



Uniting Church in Australia
ASSEMBLY
Assembly Standing Committee

11-13 March 2022

DOCUMENT 10

Title	Act2 Task Group Report
Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	For decision
Assembly or ASC Minute	Not applicable
Consultation	See below and the report
Purpose	To provide the Act2 Report and associated recommendations and rationale for the 16 th Assembly reconvened meeting.
Rationale & Findings Summary	<p>Since the November 2021 ASC meeting, the following consultations took place in addition to those that had already occurred:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• All Synod Standing Committees• Representatives from UAICC National Executive• Chairs and leaders of the National Conferences• Uniting Church Adult Fellowship• Rev Dr Chris Budden• Methodist Church of New Zealand <p>A full list of consultations is included in the report.</p> <p>These consultations concluded Phase Two of the Act2 Project.</p> <p>Following these consultations, all data from surveys and the consultations was considered by the Act2 Task Group, and the report, <i>Act2: On the Way</i>, with associated recommendations and rationale was developed by the Task Group for consideration by the ASC.</p> <p>This report will be presented to the 16th Assembly reconvened meeting from the ASC.</p>
Attachments	Attachment A: <i>Act2: On the Way</i> (Report to the 16 th Assembly Reconvened Meeting)
Proposal/s	That the Assembly Standing Committee: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Receive the report2. Endorse the report, recommendations and rationale for the 16th Assembly reconvened meeting
Submitted by	Colleen Geyer (on behalf of the Act2 Task Group) Assembly General Secretary colleeng@nat.uca.org.au ; 0411 333 167

Act2: On the Way

Report to the 16th Assembly Reconvened Meeting

Context and Introduction

Act2 is first a process of imagination, vision and discernment about how faithfully following Christ in our time and place shapes our own life and the presence of the Uniting Church in the world.

In March 2020, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) recognised that the Uniting Church in Australia (Uniting Church) is living through a time of significant change, opportunity and challenge. With the Basis of Union inviting us always to consider our life and witness afresh, and as a Church that continually seeks the leading of the Spirit, the Act2 project emerged.

Act2 recognises that both the Uniting Church and wider Australian society have changed radically in the 44 years since Union. We now have an opportunity to look holistically at our life and consider together what we might need to do, and what might need to change, that we might more fully live out our shared identity, commitment to unity, and commitment to God's mission.¹ This asks us to be honest about our strengths, challenges, and context.

Over the life of the Uniting Church, we have sought to boldly develop a unique identity and faithful witness within the one holy catholic and apostolic church in Australia. The many strengths of our Church were affirmed by the ASC in commissioning the Act2 project, and have been further affirmed in consultation undertaken by the Act2 Task Group. We also remain aware that the Uniting Church faces significant challenges and questions which demand our attention.

The ASC conceived the Act2 project to identify and implement sustainable structures, practices, and ways of working that would position the Uniting Church to continue growing into our calling in the decades ahead. It named 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.

¹ Context is drawn from the *Considering Afresh Our Life Together* report, p.3.

In entering this time of self-examination and as we look ahead with faithfulness and openness, we call upon the Church to pray for the gift of the Spirit. We are reminded of God's call on our collective life articulated in the Basis of Union: to confess Jesus Christ, to make disciples of all nations, to seek out God's will, to serve the world, to be a fellowship of reconciliation and a pilgrim people on the way to the promised end.

The purpose of Act2 is to support and enable the Uniting Church to live more fully into this calling in the context of 21st century Australia. The scope of this work is not to make new theological statements but to clarify and support a nationally consistent understanding of our identity and vision as articulated throughout our life, and through the guidance of the Spirit, make changes in our ecclesial life that enable us to live more fully into that identity in this time and place.

This report draws together the work undertaken by the Act2 Task Group to date and proposes the next steps in response to feedback from broad consultation across the Uniting Church. It has four sections:

1. The Act2 process, consultation, and feedback
2. The identity and vision of the Uniting Church
3. The case for change as we look to the future
4. Recommendations and rationale

The Act2 process, consultation, and feedback

In early 2020, the ASC discerned the Act2 project and defined its scope. On behalf of and with the oversight of the ASC, the Act2 Task Group has progressed the project via an iterative process in which each phase has been fed and informed by the one before. The following is a summary of these phases.

[An introduction to the Act2 project](#) accompanied an **initial online survey** made available via Assembly communication channels for approximately five months, from December 2020 until April 2021. The survey sought insights, experiences, ideas and hopes from people across the Uniting Church. 626 people filled in some or all of the survey. Alongside this, a series of six national Zoom conversations were held; five of which were open to all and one of which was a gathering of Uniting Church community service agency leaders.

In October 2021 the Task Group **released a report** entitled '[Considering Afresh Our Life Together](#)' ('*Considering Afresh*'), which summarised the feedback from the first survey and national conversations. '*Considering Afresh*' also detailed the Task Group's interpretation of the feedback, highlighting three emerging themes and some directions.

A **second online survey** was made available following the release of '*Considering Afresh*', inviting responses to whether the themes and suggested directions outlined in the report had accurately captured feedback from the Church.

The second survey was designed to capture qualitative data, particularly people's positive and negative responses to the ideas in '*Considering Afresh*' and whether there was anything missing. Despite the larger investment required to complete this survey, about 340 people responded. Those respondents typed more than 900 individual comments totaling more than 42,000 words! All of this valuable data was read, summarised and considered by the Act2 Task Group.

At the same time, [a series of studies](#) exploring the *Basis of Union* was prepared by Uniting Church theologian Rev Dr Geoff Thompson with a focus on what we can learn from the *Basis* as we undertake a process of evaluation and change. Seeking to encourage spiritual and theological engagement with the Act2 project, these studies were made freely available for anyone to download and use. The Assembly Resourcing Unit also ran a six-week series on the material for two online study groups which were open to anyone.

A **further series of online conversations** were held with the following groups:

- Presbytery Ministers from across the country
- Representatives of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) National Executive
- Chairs and leaders of the Uniting Church's National Conferences
- Each of the seven Assembly Circles of Interest (particularly Advocates and panel members but with an invitation extended to all Circle members)
- The Assembly Standing Committee and all six Synod Standing Committees
- Synod Moderators, General Secretaries, and Associate General Secretaries
- The Uniting Church Adult Fellowship
- Rev Dr Chris Budden, in relation to the UAICC and its structure (Rev Dr Budden is also Chair of the Assembly Polity Reference Group)
- The Assembly Standards for Ministries Committee
- Leaders in the Salvation Army Australia, the United Church of Canada and the Methodist Church of New Zealand

A further piece of work involved collecting **current Synod strategic planning documents** to compare the directions in these documents with those discerned through the Act2 process. Through this we learned that common themes and hopes are emerging across our Church. Most of the plans emphasise inclusivity, justice, community engagement and transformation, commitments to First Peoples and being

contemporary, courageous and prophetic. A number name the desire to be ‘aligned’, ‘one Church’, ‘understanding who we are’ or ‘finding common ground’. Discipleship is a consistent theme, as is faith sharing, evangelism and witness.

What we heard through the first survey

Some key insights are highlighted below.

67% of respondents to the first survey characterised the Uniting Church and its identity positively, highlighting themes of diversity, inclusion, justice, compassion, contemporary relevance, and courage. A smaller number of people (15%) gave mixed responses contrasting ideals and reality, speaking of struggles with ageing, declining resources and unwieldy decision-making processes, but also of determination, faithfulness and resilience. A minority saw the Uniting Church as having lost touch with core values, being overly and inappropriately influenced by society, too focussed on social issues and too intellectually focussed.

Key strengths of the Uniting Church affirmed by first survey respondents included: *“Inclusive and welcoming”, “Equality of women and men in leadership”, “Basis of Union”, “Every member ministry”, “Commitment to the most vulnerable”, “Willingness to have hard conversations”* and *“Multi-cultural and Intercultural”*.

The feedback also indicated a range of significant challenges that need to be addressed, as seen in the graph below.

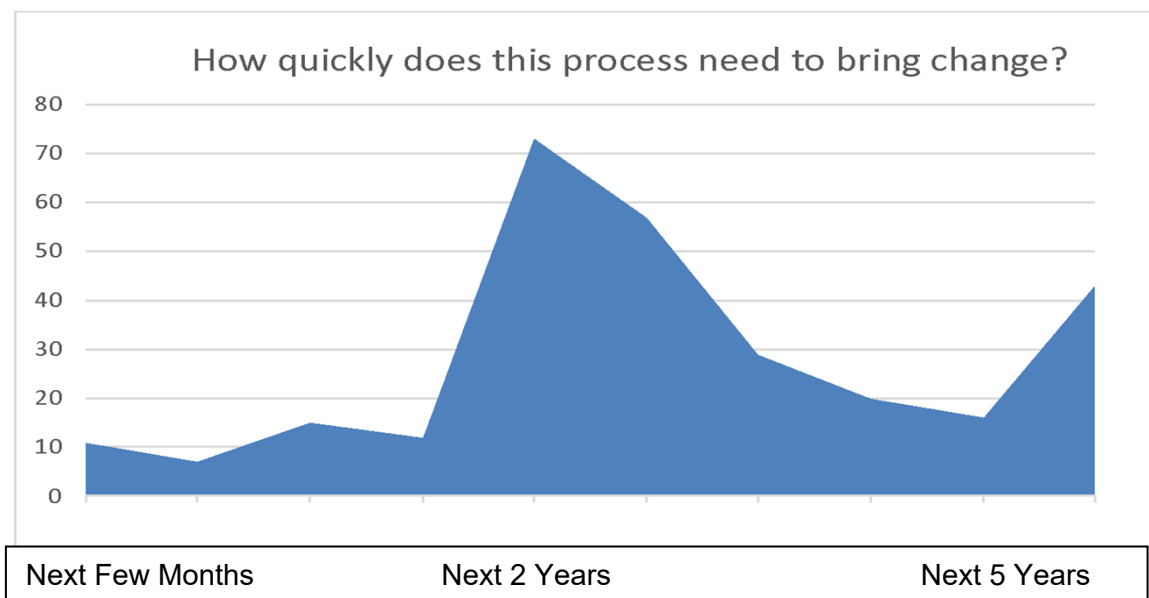
Top 10 Issues we need to address to achieve the three outcomes...					
Key: Structural issues Property/Finance/Sustainability Issues Issues of Vision/Identity/Communication Other Issues					
Enabling Environment for local communities		Foster Cohesive National Character		Fulfill legal, ethical and social obligations	
Membership decline and age profile	80%	Whole of Church vision and strategy	77%	Relationship with social services agencies	69%
Loss of confidence and focus on the gospel and mission	78%	Clarity on the Church's theological identity	64%	Addressing our environmental sustainability	60%
Building and finding sustainable ways of supporting new models of being Church	76%	A stronger voice in the public sphere as a Church	62%	Sustainability of the Assembly in exercising its various responsibilities	57%
Encouraging and equipping young leaders	74%	A renewed understanding of the inter-related councils	62%	Cumbersome and complex governance structures and requirements	54%
Building an attractive model of church	70%	Internal conflict, difficulty maintaining unity in diversity	58%	Structure and regulations are not fit for the Church needs today	52%
Property resources misaligned or under-utilised	64%	Relationship with Congress	55%	Financial constraints	52%
Maintaining space for a diverse points of view while living together well	58%	The role of executive leadership and relationship to inter-related councils	52%	Clarity of roles of various councils and governing bodies	52%
Addressing the general post-Christendom anxiety that we're a dying Church	57%	Diminishing of the voice of the wider membership of the Uniting Church in our decision making about the direction of our life and mission	50%	The role of executive leadership and relationship to inter-related councils	51%
Financial constraints	50%	Maintaining space for a diverse points of view while living together well	48%	Councils under-resourced for undertaking the matters allocated to their oversight	51%
Too many councils and committees for the size of the Church	49%	Sustainability of the Assembly in exercising its various responsibilities	44%	Fixing over-governed and costly structure	49%

Similar challenges were expressed in the first series of online conversations:

- 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 'siloed' 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 and agencies

'*Considering Afresh*' contained several case studies drawn from our conversations which illustrated the key insight we consistently heard: 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.

The first survey and the associated online conversations also captured a sense of urgency regarding the need for changes to be implemented.



As a result of considering the data from our first round of consultation, the '*Considering Afresh*' Report suggested three emerging themes:

1. Threats to long-term sustainability due to factors including demography and inequity of resourcing across the Church;
2. An unduly complex and bureaucratic governance structure hindering collaboration and creating unsustainable administrative demands;
3. A lack of cohesion and clarity around the Uniting Church's national vision, identity and character.

The report then suggested possible steps addressing each theme as follows:

Towards a more equitably resourced and sustainable Church

- 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.

Towards a simpler, more streamlined model of ordering our life

- 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.

Towards a cohesive national character and vision

- 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.

The second survey asked people to indicate whether they thought these three themes, and the suggested directions, had appropriately captured our challenges and opportunities. A majority felt they were 'on the right track', with suggested directions related to the governance theme particularly affirmed at almost 70%. See table below.

Have we got it right?

Q 4

Do the 3 themes enable the desired outcomes?

Almost Completely	16.3%	61.5%
Mostly	45.2%	
Partially	31.4%	
Not at all	7.1%	

Q 6

Do our suggested directions address the Resourcing Theme?

Almost Completely	15.2%	57.9%
Mostly	42.7%	
Partially	34.8%	
Not at all	7.4%	

Q 8

Do our suggested directions address the Governance Theme?

Almost Completely	29.1	68.8%
Mostly	39.7	
Partially	26.8	
Not at all	4.5%	

Q 13

Do our suggested directions address the Identity Theme?

Almost Completely	24.0%	60.3%
Mostly	36.3%	
Partially	30.4%	
Not at all	9.4%	

What we heard through the second survey

Some key insights are highlighted below.

- Many comments talked about the need to focus our attention on spiritual factors such as prayer, discipleship, evangelism and faith formation.
- A significant number of references to the need to better educate, train and equip members of the Church.
- Many comments connected with the perceived Uniting Church characteristics of inclusivity and diversity and the need to ensure that any strengthening of national identity would not sacrifice these traits.
- A significant number of responses questioned the need for four councils of the Church. Of these, most saw change or removal of Presbyteries and/or Synods as the most appropriate.
- Many comments agreed with the need for structural reform, such as simplifying structures, reducing the number of Councils, or addressing complex regulations. However, there was also an undercurrent of concern that this was going to be difficult (if not impossible) or that it was 'politically' motivated. A generally agreed principle seemed to be that missional decisions need to be made as locally as possible, while administrative and compliance burdens need to be moved away from the local level.
- Many comments affirmed the principles and values seen in our interconciliar polity, along with a number who questioned or did not understand this aspect of the Church's life. There were many comments regarding the need to better define the responsibilities of different Councils, better communicate and collaborate, and to remove redundancies or complexities in decision-making processes.
- Several responses mention the need to rationalise theological education, consistently suggesting a single theological college as a way of enhancing the flexibility and

responsiveness of theological and ministry formation. This aligns strongly with feedback from the online conversations where this was probably the most frequently mentioned opportunity to enhance local and regional mission and ministry through productive national collaboration.

As can be seen above, there has been an intensive effort to consult with a wide range of Councils, committees and communities within the Church. Some key themes from these conversations:

- The importance of identity and the desire to retain key identity markers, such as the Covenant, theological foundations, diversity, justice. Some suggested we also need a renewed sense of being an intergenerational Church.
- What it means or would look like to have a cohesive national identity, with some interpreting this to mean 'uniform' while others understood this to refer to shared frameworks and foundations contextualised from place to place.
- That trying to articulate common theological foundations has proved a challenge to our national identity and cohesiveness.
- Affirmation of the need for a smaller, more agile and flexible structure.
- A push for proper focus on faith and discipleship as core business to be better prioritised in the Act2 conversation.
- Strong encouragement to re-think formation for ministry, including the possibility of one theological college, and some creative thinking about the new kinds of roles/communities we might train people for.

The feedback from the second survey, online conversations and consideration of Synod strategic directions all contributed to the final form of the proposals following this report.

Each phase of the Act2 process has been accompanied by a two-way communications strategy, which sought not only to share information about the Act2 process, directions and vision through Assembly and Synod channels but has gathered meaningful input and reflections on Act2 from across the Church. [You can see some of these here.](#)

Identity and Vision of the Uniting Church

“The Uniting Church affirms that it belongs to the people of God on the way to the promised end. The Uniting Church prays that, through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in its life, will bring it into deeper unity with other Churches, and will use its worship, witness and service to God’s eternal glory through Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.”

- Basis of Union Paragraph 18

The rich foundational documents of the Uniting Church articulate the heart of our identity: we belong to the people of God on the way to the promised end. We live and work within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, and are guided by the Basis of Union on the way (Paragraph 3, Basis of Union; Clause 2, Constitution). In the *Basis*, we have the substance of Uniting Church theology and ecclesiology – what we believe about God made known in Jesus Christ, what we understand as God’s calling for the Uniting Church, and how we should order our common life in response.

We note some of the key insights and affirmations of the *Basis* about our core theological identity, calling, and witness in the world (found in paragraphs 1-3):

- We preach Christ the risen crucified One and confess Jesus as Lord over our own life; we confess that Jesus is Head over all things, the beginning of a new creation, of a new humanity.
- We hold the faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.
- We are committed to hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations, and daily to seek to obey his will.
- Our purpose is to serve the world for which Christ died, and we await with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- We are called to be a fellowship of reconciliation.
- We are a pilgrim people on the way towards the promised end.

Feedback gathered through the Act2 consultation process paints a picture of a national Church outworking this identity in a shared life of faith, prayer, discipleship, service, and justice. We also celebrate our diverse and inclusive character as a sign of our active pursuit of unity and reconciliation. Our name has always borne witness to this: we are a *uniting* rather than a *united* Church, called into relationship with God, each other, and with the world in a dynamic, ongoing sense. Through Christ, we seek to be a visible presence, however imperfect, of God reconciling the world to God’s self.

Our identity as a Church is never abstract. The key markers of both our identity and faith must always come alive and be seen in the practice of Christian community. This includes how we structure, govern and resource ourselves. These reflect who we are, 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, justice and reconciliation.

A good example of this is how a core commitment to relationship and reconciliation has directly shaped the ordering of our life from the beginning. The development of Uniting

Church structures was more than an “exercise in ecclesiastical carpentry”² which saw the best parts of the founding traditions spliced together. It envisaged something new, which was a model reflecting the fundamentally relational nature of reconciliation. This is the same nature that sits at the heart of our Trinitarian, relational God. While the *Basis* speaks in practical terms about church order, it is first informed by a vision of governance that relies on lines of relationship, the wisdom and gifts of the whole people of God, and each council’s recognition of the other.

The *Basis* articulates some of the fundamental principles guiding the way we govern our life as a Church:

- Christ alone is supreme and constitutes, rules and renews his Church.
- The responsibility of governing our life belongs to all by virtue of their gifts.
- Our councils have responsibilities both in relation to the Church and the world.
- Each council is asked to wait upon God’s Word and obey God’s will in the matters allocated to its oversight.
- The relationship between councils is defined by the goal of being united by mutual submission in service of the Gospel.

In our structures, as in other parts of our life, we explicitly seek to live out our commitment to actively work towards reconciliation – the wholeness of all things in Christ – despite, and in celebration of, our differences. At our best, the Uniting Church is positioned to offer a transformative witness that transcends social, cultural and theological boundaries (Gal 3:28). It is within this framework that we seek to discern, govern and steward faithfully.

As a pilgrim people on the way, we have listened carefully to the Spirit across our life and continued building on our foundations with ‘fresh words and deeds’. These are the fruits by which others shall know us (Matt 7:20). Feedback gathered through the Act2 consultation process has affirmed the following identity markers:

- a) We are in covenant relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress ([Covenanting Statement, 1994](#); [Preamble to the Constitution](#)).
- b) We are a multicultural Church ([We are a multicultural Church, 1985](#)).
- c) We are committed to gender equality in leadership ([Paragraph 14, Basis of Union](#)).
- d) We affirm the ministry of every member of the Church, both lay and ordained ([Paragraph 13, Basis of Union](#)).
- e) We are committed to the promotion of justice ([Statement to the Nation, 1977](#); [Statement to the Nation, 1988](#)).

² This reference is made in Rev Dr Geoff Thompson’s study series on the *Basis of Union*, ‘Our Life Together’, p.10.

- f) We value scholarly enquiry and an informed faith, learning from a breadth of theological perspectives and contemporary thought ([Paragraphs 5 & 11, Basis of Union](#)).
- g) 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.
- h) We are called to make and grow disciples through communities of worship, witness, service and discipleship formation.
- i) We seek to engage with our ecumenical partners in seeking union with Churches ([Paragraph 2, Basis of Union](#)).
- j) We seek friendship and understanding with people of other faiths ([Living with a Neighbour who is Different, 2000](#)).

The discernment of the Act2 project so far is that a meaningful review of our life and practice is needed if we are to continue living more fully and faithfully into all that makes us who we are. This is a moment that wills us to be alert to the Spirit's calling and invites us to partner with God to create a faithful future. As we consider the shape of that future, we open ourselves to renewal and to the living Christ. In the tradition of the *Basis* we pray, that through the gift of the Spirit, God will constantly correct that which is erroneous in our life that we may take up our calling afresh to be a fellowship of reconciliation in relationship with God, one another and the world.

<p>The case for change as we look to the future</p>
--

The common themes and strength of feeling in the data and consultation process indicate this conversation about fresh, faithful forms of life for the Uniting Church is essential and comes at a crucial moment. For many reasons, we cannot in good conscience continue maintaining the status quo in the presence of such significant challenges, nor can we risk missing opportunities at hand!

As the data indicates, we now face some significant challenges and risks in a shifting context. Also, as we affirm our identity and many strengths, we must confess that we have often failed to live up to our calling as a Church. As followers of the living Christ and pilgrim people on the way, we must now consider faithful ways of living for the Church we are now. With our hearts beating for thriving local communities of faith, this is an exciting opportunity to explore what kind of shape and structure might best serve and enable mission and ministry in our time and place.

A review of structural arrangements governing our Church, including its Councils, may unlock opportunities that address many of the interrelated challenges we face. Structures do not exist for their own sake but order the Church in service of our mission,

vision and purpose. Therefore, we can't ignore what we have consistently heard: that the structures we maintain no longer suit our current size, capacity and ministry needs; that the administrative and compliance demands of 'being church' are sapping many of energy and vitality; and that in many communities, the capacity required for existing practices will not be sustainable for much longer. Pastorally and as a matter of good stewardship, we must consider change for the wellbeing of our Church.

Considering the most efficient model for our current needs may also help address significant resourcing limitations across the Church by tapping into the resourcing implications of structural change. Opportunities may arise to release resources currently tied up and distribute them more equitably according to the discerned mission and ministry needs of the whole Church.

It may also be an opportunity to strengthen effective oversight and potentially redistribute roles and responsibilities, as a response to the current situation in which administrative demands on local communities are displacing our call to mission, discipleship and faith formation. Freeing communities of faith for this work and affording them sufficient flexibility will allow them to meaningfully explore and support new opportunities and forms of life.

We have heard that we are not maintaining a sustainable Church.

We have heard about siloed structures and growing burdens.

We have heard of the disconnect between different parts of our Church.

We have heard the desire for something simpler, more flexible and more accessible.

We have heard the desire to nurture discipleship.

We have heard that we need new wine skins.

We have heard that changes are needed for the sake of our integrity of our commitments and witness as a Church - so that we may be a truly inclusive, multicultural and covenanting Church.

The need for change: why now?

- Acting now and with urgency on the need for change is consistent with feedback we received through the consultation process: 72% of people who responded to the survey said they wanted substantial change within the next 2-3 years.
- There is no better time than now. The COVID-19 pandemic with its pivot to online has upended the assumptions and norms we have lived with for many years, and encouraged us to quickly embrace new ways of gathering, connecting, worshipping, witnessing and serving. It has shown us change is possible. We can

harness some of these learnings to think creatively about new expressions of faith and community into the future.

- The challenges we face suggest that a tipping point is upon us. As responsible stewards of God's church, we must act before this situation takes hold.
- As an intergenerational community, we have a responsibility to ensure that those who come after us inherit a Church that stands ready for the future. We have heard many positive responses from younger people about the directions of Act2. They hope for a Church they can see themselves serving. We should not leave the work of change to them. If, as we discern, the time to change is now, then we must do it alongside and with the voices of those in our church who will inherit that change.
- As pilgrim people on the way, our life is always in flux and ferment. The Spirit invites us to seize opportunities presented to us to take our life forward.

The need for change: why the Assembly?

Paragraph 15 of the Basis of Union outlines the determining responsibilities held by the Assembly on 'matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline'. The Assembly promotes the Church's mission, urges it towards wider union, and makes guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils. The Assembly is thus the council of the Church with a national view, which positions it to drive a national process and invite the whole Church to participate.

Although identity is contextual in every place, the key identity markers of the Church are held nationally by the Assembly on behalf of the whole. It holds key doctrinal and identity statements, regulates many of the common practices of our Church, and holds the 'story' of our Church – the tensions and joys. It can seek to convene Councils of the Church and encourage the kind of collaboration that will make change possible. We have heard that many of our presenting challenges are structural and systemic. With the whole Church on the horizon, the Assembly is the council with scope to address the complex environment in which our communities have their being. It can consider holistic change that may have implications for the Regulations or Constitution, the architecture of governance and standards for ministry or theological formation.

In reflecting on our challenges and in response to the data, the Act2 Task Group has identified three key directions to explore potential change. The first is a review of our current governance model with a particular focus on regional oversight and resourcing; the second focusses on enhancing flexibility and innovation in local communities of faith; the third is exploring new possibilities for theological education towards enhanced mission, ministry and collaboration. All of this to clear the path that we might better

nurture thriving communities of faith engaged in Christ's mission and ministry of wholeness, justice and love in church and world.

The *Basis of Union* calls us to self-examination, fresh words and deeds, and to constant reform under Christ the living Head of the Church. It is consistent with our very identity to explore new expressions of life that we may flourish into the future, be a vibrant and sustainable witness in our context, and nurture life-giving communities of faith and discipleship. Naturally, we are hesitant about change. It can be a risk. But at this time we also ask: what are the risks if we don't?

Recommendations

That the Assembly:
Identity and Vision

1. Acknowledge that the Uniting Church in Australia:
 - a. Lives and works within the faith and unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, guided by its Basis of Union (Paragraph 3, Basis of Union; Clause 2 of the Constitution).
 - b. Is committed, along with the whole church of God, to serve the world for which Christ died, and awaits with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ (Paragraph 1 Basis of Union).
 - c. Is called to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. (Paragraph 3, Basis of Union).
 - d. Is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal, and that the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come (Paragraph 3, Basis of Union).

2. Acknowledge that:
 - a. Christ alone is supreme and constitutes, rules and renews his Church
 - b. The responsibility of governing our life belongs to all by virtue of their gifts
 - c. Our councils have responsibilities both in relation to the Church and the world;
 - d. Each council is asked to wait upon God's Word and obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight
 - e. The relationship between councils is defined by the goal of being united by mutual submission in service of the Gospel

3. Acknowledge that as a Church:
 - a. We are in covenantal relationship with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (Covenanting Statement, 1994; Preamble to the Constitution)
 - b. We are a multicultural church (We are a multicultural church, 1985)
 - c. We are committed to gender equality in leadership (Paragraph 14, Basis of Union)
 - d. We affirm the ministry of every member of the Church, both lay and ordained (Paragraph 13, Basis of Union)
 - e. We are committed to the promotion of justice (Statement to the Nation, 1977; Statement to the Nation, 1988)
 - f. We value scholarly enquiry and an informed faith, learning from a breadth of theological perspectives and contemporary thought (Paragraphs 5 & 11, Basis of Union)
 - g. 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.
 - h. We are called to make and grow disciples through communities of worship, witness, service and discipleship formation
 - i. We seek to engage with our ecumenical partners in seeking union with Churches (Paragraph 2, Basis of Union)
 - j. We seek friendship and understanding with people of other faiths (Living with a Neighbour who is Different, 2000)

Imperative for Change

4. Note the challenges identified within the Act2 Report regarding the current structures, practices and ways of working which are now impeding the ability of the Uniting Church to live out our vision and calling.
5. Note the opportunities identified within the Act2 Report to explore changes to our structures, practices and ways of working which will enhance the Uniting Church's ability to live out our vision and calling into the future.
6. Heed the call of the Basis of Union, and invite the whole Church to enter a period of self-examination in which we consider afresh our common commitment to the Church's mission.
7. Request all Congregations, Presbyteries, Synods, agencies, schools and other institutions of the Church to engage with the work of the Act2 Project in a spirit of mutual submission in service of the Gospel.

Project Outcomes

8. Endorse the scope of the Act2 Project as:

“identifying and implementing structures, practices and ways of working which:

- a. Create an enabling environment for local communities of worship, witness, service and discipleship formation.
- b. Foster a cohesive national character of the Church and collaborative ways of working across the Church.
- c. Fulfill the Church’s legal, ethical and social obligations.” (ASC Minute 20.43.02)

Next Steps

9. Request the Assembly Standing Committee undertake a process to review the current interconciliar model of governance of the Uniting Church, with a particular focus on regional oversight. The scope of the review should include:

- a. Evaluating the principles of an interconciliar model and how they are being lived out across the life of the Church;
- b. Considering the number of Councils required;
- c. Considering the specific roles and responsibilities of each Council and the relationships between these Councils;
- d. Considering the resourcing available across all the Councils and the equitable allocation of the resources to fulfill their respective responsibilities;
- e. Considering opportunities to release resources for investment in ministry and mission;

With a view to bringing any recommendations, including changes to the Constitution and Regulations to the 17th Assembly.

10. Authorise the Assembly Standing Committee, following consultation with the Church, to provide guidance to the Church and amend the regulations relating to communities of faith to provide for more flexible and innovative local and digitally gathered communities of faith and discipleship formation, such as providing for:

- a. The recognition and oversight of online communities of faith
- b. The networking together of communities of faith
- c. The more flexible provision of ministry across multiple communities of faith
- d. The recognition, development and resourcing of new communities of faith

11. Request the Assembly Standing Committee to lead a national process with the Synods and other relevant councils and bodies to identify and implement a new national theological education framework, including:
 - a. the number and location of theological colleges
 - b. resourcing, oversight and affiliation of theological collegesin order to improve access, efficiency, relevance and quality of discipleship formation, theological education, ministerial formation and other educational needs of the Church.

Process

12. Commit to the Church that in pursuing the next steps of the Act2 Project, the Assembly will undertake wide consultation with the Congregations, Councils and institutions of the Church.
13. Request the Congregations, Councils and institutions of the Church to engage with the next steps of the Act2 Project as an expression of our common commitment to the Church's mission and a demonstration of our unity.
14. Request the Assembly Standing Committee identify, source and make available the resources required to effectively pursue the next steps proposed.
15. Request the Assembly Standing Committee bring any final recommendations to the 17th Assembly.

Rationale

There are five sections within the proposals:

- Identity and Vision
- Imperative for Change
- Project Outcomes
- Next Steps
- Process

Identity and Vision

As we enter into a period of change it is important to continue to affirm those foundations which continue to shape our life. This proposal affirms fundamentals about our ecclesiology within the one holy catholic and apostolic church and the nature of our life through shared responsibility and communal discernment. It also affirms core markers of our identity which are grounded in the Basis of Union and existing decisions

of the Assembly. Affirming that which is important to our life as a Church is critical to any period of change so that in whatever change we bring we continue to honour and preserve those aspects of our life which are central and important.

Imperative for Change

This section recognises that the Act2 Project has, through its consultation, identified both challenges and opportunities for change to our life together as a Church. These are outlined in the report. In brief they identify that our structures are no longer fit for purpose, there are significant resourcing constraints, limitations in personnel and capability required to meet our existing practices, and insufficient flexibility to support new ministry and mission. There are also opportunities for us to build a more cohesive identity as a Church, collaborate more effectively, work together more efficiently, and release resources to support new ministry and mission opportunities. This section also recognises that the Basis of Union calls us to self-examination. This call is particularly related to how we order our institutional life together. It also invites all parts of our Church's life to join us in that self-examination, recognising that this may include changes in our life which will require us to give up existing roles, responsibilities, or resources as an act of self-sacrifice in service of the Gospel.

Project Outcomes

This section asks the Assembly to endorse the scope and three outcomes approved by the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC Minute 20.43.02) in the creation of the Act2 Project. The ASC recognised the purpose of the project was not solely to explore new structures, practices and ways of working but also to implement them. The three outcomes identified by the ASC have shaped all the consultation to date. The first recognised the centrality of local communities of faith to our life and the need for all councils of the Church to support and enable their worship, witness, service and discipleship formation. The second recognised that we are one Church within the one holy catholic and apostolic church and there are significant practical opportunities to collaborate more effectively across the Church and foster a cohesive national character, grounded in our identity and vision. The third recognised that both our own commitment to high ethical standards and the external legal and social environment mean that we need to maintain our commitment to these obligations. However across the consultations this is currently a significant burden in parts of our Church and many people identified there were opportunities to do it more efficiently and effectively.

Next Steps

This section identifies three specific opportunities for fulfilling the project outcomes. These are:

1. A review of our current governance, with a particular focus on regional oversight. Throughout the consultation the nexus between our two regional councils (Synod and Presbytery) was identified as an opportunity for significant improvement. This seeks to provide the scope to consider in a systematic way how this could improve. It would include wide consultation across the Church (as outlined further in the final section) with the goal of bringing proposals to the 17th Assembly for implementation following it. While this is a significant undertaking, the consultation to date indicates that this is a critical and urgent issue facing our Church which cannot continue to go unaddressed. It does not suppose any particular outcome however it is hoped that if this change can be successful it would yield significant opportunities to the Church for more effective oversight, resource allocation and ultimately a greater focus on ministry and mission.
2. A more flexible approach to our communities of faith. The consultation identified that while there are currently flexible options within our regulations for local communities of faith, they are either not flexible enough or not being flexibly implemented across the Church. However this flexibility is not fully realised due to either narrow interpretations of the regulations or unfamiliarity with the extent of flexibility provided for in the Constitution and Regulations. As new models of community emerge, there would be significant value in the ASC issuing guidance to the Church in the recognition, oversight and support of these new models. Alongside guidance, it also authorises the ASC to make amendments to regulations relating to communities of faith to enable and provide greater flexibility for new models not anticipated by the current regulations.
3. This proposal provides authorisation to the ASC to amend the regulations to improve flexibility. This is particularly pressing in online or digital communities, which may be geographically dispersed. There are also opportunities for a simpler process for communities of faith (whether Congregations, faith communities or other groups of gathered disciples) to be networked together. There are also challenges faced in sharing ministry across communities of faith, particularly smaller communities. Also, while the designation of 'faith community' has provided some flexibility to new communities of faith, it is not always suitable as communities grow and mature but where recognition as a Congregation is not appropriate.
4. A national theological education framework. A constant theme identified through the consultation when considering national collaboration was the opportunity to move towards a national approach to the delivery of theological education. This has been a matter of discussion for many years across the life of the Church, however the consultation indicates that now is the opportunity to not only explore this option but to move towards it. This does not assume one national theological college or one physical location. There are many issues to work through and

competing interests and priorities. However this is a concrete way to give expression to our national identity, better equip our ministers for ministry, offer greater opportunities to all members for discipleship formation and release resources for ministry and mission.

Process:

This section provides principles and commitments as an Assembly to guide the ASC in its oversight of the Act2 Project. It also recognises that this project will require resourcing to be successful and tasks the ASC with finding that resourcing as a priority.

Final decisions which require the Assembly in Session would be brought to the 17th Assembly following wide consultation across the Church. While the Assembly is the council to lead and oversee change of the scale that is proposed, it will not succeed without the commitment and engagement of the whole of the Uniting Church as an expression of our common commitment to Christ.