecting both our capacity to grow and nurture life-giving local communities of faith and hope, as well as our capacity to fulfil the Church's legal, ethical and social obligations.

In our Zoom conversations, we heard many stories like the three listed at the beginning of this paper, or like the following:

Penny flopped into her armchair, exhausted after a stressful morning. Penny didn't like public speaking at the best of times, but she had agreed to attend the local Uniting Church to talk about the new community service programs her agency was beginning to run. Penny was confused. The agency she worked for was supposedly part of the Uniting Church, but the parishioners today had seemed almost entirely uninterested in the programs in which Penny was so invested. Before the service Penny had stood around awkwardly in the foyer, feeling lonely as other people came and chatted to one another, while ignoring her. After the service as she stood near the door of the sanctuary, a few people shook her hand or politely said hello, but no-one wanted to talk to her about the work she had described in her talk. One gentleman had been quite aggressive to her, saying things about how her agency was stealing the Church's property and money. Certainly no-one had shown an interest in volunteering with any of the programs Penny was starting. When she had first started to work at the agency, Penny had been first surprised, and then delighted by the Uniting Church values she had been taught about. Not having been a churchgoer for many years, Penny had never thought that a Church's mission could be so well aligned with the social justice issues she felt passionately about. She'd even wondered whether she might explore attending a Uniting Church. But this morning's events had well and truly quashed that idea! Penny wasn't sure what the values of that congregation were, but they certainly didn't seem related to what she saw in her work at the agency.

As the minister droned on, Darryl looked across the sanctuary at the other members attending the service. No-one looked very inspired. Rev Whitehead was not the most energising of speakers. Darryl caught himself being critical and tried to let it go. A relative newcomer to the Uniting Church, Darryl had loved the 'vibe' of this congregation and the genuine welcome he had felt when he first started attending after many years away from the church.

He enjoyed seeing articles supporting refugees and asylum seekers in the Synod magazines in the foyer. Darryl felt good that there was a poster on the noticeboard proclaiming support for the Uluru Statement from the Heart. But despite this, somehow the actual worship services never quite captured his imagination. In fact they didn't seem that different to what he remembered from his childhood. Darryl never knew what to say when his friends started telling him he should leave that dying church and come to their church, nor how to respond to their jibes about "what does the Uniting Church actually stand for anyway?" His daughter, who had ceased attending church some years back, regularly called him out for belonging to a misogynistic, patriarchal and homophobic institution. Darryl didn't think she was quite right, and would have liked to be able to tell her something positive, but he just didn't know what to say. As Darryl gazed across the scattering of white skinned, white haired people in the congregation he figured something must be wrong with the Uniting Church because clearly it was dying out.

Ruby sat opposite Peter shaking her head. When she had suggested this meeting, she had hoped that the two of them would together be able to chart a way forward for "The Prophets Collective", the faith community into which both Ruby and Peter had poured so much of their time. But the look of resignation on Peter's face told the story. "I just don't think the Uniting Church is the right place for this kind of thing," he said. TPC (as those in the know called it), had been such an exciting venture. Ruby remembered the energy in the room as the two had shared their vision of a group of young people committed to living out the way of Jesus in their inner-city environment. The proposed gift of a somewhat dilapidated building by the traditional Uniting Church congregation nearby, had seemed to Ruby like a seal of approval from God. That's why it had been so devastating when the Presbytery stepped in and stopped the process, arguing that TPC, as a faith community could not own property. Ruby had felt like some members of the Presbytery had taken a personal dislike to the group and what it stood for. Ruby had tried to raise TPC's concerns at meetings of the Presbytery but had been pointedly told that she was only invited to 'attend' the meeting and was not a voting member. An appeal to a friend in the Synod had yielded a supportive listening ear, but then a shrug and the comment that Synod didn't have the ability to change the faith community regulations – that was an Assembly matter. The letter Peter had brought over to share with her had been the last straw. Apparently someone had complained to the Presbytery PRC that TPC had been 'illegally' conducting communion at their meetings. "Did Jesus have to get permission from someone to hold the Last Supper?!" Ruby grumbled. She was sure that the vision was still God's, but maybe it needed to happen outside the institution. There didn't seem to be a place for TPC inside it!

Some Conclusions

Where do we think the data leads?

A clear mandate for change, and a sense of urgency

The feedback from the Act2 survey and national conversations reflect some of the key challenges facing the Uniting Church, which we have tried to illustrate in the scenarios at the beginning of this paper. The feedback provides a clear mandate for change, and a sense of urgency regarding the change needed. The feedback received also shows that there is much to celebrate in our life and witness. As we envision the future we must continue to harness the recognised strengths of the Church. In what follows we seek to identify the major themes emerging from the data, name some of the factors contributing to challenges we face, and consider opportunities and directions to which they point. These reflections are not exhaustive. We invite responses via the feedback options found at the end of this paper.

Out of the wide-ranging data received thus far, three common themes (challenges) emerge:

- a. *threats to long-term sustainability due to factors including demography and inequity of resourcing across the Church;*
- b. *an unduly complex and bureaucratic governance structure hindering collaboration and creating unsustainable administrative demands;*
- c. *a lack of cohesion and clarity around the UCA's national vision, identity and character.*

These challenges are broad and interrelated, in many ways concerned with structure, governance and resourcing. We note that for the church, these are also deeply theological questions. The ways we order our life arise from and are shaped by our faith. They reflect our identity, the character of our Christian witness, and our commitment to the ministry of the whole people of God. They test the integrity of our commitments to equality, inclusion and reconciliation. Our faith and commitments must come alive in our structures, so that into the future the Uniting Church might offer a vibrant and sustainable witness in Australia and beyond.

Towards a more equitably resourced and sustainable church

The question of good governance and stewardship is directly related to the question of sustainability and resourcing. Considering the most efficient model for performing the church's social, legal, and ethical obligations may also present opportunities to release resources currently tied up in administration for investment in local mission and ministry (including faith communities that may emerge). Recognising that sustainability is about discipleship and leadership as well as finances, resourcing for local communities is also about resourcing meaningful mentoring and discipleship.

How resources can be harnessed to serve the discerned needs of the collective is a key issue. Is it adequate that the relative independence of

many congregations means capacity for mission and ministry in that place is according to individual financial situation? We are currently without broad structural mechanisms to intentionally review this situation or be proactive and strategic about the allocation and sharing of resources more broadly. Further, the movement of resources to places of most significant potential is hindered by the siloing of such resources into specific Councils of the Church. This creates difficulties for any truly whole of Church approach to resourcing needs and opportunities, let alone the enabling of resource sharing across boundaries of Congregations, Presbyteries or Synods.

We also cannot ignore that the UCA has a blinkered view of resources available. While it tends to understand itself as severely financially limited, it is immensely asset and property rich. Many of these assets are under-utilised or no longer fit for purpose. The stewardship and maintenance of this property portfolio is proving to be a major administrative task far larger than the energy and resources available to manage it. Yet, the question of how property assets might be strategically released is neglected in many places.

There is a related issue here concerning the ethics of the UCA continuing to hold such a large claim over – and benefit from the use of – land that is unceded by First Peoples. Further, in the context of climate change, the environmental requirements of maintaining this property portfolio raise questions of ethics and sustainability.

Where does it point?

We suggest that next steps in addressing this challenge might explore:

- The adequacy of financial arrangements between the Councils of the Church.
- How the release of resources from administration and property may be harnessed to strengthen oversight and support for local communities and ministry.
- How new experimental and flexible forms of faith community can be resourced and sustained.
- Specific consideration of the roles of the Councils of the Church in the management and distribution of financial and other assets of the Church.
- A renewed understanding of 'wealth in common' across the national Church.
- Mechanisms to review, and processes for robust oversight of, resource allocation, including financial, property and personnel assets.
- How non-financial resources may be shared between Councils, e.g. through shared roles or placements.

Towards a simpler, more streamlined model of ordering our life

The recognition that much has changed since Union has in part prompted the Act2 process. Our external (particularly social) context has shifted dramatically, while changes to internal factors such as membership decline and demography are clear. We must now consider faithful ways of living both for a new context and for the church we are now.

The UCA is facing significant risks in seeking to maintain structures that are no longer appropriate for our present size, capacity and mission and ministry needs. The feedback indicates a clear and wide-spread sense of being over-governed, resulting in operational fatigue, a maintenance mentality and low morale. If the administrative and compliance demands of 'being church' are sapping members and congregations of energy and vitality, that is a great concern both from a sustainability and a pastoral perspective.

We note that structures do not exist for their own sake. They allow for the good ordering of the Church only when they serve and enable mission and ministry in ways that make sense for current context. They follow and do not dictate strategy.

We recommend that next steps explore a leaner, more agile model of governance that allows us to meet legal and social obligations and encourages living out the Gospel in a changing world. Consistent with the feedback seeking a renewed emphasis on the 'local', these structures must also be designed to release and enable local congregations and communities for mission and ministry.

Where does it point?

The feedback would seem to indicate a need to consider our interconciliar model of governance and to address whether its principles might be embodied and outworked in fresh ways. We suggest next steps in enabling good governance and effective nurturing and support of life-giving, mission communities of faith may include:

- evaluating the principles of an interconciliar model;
- a consideration of the number of Councils required;
- addressing specific roles and responsibilities of each Council;
- detailing the relationships between these Councils;
- specific consideration of the ways in which new, experimental and flexible, forms of faith community can be encouraged, supported and sustained within our structures.

Towards a cohesive national character and vision

The ASC has identified fostering a cohesive national character of the Church and collaborative ways of working to be a key outcome of the Act2 process. This outcome is validated by the feedback, which indicates the wholeness of our national identity is suffering. Many are satisfied with the current expression and outworking of Uniting Church identity. For others it is in flux and transition; for others still, it is deeply divided and confused. Responses identify several elements to this: a divided theological identity, unspoken distrust and tension between councils, structural and cultural silos, and missed opportunities for collaboration.

A key issue is a sense of disconnect between the UCA's various distinctive ministries, including agencies and schools. There is also uncertainty about the status of other bodies clustered around the UCA with unclear structural relations to the councils of the Church, such as the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the UCA's National Conferences.

We note two other themes in the feedback related to this challenge. First, that for as long as we maintain a preference for speaking only out of internal unity, internal silos and fragmentation will hurt our capacity to project a cohesive national identity into the public sphere or undertake public theology and witness. Second, there is a perceived tension/imbalance between social justice activity and attention to personal faith formation and the practices of preaching, teaching and evangelism.

Seeking a cohesive national character will require reconnecting with and a fresh articulation of the foundations and shared understandings and frameworks guiding and uniting the work and witness of the Uniting Church as a whole, and development of an enhanced capacity to work in a spirit of partnership.

Where does it point?

We suggest that next steps in addressing this challenge might explore:

- The adequacy of resourcing for the National Council to appropriately fulfil the responsibilities placed upon it and to engage the Church in fulfilling those responsibilities.
- New opportunities for deep and sustained national collaboration and cooperation across Councils, agencies and institutions, including where collaboration can be built into our structures.
- Addressing any existing structural and cultural hindrances to collaboration, including between agencies, schools and Councils of the Church.
- The relationship between the Councils of the church and other related organised bodies, including the place and status of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and the UCA's National Conferences.

- Reconnecting with our core identity and clearly articulating and communicating the common theological and other frameworks shaping the life of the UCA.

The urgency of this conversation

It is clear from the commonality of these themes and the strength of feeling in the feedback that this conversation about fresh, faithful forms of life for the Uniting Church is essential and comes in a crucial moment. We cannot in good conscience continue maintaining the status quo in the presence of such significant challenges and risks. We might understand this as a *kairos* moment, a biblical concept describing an extraordinary time requiring and leading to renewed understandings, action and transformation – a change of life. Amid inherited social, economic, and political forces there is an inbreaking of God which pauses the normal march of history and tradition. It is a moment of both urgency and grace, that wills us to be alert to God's presence and invites us to partner with God to create a faithful future.

Invitation for Responses

The Act2 Project Group will be seeking responses to the understanding and summarisation of issues we have put forward in this paper. Individuals or groups are invited to give feedback following the questions below. The most helpful way you can provide your feedback will be via the online questionnaire, but responses by mail and email will also be received. The link for the questionnaire and other contact information is below.

1. Do you believe that the three themes outlined above — over governance and complex structures, issues of resourcing and sustainability, and cohesive national identity and character — have accurately captured the primary issues facing our Church at this time? If not, what issue(s) would you add or change?
2. On the topic of over governance and complex structures, we have identified a need to address:
 - Exploring the principles of our interconciliar form of governance
 - Consideration of the number of inter-related Councils
 - Consideration of the specific roles and responsibilities of each Council
 - Consideration of relationships and processes between Councils
 - Addressing the need to encourage new, flexible, experimental forms of faith community within our structures

Do you believe these directions adequately address the issue of over governance and complex structures? If not, what directions would you add or change?

3. On the topic of issues of resourcing and sustainability, we have identified a need to address:

- Reviewing the roles of different Councils in management of financial and other assets of the Church
- Reviewing the amount and mechanisms for resourcing different Councils
- Commitment to 'common wealth' and review of processes for allocation and distribution of financial, property and personnel (Ministry) assets across and between Councils of the Church

Do you believe these directions adequately address the issue of resourcing and sustainability? If not, what directions would you add or change?

4. On the topic of cohesive national identity, we have identified a need to address:

- Revisiting our common theological frameworks
- Addressing resourcing for the National Council of the Church
- Reviewing the place of internal bodies such as UAICC and National Conferences
- Addressing barriers and new opportunities for collaboration between Councils, agencies and institutions of the Church

Do you believe these directions adequately address the issue of cohesive national identity? If not, what directions would you add or change? Do you believe there is a priority order to these directions?

TO GIVE FEEDBACK CONCERNING THIS NEXT
STAGE OF THE ACT2 PROJECT

COMPLETE THE ONLINE SURVEY:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/act2response>

Email: uca.act2@nat.uca.org.au

Address: PO Box A2266, Sydney South, NSW, 1235