



Uniting Church in Australia

ASSEMBLY

Assembly Standing Committee

10-12 November 2023

DOCUMENT 14

Title	Act2 Report
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 1. Receive the Act2 Report
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ACT2 REPORT

Introduction

By the time of the November Assembly Standing Committee meeting we will be two and half weeks from the deadline (30 November) for responses to the third report of the Project – [Act2: In Response to God's Call](#).¹ It will follow an intensive time of engagement across the length and breadth of the Church where we will have visited every state and territory to resource the Church to respond to the Directions, Key Changes and Options outlined in the report. Alongside this we have continued to progress the rest of the work, particularly on our national identity and our theological culture. This will culminate in us considering the response of the Church through December and January as we frame up the report and recommendations for the ASC and ultimately the 17th Assembly.

Phase 2: Collective Discernment (June to November 2023)

Act2: In Response to God's Call

While engagement is continuing our engagement across the Church to date has included:

- Direct communication with 1,672 local communities of faith.
- Participation occurred or scheduled in five Synod meetings.
- Participation in or scheduled with eleven presbyteries and support to several other presbyteries to engage the report themselves.
- Three agency CEO gatherings, two agency boards, the UnitingCare Australia Board and the UnitingCare Australia National Leaders Forum.
- Face to face visits to both the Northern Regional Council of Congress and Queensland Regional Council of Congress meetings.
- Dedicated outreach and gatherings with CALD leaders through each of the Synod networks along with some engagement with National Conferences.
- Engagement with the ASC, Assembly Executive Team and the Frontier Services gathering of Bush Chaplains.
- 11 Focus Groups of over 100 ministers and leaders from local communities of faith.
- Five National Forums focused on our national identity.
- 33 contributions to our Call for Papers on our theological culture.
- 22 written submissions received to date from a mixture councils, boards, networks and individuals.

Alongside these formal engagements we have had countless conversations, emails and phone calls with thoughts, ideas, questions and concerns from across the length and breadth of the Church. Each one of these encounters is giving us more information and insight with which to shape the pathway forward as we move towards Phase 3: Recommendations for Action.

As the report has continued to roll out across the life of the Church we have continued to produce artefacts to support engagement with the report. These have included:

- [Videos](#) introducing the Collective Discernment Phase, Workstream 1 Directions and Workstream 3 Options (with text and voiceovers)
- An [Executive Summary](#)

¹ 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.”

- A [Plain Language Summary](#)
- Over 50 [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Graphics](#) and [table summaries](#) of Directions and Options
- Consistent [response forms](#) for all councils, committees, boards
- [Church Council](#) specific and [individual](#) specific response forms

Alongside responding to invitations to participate and visit groups we have had:

- 11 Focus Groups for Ministers and local leaders
- Fortnightly online Going Deeper Sessions
- An [online launch](#) of the report and an online [FAQ session](#)

As we said at our October meeting with the ASC, we anticipate through Workstream 1 and Workstream 3 a mixture of proposals that could relate to the Constitution, regulations, structure, guidance, policy and overall direction. It is not currently possible to predict the mix of those and we are not seeking to pre-empt the process.

Workstream 2: National Identity

The focus in the Exploration Phase on National Identity was on hearing from local communities of faith about what they value about the national identity and work of the Uniting Church. There is a summary of these findings in Section 2 of the report. Uniting in Prayer was an important marker as we sought to discern and strengthen our national identity. Through the Collective Discernment Phase, we have continued work on this workstream through five national forums focused on five areas of national work that were identified through the Exploration Phase. These national forums were focused on:

- Our National Voice in the Public Square
- Our International Partnerships and Ecumenical Relationships
- Promoting the Mission of the Church
- Our Multicultural and Intercultural Identity
- Our National Theological Culture

[Summaries and recordings](#) of these national forums are now available. The format has primarily been a webinar style format with four to five panellists from across the work of the national Church and the wider Uniting Church. Attendees have also been able to ask questions and there has often been a lively chat discussion during the sessions. There has been about 30 attendees on average for the national forums.

This conversation has always proceeded in two ways, the first is people's interest in continuing to explore what it means to be the Uniting Church and the second is in exploring what it means to be a national Church. We anticipate this will feed into some proposals about both elements. The second particularly feeds into the outcomes of Workstream 3 in relation to the role and resourcing of the national council of the Church.

Workstream 4: Theological Culture and Education

As planned in the project plan, this workstream has taken a slower pace. However through the period of August to October we have been pleasantly surprised with the level of engagement in the Call for Papers on our theological culture. The call itself was first published in April, however after a slow trickle we have now received over thirty papers and reflections which we have been publishing three to four per week on the [website](#). There is a rich diversity of contributions from across the breadth of our Church.

This has provided a solid foundation for preparing for consideration of the theological education component of this work.

Following our meeting with the Heads of Colleges in July we have been working on preparation for a national gathering on theological education. This is drawing leaders from theological colleges, lay education, Synod governing bodies, national committees, Congress, agencies and scholar practitioners together to explore a national framework and approach to the provision of theological education. This is not the first time this conversation has been explored and we have listened to the experience of those previous conversations. Our focus will be in the role of theological education in:

- Supporting the theological culture of the Uniting Church
- Equipping the specified ministries for the diverse ministries to which they are called
- Enabling discipleship formation of the whole people of God within the Uniting Church

We have also been prompted by the UnitingCare Australia second submission to consider the role of theological education in relation to the agencies, particularly the equipping of executive and non-executive leaders.

This conversation is not confined to theological colleges, the ordained ministries or one particular model or outcome. However, it is intending to be an imaginative and ambitious conversation considering the work of the rest of the Act2 Project. This will require ongoing work in the lead up to the gathering and follow up work. We have been encouraged by the response we have received to date with 19 participants already confirmed. We anticipate that this could lead to proposals as part of the integrated set of recommendations brought to the March ASC. It may also include other outcomes which are pursued through other councils or governing bodies.

Uniting in Prayer

We have continued to receive positive feedback about Uniting in Prayer and continue to use the prayers from that time throughout our engagement. We have looked at the period between Pentecost (19 May) and the 47th Anniversary of the Uniting Church (22 June). This is close to the commencement of the 17th Assembly so we believe 34 days of prayer at that time would be a good further activity of the project.

Communication

Website

We have continued sustained communication throughout the past few months. Since the beginning of August we have seen sustained growth in the visitors to the Act website. We have had 7,600 unique visits and 22,000 page views. Our most popular page by far is the Act2 Report followed by our Home page and the theological culture reflections.

National Update

We have had at least one, usually two articles in National Update every week for some months now. Our most popular contributions remain the articles we put out about the project, particularly when we share about the report:

- [Unpacking our theological culture](#) (Jul 5, 567 clicks, 411 unique)
- [Act2 reflects back](#) (Sep 13, 1,053 clicks, 773 unique)
- [8 key takeaways from the Act2 report](#) (Oct 6, 1,267 clicks, 893 unique)

Social Media

We continue to have strong engagement on social media, it has been a particularly effective tool for gaining sign ups to events, forums and focus groups. Our reach has generally been between 2,500 to 3,000 in terms of reach. We have also found the 'organic' social media of team members or individuals in the Church sharing about the project (particularly the theological culture papers) has spread the reach of the work and received good engagement. We have also prioritised timely response to social media comments and looking for ways to invite people into other opportunities to engage with the project.

Direct Email

We have also continued to communicate directly with all those for which we have contact information, over 2,000 contacts across all parts of the Church, particularly congregations and presbyteries. We continue to have an open rate for emails of above 60%. We have been using this to both engage people in the work and to call them to respond to the report by 30 November.

Steering Committee

Since our last report the Steering Committee has met on three occasions in August, September and October. 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. Many members of the Steering Committee members engage with the team between meetings and have been actively involved in supporting engagement with councils, boards and committees in their part of the Church.

The Steering Committee will meet online in early December and has its final face to face meeting scheduled for January 20-21, 2024 to consider the response from Phase 2 and to consider recommendations for the ASC and ultimately the 17th Assembly.

Risk Management

There has been some change in the likelihood of some risk, in particular the risk of there not being sufficient time or sufficient will to gain support for significant change. There has been an overall increase in the active questioning of the direction of some aspects of the project, particularly around Workstream 3. We have sought to manage some of this through our broadcast communication. However, our most effective tool has remained turning up and participating in conversations with people across the Church. Seeking and respecting feedback from all parts of the Church and inviting people to respond and locating their concerns within the context of the project have been useful in managing this risk. We believe there are adequate avenues for people to offer their response within the context of the process and Directions and Options offered. However helping people recognise and take the opportunity usually requires direct engagement, usually face to face.

We have been encouraged by the wisdom of the collective in shaping the response from different parts of the Church to be more constructive than individual responses. As a team, Steering Committee and ASC we may need to be prepared to make some important trade-offs as we consider what we recommend to the Assembly. There is competing anxieties in the Church about the potential scale of change and whether we are culturally ready to make significant change.

Budget

The budget continues broadly in line with that which was approved by the ASC. Travel has been consistent with our planning. We are finding we are able to respond to all the requests for meetings in person with different parts of the Church within the budget. The main constraint is staff capacity.

There have been some questions about a budget for implementation. Both the scale of our current engagement at this stage along with not wanting to pre-empt the process means we have not gone too far down the path of implementation budgeting.

Project Unit

The team has continued to be very stretched in terms of capacity, particularly in light of the scale of engagement required of the Church. This has required some trade-off choices about where to invest time and effort. It has also meant more of the engagement has been done just by one member of the team through this 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. We also had a valuable time of gathering face to face as a team for reflection and sharing in August this year. Continue to pray for all the team as we support the Church in its discernment.

Conclusion

This report comes at a time of intensive engagement with the Church. When energy levels are low or managing the competing demands and responses stretches us, as with all stages of the project, prayer remains our constant source of strength. We are ever attentive to the leading of the Spirit. While at times we may find ourselves falling into frustration or despair the vision to which Christ calls us is still compelling.

Our Basis of Union and the Sydney Opera House are almost the same age. Both inspirational, both reimagining the possibilities of shape and form. Just as people on the Sydney ferry each day may become complacent of the wonder that the Opera House is, so to we sometimes think the vision of our Church as described is inevitable and unremarkable. May we find the inspiration that first shaped our birth as we reimagine our life as we look to our second act.