



**Uniting Church in Australia**  
**ASSEMBLY**  
Assembly Standing Committee

21-23 July 2023

**DOCUMENT 16**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Act2 Report</b>
Type of Paper (Information/Decision)	For information
Assembly or ASC Minute	
Consultation	
Purpose	To update the ASC regarding the work and process of the Act2 project
Rationale & Findings Summary	See the report
Attachments	
Proposal/s	That the Assembly Standing Committee <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Receive the Act2 Report</li><li>2. To approve a stand-alone conversation with the ASC between its July and November meetings to gain the perspective of the ASC of the Directions and Options offered; and to request the General Secretary to identify a time for this to take place (via zoom).</li></ol>
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# ACT2 REPORT

## Introduction

On 22 June 2023 the Uniting Church in Australia celebrated its 46th Anniversary. On that day Uniting in Prayer came to a conclusion as the Assembly General Secretary, Colleen Geyer, and the Act2 Project Lead, Andrew Johnson, presented to the first council of the Church about the third report of the Project – [Act2: In Response to God's Call](#).<sup>1</sup> This represented the culmination of an intensive period of work over the preceding six months and signaled the transition into the important time of collective discernment which will mark the next six months. This report to the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) charts the course of this work to date and outlines the trajectory of the work over the coming six months.

## Phase 1: Exploration (November 2022 to May 2023)

Our engagement across the Church has included:

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

Building on the earlier work of the Act2 Project, we believe we have had the opportunity to engage with the breadth and depth of our Church throughout this phase. A key to this phase has been the extensive travel in which people were engaged by the team in their context. This has helped deepen our collective understanding and built visibility and trust which has enabled honest, deep and illuminating conversations. Our engagement highlighted both the richness and reality of our life in all our diversity alongside the consistency of the systemic issues we face as a whole Church.

At the conclusion of the Exploration Phase the team worked to synthesise all that they had heard and produce a draft of the report for the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee then spent two days together (13-14 May) in person working through the report. This was a time of exploring and testing the findings, directions and options. The fruits of that weekend were then used to rework the report, to strengthen the articulation and illustration of the findings, directions and options. The final product of the report owes a lot to the quality of engagement and feedback of the Steering Committee.

The final report was provided to the Synod of South Australia and published on the Act2 website ahead of the meeting of the Synod.

Rather than repeat the findings of the report here, the ASC is invited to read [Section 2](#) of the report. The concluding paragraph of that section says:

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

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this report is drawn from the final sentence of Paragraph 13 of the Basis of Union, “The Uniting Church will thereafter provide for the exercise by men and women of the gifts God bestows upon them, and will order its life in response to God’s call to enter more fully into mission.”

Reflecting a similar theme, the concluding paragraphs of the theological reflection in [Section 3](#) says: “As we embrace the reality of our fragility and marginality within the life of the Australian society, we can imagine our life differently. So many within our Church feel a deep sense of grief for a Church that no longer exists. However we have always anticipated our end as a Church, knowing that we did not have a continuing city.

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

### **Uniting in Prayer (28 May to 22 June 2023)**

Alongside the Exploration Phase the team has worked to build up to [Uniting in Prayer](#), a whole of Church time of prayer and reflection and the beginning of our time of collective discernment.

This time included the following:

- Daily prayers shared for 26 days between Pentecost and the Uniting Church Anniversary
- Resources for liturgy, reflection and at home engagement with families.
- A National Prayer Chain joining together over 2,000 parts of the Church in prayer.
- A National Prayer Gathering online.

Tracking actual prayers is still beyond the scope of the social media analytics, however as a measure of interest, reach, engagement and participation in Uniting in Prayer we share the following:

- Total reach of daily prayers via Facebook of 97,972 (average 3,918 per day).
- Total shares of the prayers on Facebook of 1,772 (average 70 per day).
- 640 subscribers to the daily prayer emails with a 67% average open rate across the time with 10,722 unique opens. This indicates a high forward rate with many people sharing the daily prayers within their local communities of faith.
- 4,176 views of the Uniting in Prayer webpage, now the most popular webpage on our website this year.
- The Covenant Prayer video received 4,200 views and the Lord’s Prayer video 1,800 views.

Alongside the breadth of the reach of Uniting in Prayer we have heard stories from all around the country of the prayer in action:

- Two communities, one in Queensland and another in Victoria zoomed together for worship and prayed for one another and are now planning a joint bible study.
- A community creating a banner on Pentecost to photograph with their community and share with their prayer partner.
- A prayer gathering of a community shared with a meal and open time of prayer for all the councils of our Church.
- Several people stayed after the conclusion of the national prayer gathering for over 20 mins online in prayer.
- A Church printed out the prayers each day and shared them all over the Church (including in the bathrooms).
- In an aged care facility, members of the Uniting Church in that facility gathered for prayer each week across the period.

One person used the prayers on their train each morning. They shared the following with us:

“I receive the texts while it is still dark and pray with them as light emerges through the train windows. I have found the prayers both consoling and challenging. They have helped me reflect on my own call and ministry as well as draw me deeper into communion with a new part of Christ’s blessed and broken body. Some days I just receive the verbs in the texts as manifestation of our incarnated God.”

Someone at the conclusion of the National Prayer Gathering shared:

“Blessings to all it has been amazing to unite in prayer with folk across the nation to pray for the ministry of Christ happening in so many diverse places and ways.”

Many have asked us to think about continuing with Uniting in Prayer weekly or annually. This is worthy of consideration. We continue to invite people to [share prayers](#) with us. More deeply, the location of prayer and the other practices of our faith at the centre of our collective life and discernment should be a call to us all. The mix of prayers, new words and from the tradition of our faith, helped connect us more deeply with God and each other. This practice of prayer will continue to shape our work over the rest of the year.

## **Phase 2: Collective Discernment (June to November 2023)**

A more detailed introduction to this phase is included within the report in [Section 4](#). The key framing questions for this phase are:

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

The promotion of the launch of the report was held until after the conclusion of Uniting in Prayer to ensure we remained focused on this important time. Since that time promotion of the report has begun, including a launch scheduled for 13 July and distribution out to all contacts across the Church. The focus of this phase of the project is on discernment, particularly the Directions outlined in [Section 5](#) on *Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship* and Options outlined in [Section 6](#) on *Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing*. It is important to note that while there are four options offered in Workstream 3, there are also a set of key changes proposed irrespective of the options.

Every part of the Church is invited to engage with the report, in particular we are inviting consideration by Synods, Presbyteries, boards and committees throughout the Church. We are also again asking Church Councils to consider the report. We would welcome an opportunity for a stand-alone conversation with the ASC between its July and November meeting to gain the perspective of the ASC of the Directions and Options offered. We recognise the opportunity for different parts of the Church to respond to the report will vary. Therefore, we have developed a consistent set of response tools which can be used in a variety of contexts. We expect leaders across the Church should have multiple opportunities to engage over this phase. Alongside this we are inviting questions, individual responses and submissions. Responses from the Church are due by 30 November.

To support the Church’s discernment, we are developing a variety of resources including:

- Launch of the report on [Facebook Live](#) at 1pm AEST on 13 July
- Plain language [executive summary](#)
- [One-page graphical summaries](#) of the Directions and Options
- FAQs answers page and potentially online Facebook live sessions to answer questions
- Slide pack summary
- Videos introducing the Collective Discernment Phase, Directions and Options
- Pivoting to fortnightly [Going Deeper Sessions](#) focused on the Directions and Options

We have developed a communications plan focused on July and August to ensure early awareness and engagement with the report. We expect more communications artefacts will be developed over time.

We have received invitations already to meetings of Synods, Presbyteries, boards, networks and committees. While we are open to invitations to engage with any part of the Church in-person or online we are aware we will not be able to accept every invitation. Therefore, we are focused on ensuring we have tools and artefacts to enable discernment without the direct support of the Act2 team. We are also being supported by the members of the Steering Committee in this work.

Alongside supporting the Church's discernment on the Directions and Options in the report we will continue work on *Workstream 2: National Identity* and *Workstream 4: Theological Culture and Education*. A summary of the findings so far is included in the report. This has informed work on the Directions and Options. However, there is further work to be done to fulfill the decision of the 16th Assembly in these two areas.

We will be focused on:

- [National Forums](#) in July-August (Workstream 2). These will be on:
  - Our national voice in the public square (7.30pm AEST, 19 July)
  - Our international partnerships and ecumenical relationships (12.30pm AEST, 25 July)
  - Our multicultural and intercultural identity (12.30pm AEST, 3 August)
  - Our national theological culture – linked with the work on Workstream 4
  - Promoting the mission of the Church (7.30pm AEST, 24 July)
- Promoting the [Call for Papers](#) on theological culture due September (Workstream 4).
- Determining how to proceed with a national gathering on a framework for theological education (Workstream 4).

One thing worth the ASC noting is our working definition of theological culture:

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

This has taken some time to gain understanding and traction as we have engaged with the Church.

We are continuing to work on ways to fulfil our core commitments to the Covenant with Congress, being a multicultural Church and fulfilling our ethical, legal and social obligations. We believe all three areas can be strengthened through ongoing engagement, particularly with Congress leaders and leaders of our CALD communities during the Collective Discernment phase.

By the time the ASC meets in November the Church will have been engaged in a sustained discernment conversation over six months. This will shape our work into Phase 3: Recommendations for Action. In this phase we will again look to synthesise what we have heard and work to craft an integrated set of recommendations for the ASC in March 2024 for its consideration to recommend to the 17th Assembly. Please continue to be in prayer for the Church throughout this time and encourage participation from all parts of the Church. It is only through prayer and participation from the Church that we will be able to discern the leading of the Spirit for our life together.

## **Steering Committee**

Since our last report the Steering Committee has met on two occasions in April and June online along with two days in May to consider the draft report. All members receive all the documents via a shared GoogleDrive and are encouraged to include comments directly into the documents before, during and after meetings alongside the discussion and deliberation within the meeting itself.

Ultimately all four of the workstreams are expected to converge towards the end of 2023 with an integrated set of recommendations coming to the March 2024 ASC ahead of the 17th Assembly in July 2024.

### *Risk Management*

The Steering Committee continues to monitor the risks at the project at each of its meetings. We were able to successfully mitigate the risk of not completing Phase 1 by the Synod in Session meeting of the Synod of South Australia. The risk profile of the project has continued largely in line with what was reported in March. Early response to the report indicates that people have found it to reflect the experience of the Church. We believe this along with the experience of Uniting in Prayer will strengthen

people's engagement with the project and assist in mitigating the risks associated with the engagement of the Church.

#### *Budget*

The 2022-23 Budget has continued in line with the reforecast reported at the March meeting. The budget for 2023-24 and the funding request arising from the decision of the March ASC is dealt with in other reports. The Act2 team has assisted the General Secretary in responding to requests for further information from Synods regarding the budget.

#### *Project Unit*

Illness and leave over the May and June period has stretched the capacity of the team. From mid-July all the team are expected to be back on deck as we scale up the work in the Collective Discernment phase. The General Secretary and the President along with the members of the Steering Committee have played a valuable role in supporting the team throughout this time of intensive work. Continue to pray for all the team as we support the Church in its discernment.

### **Conclusion**

This report comes at a time in the project. While it is a time to pause and reflect on all that we have heard over the past six months, the next six months is a critical time which will define whether the project will achieve the hopes expressed through the decision of the 16th Assembly. Everyone involved in the commissioning, oversight and implementation of this project will need to support the discernment process throughout the life of the Church. Prayer and participation need to be prioritised over watching and waiting.

As in our March report, prayer remains our constant source of strength. We are ever attentive to the leading of the Spirit. As the challenges we encounter remain great, my hope continues to grow that through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ will renew the Church's collective imagination about our life together.