



Act2: The Gift of the Spirit

# **Act2: The Gift of the Spirit**

July 2024



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### A note about the title of this report

The title of this report is drawn from the final sentence of Paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union,  
*On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.*

### A note about the Illustration

The cover illustration was commissioned by talented Melbourne-based illustrator Cat McInnes. It is inspired by the work of the Act2 Project and the engagement of the Uniting Church, the joys of our life and our future hopes and dreams. In considering the content of this report, we pray it inspires your own reflection on what challenges you and what gives you hope and joy.



## Preface

Welcome to this Act2 report to the 17th Assembly.

The title of this report comes from the Basis of Union which affirms that the Church “has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way”. The Holy Spirit is a disturbing gift at times. It is an unsettling presence in our comfort and apathy, nudging us to take notice of both pain and joy and calling us to lives of creativity and courage.

I have seen the Spirit moving many times in the work of the Act2 Project. It was there in the faithful discernment of our councils and members. It was there as people shared honestly about their hopes and fears. It was there in feedback which caused us to reshape our direction. It was there as the Act2 team wrestled with a way forward that was true to the discernment of the Church.

The Spirit has also been gently brooding on the difficult truths that have arisen from looking at our life with honesty and love. While there is much to celebrate in our body of Christ there is much that is hard and frustrating. There are many places where the current ordering of our life makes it difficult to be faithful to who God is calling us to be. Before us is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reorient our life to our very purpose, to serve the gospel of Jesus Christ and enter more fully into Christ’s mission. An opportunity to move forward with a renewed sense of faith, hope and unity. An invitation to courageously ask what we might need to give up to find newness of life.

We will need to acknowledge the grief that change may bring and give thanks for the past. But we are in God’s hands and there is more life and hope ahead than we can even imagine.

I want to thank the Uniting Church for its considerable engagement with the Project, and the Act2 Project Unit and Steering Committee for the scale of work it has undertaken. In the discernment now to take place on this report may we be guided by the Spirit, the compass that guides us to Jesus, our true north.

**Rev Sharon Hollis**

Chair, Act2 Steering Committee

Easter 2024



# Executive Summary

## Act2: The Gift of the Spirit

### Summary of the Findings and Conclusions (continued)

#### RESPONSES TO DIRECTIONS ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES OF FAITH AND DISCIPLESHIP (CHAPTER 4)

- There was widespread support for the directions including the focus on discipleship and mission and flexible governance arrangements.
- There were questions about implementation, particularly about the relationship between congregations and the wider Church.
- There needs to be closer relationships between communities of faith and the wider Church to provide oversight, encouragement and support. People saw that the Directions renewed the toolkit for that relationship to be fostered.

#### RESPONSES TO OPTIONS ON GOVERNANCE AND RESOURCING (CHAPTER 6)

- There were a range of responses to the Options about differences in context, imperatives and priorities. Many people recognised the current governance model was not working and needed to change.
- People were most supportive or open to Option 1. They recognised the scale and challenges of implementation. They also supported elements of other options, including increased resourcing closer to local communities of faith, reducing duplication and resource sharing.
- The broad sentiment of the Church is that now is the time to be bold and take the opportunity to pursue significant structural and cultural change.

### Act2 Proposals: an integrated set of proposals in three streams (Chapter 7 & 8)

#### A. LIFE GIVING COMMUNITIES OF FAITH AND DISCIPLESHIP

- Focus on discipleship and mission.
- A new toolkit for fit-for-purpose local governance.
- Better beginnings and endings for communities.
- Review of church membership to better align our rules and our reality.

Overseen by the Assembly Standing Committee.

**JULY 2024-JUNE 2027**

#### B. A NETWORK FOR A FLOURISHING THEOLOGICAL CULTURE

- National multi-campus Theological College.
- National Theological Culture Structure.
- Theological work on 'discipleship', 'evangelism', 'mission' and 'diaconal communities'.

Overseen by a Commission for Theology, Formation and Leadership.

**JULY 2024-JULY 2027**

#### C. SHARING OUR LIFE AND OUR COMMON WEALTH

- Conduct a feasibility assessment of a three council model and a four council model.
- Develop a roadmap for implementation underpinned by a resourcing model.
- Identify and implement other actions to progress the Vision and Principles.

Overseen by a Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration.

2024  
TRANSITION TO  
NEW COMMISSION

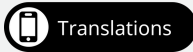
➡

2025-2027  
ASSESS GOVERNANCE  
MODELS & PREPARE  
ROADMAP

➡

2027 AND BEYOND  
ASSEMBLY DECISION  
& APPROVAL BY  
OTHER COUNCILS

**JULY 2024-2027**



# Executive Summary

## Act2: The Gift of the Spirit

### Summary of the Process

#### EXPLORE

LISTENING FOR IDEAS AND  
IMPERATIVES (NOV-MAY 23)

#### DISCERN

DEEP DISCUSSION OF DIRECTIONS  
AND OPTIONS (JUN-NOV 23)

#### RECOMMEND

DEVELOP AND RECOMMEND A  
WAY FORWARD (DEC 23-JUL 24)

### Summary of the Findings and Conclusions

#### OUR SHARED IDENTITY (CHAPTER 2)

- Across the Church we have continued to affirm shared identity markers. These come from the biblical witness, the Basis of Union and foundational statements and decisions we have made since Union.
- We have not always lived up to our commitments, particularly in living out our Covenant with Congress and our commitment to be a truly intercultural Church.
- Our theological fault lines continue to cause pain in our life. We look to Jesus Christ as the source and sustainer of our unity.
- We need to keep drawing on these foundational sources of faith and unity to build our sense of shared identity as a Uniting Church within the universal church.

#### OUR NATIONAL LIFE AND WORK (CHAPTER 3)

- Being a national Church is a gift which gives us the opportunity to celebrate our shared and diverse identity and to speak with a shared public voice.
- In general people value the work of the national Church. This is particularly in areas of our public voice, international relationships, the Church's core theological identity and particular national missional opportunities.
- To fulfil these responsibilities most effectively the national Church needs to be both better resourced and deeply connected to the wider Church.

#### OUR THEOLOGICAL CULTURE AND EDUCATION (CHAPTER 5)

- The Church's theological culture and the future of theological education is part of nourishing a healthy, vital and imaginative Church.
- We have many theological cultures and we need platforms for dialogue across our theological and cultural diversity.
- Theological education is essential to the discipleship of the whole people of God including forming people for the specified ministries in diverse ministry contexts.
- There is an appetite for deep and productive collaboration on the provision of theological education and formation. This requires a structure to lead and a culture to foster collaboration.

## Chapter One Considering Afresh: Introduction

*"...to enter a period of self-examination in which members are asked to consider afresh their common commitment to the Church's mission and their demonstration of its unity."*

- Paragraph 15, Basis of Union

The Act2 Project is a major whole-of-Church change project led by the Assembly focussed on discerning and deciding on the future of the Uniting Church. As a Church we are living through a time of change, opportunity and challenge. We are not the Church we were at the time of Union in 1977. The size, shape and demographics of our Church have changed. The society in which we participate in God's mission has also changed. Our structures, practices and culture need to change too.

As a Church we have courageously considered our life afresh. We have prayed together, listened broadly, discerned deeply and spoken honestly. Behind the processes and the numbers are the hopes, fears and yearnings of the people of God. Through exploring and testing new ideas and new ways to shape our life we have grappled with how to centre our lives on Jesus Christ.

Since the 16th Assembly the work has been organised into four workstreams:

1. Local communities of faith and discipleship
2. National identity
3. Governance and resourcing
4. Theological culture and education

*Act2: The Gift of the Spirit*, the report of the Act2 Project to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly, is a culmination of all this work. It draws the streams together into a set of reflections, findings and conclusions (Chapters 2 to 6). It also sets out a way forward through an integrated set of proposals and an implementation roadmap (Chapter 7 and 8).

The 16th Assembly affirmed the importance and urgency of this work. Since the reconvened meeting of the 16th Assembly a sense of engagement, momentum and anticipation has built within the Church. After a time of prayer, listening, discernment and discussion, now is the time for decision. Now is the time to courageously listen to the leading of the Spirit. Now is the time to consider the proposals prayerfully and carefully to decide on the way forward for the sake of the gospel. Now is the time for the Church to reimagine the shape, ordering and culture of our life.

## The journey so far...

In 2024 the Act2 Project will move into its fourth year. In March 2020, the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) commissioned the Project to identify and implement sustainable structures, practices, and ways of working that would position the Uniting Church to grow into its calling in the decades ahead.<sup>1</sup>

An ASC task group carried the work forward between 2020 and 2022. It issued two national surveys, consulted broadly and hosted six national conversations. The Project released its first report in October 2021, *Act2: Considering Afresh our Life Together*, alongside a series of studies, *Our Life Together: Reflection on the Basis of Union*, to foster reflection on our identity.

In March 2022 the ASC delivered *Act2: On the Way*, its report and proposals to the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly meeting. At its reconvened meeting in May 2022, the Assembly passed a resolution affirming the importance and urgency of Act2 and directing its focus. The ASC was asked to establish a new national Steering Committee and a staffed Project Unit to carry the work forward to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly.

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

Exploration was the first phase of the Project following the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly decisions. It involved one of the Assembly's most comprehensive consultation processes, using tailored surveys, direct engagement and national travel to understand the current state of our life as the Uniting Church. It gave the Project insights into:

- The true size of our Church nationally.
- The things that give us joy and the identity markers of which we, as a Church, are most proud.
- A clear desire to claim back energy and love for discipleship and mission.
- The serious challenges many Congregations are facing in size, energy, capacity and direction.
- The mixed nature of relationships between the councils of the Church.
- The fractures and inefficiencies of our current governance system.

*Act2: In Response to God's Call*, released in June 2023, was the report of this phase. It reflected major findings, interpreted insights theologically and put forward a set of Directions and a diverse range of Options for consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> ASC Minute 20.29, Planning for the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly (March 2020),  
<https://www.act2uca.com/ascreolutions>



Between the end of Phase One and the beginning of Phase Two, the Project held [\*Uniting in Prayer\*](#), a 26-day period of prayer which included daily prayers from across the Church, a national prayer chain, worship resources and an online prayer gathering.

#### [\*Phase Two: Collective Discernment \(June to November 2023\)\*](#)

The release of [\*Act2: In Response to God's Call\*](#) launched Phase Two, a time of intensive collective discernment focussed on seeking responses to the report and to the Directions and Options in particular. Every part of the Uniting Church was invited to participate. The Project Unit developed a series of response forms for councils, committees, governing bodies, communities and individuals to engage. This invitation was shared regularly through both broadcast and direct communication channels.

The opportunity to respond remained open for the whole Phase. Alongside this, other activities of the Project during this time included:

- Regular outreach to 1,672 local communities of faith.
- Direct outreach to all Presbyteries and engagement with 12 Presbyteries.
- Attendance at every Synod in session.<sup>2</sup>
- Engagement with the Assembly Standing Committee and Assembly Executive.
- Engagement with Uniting Church agency CEOs; UnitingCare Australia Board and UnitingCare Australia Leaders Forum.
- Outreach to Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) regional committees and attendance at the UAICC National Conference.
- Outreach to all Synod multicultural networks and meetings with four networks.
- Direct outreach to National Conference Chairs.
- A second series of online [\*Focus Groups\*](#) with 12 groups of leaders in a diverse range of communities of faith.
- Five online [\*National Forums\*](#) focussed on key areas of the Church's national life and work, with video recordings and written summaries made available.
- Fortnightly 'Going Deeper' sessions hosted on Zoom and open to all.

#### [\*Response forms and submissions\*](#)

- Responses from 223 discernment groups representing 2,028 participants across the Church Councils, Synods, Presbyteries and the Assembly:
  - Church Councils (115 discernment groups, 1,080 participants).

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<sup>2</sup> The Northern Synod postponed its meeting of the full Synod in Session to April 2024. However, the Act2 team attended both Presbytery meetings in October 2023 which included engagement with the Synod leaders.

- Presbyteries (39 discernment groups, 428 participants).<sup>3</sup>
  - Synods (63 discernment groups, 499 participants).
  - Assembly (6 discernment groups, 21 participants).
- 77 written submissions from Church Councils, Synods, Presbyteries, the Assembly, theological colleges, individuals, agencies and networks:
  - 17 from Church Councils/Congregations.
  - 3 from Presbyteries.
  - 6 from Synods.
  - 2 from the Assembly.
  - 7 from agencies.
  - 4 from theological colleges.
  - 5 from networks.
  - 33 from individuals.
- 108 written responses from individuals.

#### *Theological culture papers*

In May 2023 the Project issued a call for papers on the theological culture of the Uniting Church. [Thirty-seven contributions](#) were received, totalling almost 100,000 words; these were published weekly on the Act2 website. This work was part of Workstream 4 on Theological Culture and Education and aimed to foster a vibrant and honest conversation about our theological life as a Church. Contributions covered a range of topics including lay and ordained ministry, the centrality of Jesus, the different voices of theology, social justice, church property, church union, preaching, mission, discipleship, worship, evangelism, grace and more.

#### *National Gathering on Theological Education*

In early December 2023 the Project hosted a two-day national gathering on theological education. With every Synod represented, it brought together key leaders in theological colleges, leaders in the work of ministry formation and lay education, emerging scholars and First Nations theologians.

#### *Phase Three: Recommendations for Action (December 2023 to July 2024)*

Phase Two: Collective Discernment ended on 30 November 2023 and the Project moved into Phase Three: Recommendations for Action. The Project team comprehensively analysed the discernment and feedback from across the Church about the Directions and Options, including all written submissions and response

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<sup>3</sup> In addition, there was qualitative feedback on the Directions from a Presbytery representing 80 participants.

forms, feedback from direct engagement and insights from various engagement opportunities offered in Phase Two.

The Project team has worked to interpret the breadth and depth of feedback in a spirit of deep listening and openness to both the leading of the Holy Spirit and the discernment of the Church.

Drawing on the insights from the engagement process, further work was then undertaken to guide and shape an integrated set of proposals to the 17th Assembly.

This report provides a comprehensive summary of the work across the four workstreams. It should be read alongside the previous reports of the Project, particularly [Act2: In Response to God's Call](#). It is primarily a report to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly to assist the Assembly in its consideration of the proposals contained within [Chapter Seven Go Forward Together: A Way Forward](#).

### A note about the quantitative and qualitative data

Throughout the report there are references to quantitative data drawn from across the life of the Church. This data comes from Response Forms prepared for the Collective Discernment Phase of the project focussing on the Directions and Options put forward in *[Act2: In Response to God's Call](#)*. We received responses from 223 discernment groups representing 2,028 participants across Church Councils, Synods, Presbyteries and the Assembly:

- Church Councils (115 discernment groups, 1,080 participants).
- Presbyteries (39 discernment groups, 428 participants).<sup>4</sup>
- Synods (63 discernment groups, 499 participants).
- Assembly (6 discernment groups, 21 participants).<sup>5</sup>

The response forms asked people to indicate whether they were:

- **Supportive**, generally warm to this Direction/Option.
- **Open**, open to this Direction/Option with questions or concerns.
- **Not supportive**, generally cool to this Direction/Option.

Within the report some charts present the results with

- **Supportive**, this shows the percentage of groups that indicated they were supportive of the Direction or Option. For example, 75% of the groups were supportive of Direction 1.
- **Open**, this shows the percentage of groups that indicated they were supportive of the Direction or Option. For example, 18% of the groups were supportive of Direction 1.
- **Supportive + Open**, this adds together the percentage of groups that were supportive with the percentage of groups that were open to the Direction or Option. For example, 75% of the groups were either supportive or open to Direction 1.

Where we have included percentages in the summary, these are percentages of the total number of discernment group forms. Where these percentages are related to feedback from councils of the church, it is the percentage of the total number of discernment group forms received from that council.

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<sup>4</sup> In addition, there was qualitative feedback on the Directions from a Presbytery representing 80 participants.

<sup>5</sup> Note that these are responses from the Assembly Standing Committee.

Qualitative comments were also collected about the Directions and Options. Church Councils were asked to focus primarily on the Directions while the wider councils of the Church were asked to focus primarily on the Options. There were also 108 responses from individuals to a similar form. Individuals were asked for comments on the Directions and Options. In addition, 77 formal written submissions were received.

Inevitably, there are limitations in the data. All councils of the Church were invited to use the Response Forms and submission process to respond to the Directions and Options. Some parts of the Church set aside significant time in their meetings, engaged deeply with the material, utilised the Response Forms and provided all the material to the Act2 Project. Some approached the material with more qualitative discussion which led to thematic feedback. Some were only able to dedicate a small amount of time in their meetings. Some considered alternative ideas, reflections or proposals. Some councils did not consider the report at all.

The Act2 team sought to collect as much material as possible in whatever form it was available. All responses were read, analysed and synthesised. A summary of the feedback is found in two of the chapters below:

- [\*\*Chapter Four Building One Another Up in Love: Life-giving Communities of Faith and Discipleship\*\*](#) (Directions)
- [\*\*Chapter Six In Service of the Gospel: Ordering Our Life\*\*](#) (Options)

The quantitative data provides a partial and incomplete picture of the response to the Directions and Options. However, collectively it does give an indicative sense of the sentiment of the Church, particularly when joined with the qualitative comments and submissions. The summary of the quantitative and qualitative data is offered to aid in the discernment of the Church about the best way forward for its life.



## Chapter Two Christ's Gift: Our Shared Identity

*"...seeking to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church..."*

- Paragraph 1, Basis of Union

The question of 'identity' has been a feature of the Act2 Project since the first ASC resolution that commissioned this work.<sup>6</sup> Since the decision of the 16th Assembly, this question has been pursued through two lenses. The first is discerning, clarifying and strengthening our national identity, which many have understood to mean our shared identity as the Uniting Church. The second is our theological culture.<sup>7</sup>

### Our shared identity

As the Act2 team travelled around the Church we asked the somewhat provocative question, 'what holds us together other than history and property?' Despite some hesitation in answering, ('maybe that is all that is holding us together...'), people named a range of things: the Uniting Church is inclusive, committed to justice, in covenant, multicultural, joyfully ordains women, has a thoughtful approach to theology and scholarship and values our connections to other Christians and other faiths. Often someone would say something like, 'Jesus Christ holds us together'.

The consistency with which people named the Uniting Church's shared identity markers was striking. Remarkably similar lists appear in [\*Act2: On The Way\*](#) and in [\*Act2: In Response to God's Call\*](#). The same markers have continued to resonate again and again.



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<sup>6</sup> ASC Minute 20.29.01, "...resource the Assembly to address the significant challenges and opportunities facing the Uniting Church into the future including identity, sustainability and structure." <https://www.act2uca.com/ascreolutions>.

<sup>7</sup> Assembly Minute 22.04, Minutes of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly, Uniting Church National Assembly, 2021-22, <https://www.act2uca.com/assemblydecision>.

### Our Shared Identity

- We are in a Covenant relationship with Congress.
- We are a multicultural Church and seek to be an intercultural Church.
- We are committed to gender equality in leadership.
- We affirm the ministry of every member of the Church, both lay and ordained.
- We are deeply committed to the promotion of justice.
- We value scholarly enquiry and an informed faith, learning from a breadth of theological perspectives and contemporary thought.
- 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.
- We are called to make and grow disciples in local communities of faith and discipleship.
- We are called to serve the world through practical expressions of God's love.
- We engage with our ecumenical partners in seeking unity with other churches.
- We seek friendship and understanding with people of other faiths.

Despite the consistency with which these markers are affirmed, as a Church we have often struggled to live up to the commitments we have made. This is particularly true of our Covenant relationship with Congress and our commitments to be a multicultural and intercultural Church.

We also continue to struggle with the significant theological fault lines that run through our life and impact the extent to which we can embrace a shared identity. While not the only one, sexuality remains the most prominent. Leaders within the LGBTQIA+ community, while acknowledging the decisions that have been made on sexuality, continue to long for a Church that is more open, affirming and celebrating of the gifts, participation and leadership of people who identify as LGBTQIA+. Despite the public and self-perception of being an 'inclusive' and 'welcoming' Church some members of the LGBTQIA+ community do not feel this is true in many communities of faith. Some are looking for more institutional recognition and support.

Other parts of the Uniting Church feel these decisions have made it difficult to continue holding our diverse theological perspectives within one institutional arrangement. One submission captured the mood in asking whether a 'gracious decoupling' might be possible – the creation of separate structures within the whole. These communities have found the decisions on sexuality, despite attempts to accommodate diverse theological perspectives, deeply challenging, disconnected from their local experience and inconsistent with their understanding of the Bible. However, the overall sense

across the Church is that we should do all we can to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church.

### Our theological culture

The concept of 'theological culture' finds its origins in the concept of 'social imaginary'. That is, the set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols through which people imagine their social whole.<sup>8</sup> As people of faith, our theology speaks into every aspect of our 'social whole' and so arises the idea of 'theological culture'. It is deeply linked to our identity.

Some have suggested that the beginning point for this work should have been to return to the sources of our faith and redefine the faith and purpose of the Church. However, the Basis of Union did not seek to define the faith of the Uniting Church. It sought to confess the faith of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.<sup>9</sup> As a Church, we entered into the faith of the church universal and described how we would live this out.

Over time as a Church, we have developed what have been called 'instruments of unity'.<sup>10</sup> These have built on our foundational documents, particularly the Basis of Union, to further respond to our context and the gaps and silences which were sinfully part of our history. For example, the [Statement to the Nation](#) (1977), [The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church](#) (1985), the [Covenanting Statement](#) (1994), [Uniting in Worship 2](#) (2005) and the [Revised Preamble to the Constitution](#) (2009). Others have suggested including our consensus decision-making process as described in the [Manual for Meetings](#) (2009). God has gifted us a foundation upon which to stand as we look to grow our theological culture and respond to our context afresh.

Faced with rapid decline, the temptation may be to build a stronger, uniquely Uniting Church identity; high walls to protect us from the outside and make us more secure.

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<sup>8</sup> For contemporary foundational work on social imaginary see Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Duke University Press, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11hpgvt>.

<sup>9</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, "The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering," in *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected theological documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, ed. Rob Bos and Geoff Thompson (Melbourne, Vic: Uniting Church Press, 2008), 167.

<sup>10</sup> Geoff Thompson, "The Theological Culture of the Uniting Church in Australia: Reflections and Possibilities," Act2 Project, last modified 16 August 2023, <https://www.act2uca.com/theological-culture-contributions/the-theological-culture-of-the-uniting-church-in-australia-reflections-and-possibilities>.

However, our tradition as a united/uniting church is not to build strong walls of doctrine and identity. It is to look out to the wide-open spaces of God's love in our life, the life of other traditions and the wider world and to learn from it all. Yes, from time to time we need to build fences, draw a line, define a boundary. And we have. We have said 'yes' to baptising children. We have said 'yes' to welcoming them at the Lord's table. We have said 'yes' (again) to ordaining women called to ministry (continuing the tradition of our founding churches).

As important as it was to define those boundaries, it was done carefully and sometimes reluctantly. We have also struggled with not defining boundaries where some have wished we would. Despite the pain it has sometimes caused, we have faithfully sought to bear witness to the unity to which Christ has called us. Even in defining boundaries we have kept our fences low enough to see others (and so others could see us). We have been willing to learn from others and invite them to learn from us.

In the end, it is not the boundaries that will sustain us. It is the deep wells God has given us to draw from. The Basis of Union points us to the author and source of our faith. We further find wells of living faith in our instruments of unity. We need to gather around these wells to drink more deeply from them to renew and refresh our life. For some of us who have stood at these wells for a long time it seems they have run dry. We think we have learned all we can from these gifts of God. It sometimes takes a new person to come alongside and say, 'that well is deeper than you think it is', and for us to plumb the depths again and find fresh water.

Sometimes, we do draw water from the wells to manufacture bricks for the walls we want to build or to pour a bucket of water on an opponent in an argument. There is a well we have drawn from too often to try to sustain our shared identity and life – our Regulations. We have too readily looked to our Regulations as a source of unity. We have too often tried to search in them for a sense of common identity.

As we look to how to sustain a flourishing theological culture, we need to drink more regularly from the wells we already have and those we might dig in response to God's call to fresh words and deeds. It might help us share with one another across the geographical and theological divides that currently seem to define our cultures.

Returning to the question of what holds us together, the answer 'Jesus Christ' ought not be interpreted as a simplistic, lowest common denominator answer. Rather it should be seen as a powerful force which transcends boundaries. The confession in Paragraph 3 of the Basis of Union, "The Church preaches Christ the risen crucified One

and confesses him as Lord..."<sup>11</sup> is, and should be, our source of unity as a fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Far from this being exclusionary or inhospitable to the breadth of theological perspectives within and beyond the Uniting Church, it is the reconciling work of God through Jesus' death and resurrection which draws us into the, "...coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation."

To navigate our complex and changing ministry and mission context we will need to pursue a robust, compelling and imaginative theological culture. The shared institutions, practices and texts which enliven it will need to be strengthened along with the web of relationships that create strong networks.

We should embrace the task of cultivating a flourishing theological culture with hope. God has not left the Church without those who have reflected deeply upon, and acted trustingly in obedience to, God's living Word. As we look to be more intentional and consistent about our discipleship, this conversation must spread beyond our scholarly interpreters to all who call the Uniting Church home.

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<sup>11</sup> As Sally Douglas notes in her paper in exploring the language of "Lordship" – "In Jesus we are confronted with the One who uses power to lift up the marginalised, to challenge the rich and powerful, and to reject violence. Jesus is the disruptive, servant Lord." Sally Douglas, *"Say What? The Ineffable within the Theological Culture of the Uniting Church: Origins, Gifts, Shadows, and the Invitation into Intentionality,"* Act2 Project, last modified 6 September 2023, <https://www.act2uca.com/theological-culture-contributions/say-what-the-ineffable-within-the-theological-culture-of-the-uniting-churchorigins-gifts-shadows-and-the-invitation-into-intentionality>.



## Our Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress

“So now, even though I’m in jail because I follow Jesus, I’m asking you strongly to live the right way. You see, God picked you to be his own people, so you have to live his way. Don’t think that you are more important than other people. You have to be good to other people, you have to listen to them and try to understand them. Don’t get angry with each other, but you have to love each other all the time. Try hard to let God’s spirit keep you together as friends, without any trouble between you.”

- Ephesians 4: 1–3, Plain English Version

At the Northern Regional Council of Congress, we were offered this word from scripture. It holds a profound insight into the ongoing task of our covenanting journey as a Uniting Church, which is an ongoing call to us all. Covenanting is not the responsibility of one council or committee; of Church leaders or those with designated responsibilities. We are all ongoing participants in the covenanting journey.

The [Covenanting Statement](#) (1994) and the [revised Preamble](#) (2009) are and will remain foundational for our life. Recognising the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress in the Uniting Church’s Constitution has been one structural way through which we’ve expressed our commitment to walk together as First and Second Peoples. But this is only the beginning. We have much work to do in being shaped by the Covenant and embracing its meaning and purpose. The Preamble describes this in one way:

“This was so that all may see a destiny together, praying and working together for a fuller expression of our reconciliation in Jesus Christ.”

Ngarrindjeri man Ken Sumner reflects on it in another:

“Reading in the Basis that we are called ‘into the fellowship of his sufferings’ reminds all of us, First Peoples and Second Peoples from many lands, that we are part of the one body. When one part of the body is suffering, we are all suffering...we are called to show that we feel the sufferings of the world, including the sufferings of First Peoples, and work as an ‘instrument of Christ’ to bear witness to the hope of reconciliation and renewal.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ken Sumer and Michelle Cook, “What good is it to me if I can’t eat it?” in *The Present and Future of the Basis of Union*, ed. Geoff Thompson and Ji Zhang, (Bayswater, Vic: Uniting Academic Press, 2024), 40.

In our travels around the Church, we heard many stories of pain and brokenness from members, communities and councils of Congress. We heard that while many are proud of the Covenant, we continue to struggle to live it out in real ways, in both congregational life and more broadly.

We heard there is much more work to do in truly listening to and being transformed by the theological wisdom and insight of First Peoples. Incorporating Indigenous theology into our theological education and formation will be crucial for the future. First Peoples are still expected to leave their culture at the church door, despite the affirmations we made in the Preamble:

“The First Peoples had already encountered the Creator God before the arrival of the colonisers; the Spirit was already in the land revealing God to the people through law, custom and ceremony. The same love and grace that was finally and fully revealed in Jesus Christ sustained the First Peoples and gave them particular insights into God’s ways.”

We heard that even though there is renewal in parts of Congress, it struggles like many other parts of the Church to find a new generation of leaders.

As we said in Section 2 of *Act2: In Response to God’s Call* the ministry and mission of Congress is very diverse. Diverse structures will be needed to match. Our conciliar structures may continue to be valuable, however Congress may also find that more fit-for-purpose governance is necessary. We remain open to that possibility. Our governance and resourcing arrangements will need to recognise the commitments we have made and our ongoing relationship.

## Our Multicultural Identity

In 1985 we declared, “We are a Multicultural Church”. Proud of our commitment to embrace our diversity, this statement is referenced often, but we are yet to see it truly shape our life.

We have heard the words ‘multicultural’, ‘cross-cultural’ and ‘inter-cultural’ used interchangeably across the life of our Church. Seforosa Carroll in her theological culture contribution worked to unpick the origins, use and meanings of these three terms. Summarised this way, Carroll says, “...multicultural describes a reality; cross-cultural is a theological rationale; and intercultural is intentional ecclesial practice.”<sup>13</sup>

We celebrate the many vibrant migrant-ethnic Churches that have found a home in the Uniting Church, and our growing number of CALD leaders. However, conversations with those leaders will remind you we still have a long way to go. We have heard how our cultural demographics are far behind those of the nation and wider Christian community. As Paul Goh has carefully pointed out,

“While Australia is one of the most multicultural nations in the world, second only to Luxembourg, the Uniting Church congregations still lag far behind their neighbourhoods and other community institutions in reflecting cultural diversity within the life of the Church ... The 2021 National Church Life Survey (NCLS) found that of the 37% of church attenders who were born overseas, 28% were born in a non-English speaking country. Nevertheless, compared to other churches or the general population, the Uniting Church has a small proportion of its people born overseas. While 86% of the Uniting Church members were born in Australia, only 8.1% were born in non-English speaking countries (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 Census data).”<sup>14</sup>

We heard stories where the vibrancy and experience of CALD communities was not matched by the practical support offered from their Presbytery. We heard about difficulties applying the regulations for faith communities and the challenges of sharing property. We heard about the lack of resources to train and equip CALD leaders; about difficulties working with the dominant language and with complex systems and processes. We heard about the sin of racism. Despite the belief that consensus

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<sup>13</sup> Seforosa Carroll, “Multicultural, Cross-Cultural, Intercultural: Theological descriptors or models of church?” Act2 Project, last modified 1 November 2023, <https://www.act2uca.com/theological-culture-contributions/reflections-on-culture-theology-and-living-3645f-gc9en>.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Goh, “CALDing the Theological Culture in the Uniting Church in Australia” Act2 Project, last modified 1 November 2023, <https://www.act2uca.com/theological-culture-contributions/calding-the-theological-culture-in-the-uniting-church-in-australia>.

processes widen the access to our decision making, it is a product of the dominant culture. All of this impedes the contribution CALD communities can make and the extent to which the whole Church can receive these gifts fully and with joy.

Sadly, those in the dominant culture have sometimes been able to hold only a surface level appreciation of our rich multicultural diversity. Paul Goh challenges us with this:

“Multicultural celebrations with music, dance, and food play a certain role in recognising cultural diversity, but they seldom require genuine engagement with cultural differences and theological reflection. Deep engagement (below the cultural iceberg) comes when we are willing to move beyond our comfort zones, become aware of other ways of doing theology, and rid ourselves of our ethnocentrism. Very often we are ‘cultural consumers’ rather than ‘cultural learners.’”<sup>15</sup>

Seforosa Carroll further writes, “Words are too easy and never enough. Deep and fundamental transformation comes from structural and policy changes. Intentionality and implementation are essential to change.” Joy Han similarly challenges the paradigm of a ‘multicultural Church’ with the ongoing reality of racism in our Church:

“...‘multicultural Church’ as articulated in the Uniting Church’s 1985 statement remains the primary paradigm for the Anglo centre of the Church to relate to not only CALD people but also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and this is a paradigm rooted in the multiculturalism of the 1970s, which is a racist, colonial, essentialist and extractive ideology.”<sup>16</sup>

As we continue towards becoming a truly intercultural church, we must take seriously the contexts of the Church when these statements were first made. At the same time, we must listen deeply to the ongoing life and changing demographics of our CALD communities which are an integral part of who we are today. To pursue the vision to which God has called us, we must work together to remove barriers in our systems and structures to being a truly intercultural Church.

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<sup>15</sup> Goh, “CALDing the Theological Culture in the Uniting Church in Australia.”

<sup>16</sup> Joy J. Han, “Our Missional and intercultural natures are to be found in the world,” Act2 Project, last modified 11 October 2023 <https://www.act2uca.com/theological-culture-contributions/our-missional-and-intercultural-natures-are-to-be-found-in-the-world>. Joy J. Han, “The Call to Transcend Racial Boundaries: An Analysis of the Language in Paragraph 2 of the Basis of Union” in *The Present and Future of the Basis of Union*, ed. Geoff Thompson and Ji Zhang, (Bayswater, Vic: Uniting Academic Press, 2024), 47-58.

## Chapter Three Transcending Boundaries: Participating in Our National Life and Work<sup>17</sup>

*"It believes that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries..."*

- Paragraph 2, Basis of Union

The Basis of Union describes the responsibilities of the Assembly (the national council) in the following terms:

"It has determining responsibility for matters of doctrine, worship, government and discipline, including the promotion of the Church's mission, the establishment of standards of theological training and reception of ministers from other communions, and the taking of further measures towards the wider union of the Church. It makes the guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils."

In Section 2 of [Act2: In Response to God's Call](#) we described the findings from church council feedback during the Exploration Phase (Nov-June 2023). This confirmed how communities of faith value our Covenant with Congress, being a multicultural Church, our commitment to justice and being an advocate in the public square.

Alongside this, throughout the Collective Discernment Phase we undertook National Forums which explored five themes with resourcing from experts. Reflections and recordings are available on the [Act2 website](#). The themes were:

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

Throughout the Collective Discernment Phase, people across the Church shared what they valued about the national life and work of the Uniting Church. The Act2 team also

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<sup>17</sup> Note that this chapter is focused on the national work and responsibilities of the Assembly. For consideration of other work which may be undertaken nationally, for example, shared administration, see [Chapter 6 In Service of the Gospel: Ordering Our Life](#).



heard concerns about this work in the past and present and what that may mean for how we shape this into the future.

### **Our National Voice in the Public Square**

The Church still wants our voice to be heard in the public square on matters of national and global importance. The Statement to the Nation as a foundational document continues to resonate. Through UnitingCare Australia we continue to have that voice in matters of relevance to our health and community services. However, the Church wants the national voice to have a broader mandate. This requires capacity for research including engagement with the Church and the ability to pursue that voice in the public square and through policy-making processes. As *Act2: In Response to God's Call* notes, the Church has a more marginal place in society. This has not diminished the desire for a public voice. Rather, it is a voice from and alongside the margins.

There is also a desire to ensure the national voice of the Church is connected to and participates with the members, communities and councils of the Church. The prophetic ministry of the Church is one into which many are called and is fundamental to our discipleship. Our national voice should arise from our theological convictions about who God is calling us to be, recognising we are a theologically diverse Church.

### **Our International Partnerships and Ecumenical Relationships**

Our international partnerships and ecumenical relationships remain foundational to reminding us that “we are not all that there is to the church, rather, we affirm our place as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church.”<sup>18</sup> The engagement of local communities in our international partnerships is largely focussed on the valuable relief and development work of UnitingWorld. But the church-to-church and people-to-people relationships these partnerships create are of broader significance, providing for two-way learning and exchange.

Ecumenical relationships remind us not to prioritise the local and contextual at the expense of the global and universal. They offer valuable insights into local and contextual issues including our Covenant with Congress, a multicultural and intercultural identity, and how to deal with theological diversity and controversy. As an Australian church there is a risk that we do not continue to listen to and learn from the global church. We will only receive this wisdom if we are able and willing to listen.

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<sup>18</sup> Erik Lennestål, “Reflection on Forum 2: Our international partnerships and ecumenical relationships,” Act2 Project, accessed on 15 January 2024, <https://www.act2uca.com/nationalforum2>.

The emerging movement of united and uniting churches reminds us that our identity is about moving beyond our founding denominations. The national Church has a particular role to sustain our participation in the global church through our partnerships and ecumenical memberships.

### Our Multicultural and Intercultural Identity

Since the Assembly declared in 1985 that the Uniting Church is a multicultural Church, our multicultural and intercultural identity has been on our agenda. The 2012 statement, [One Body, many members – Living faith and life cross-culturally](#), continued to call the Church to fully live out its identity. Many parts of our Church remain ignorant of these commitments and their implications for life as a Church. CALD leaders reflect that while the national Church is imperfect, it does feel a sense of responsibility and accountability to those foundational statements and commitments. National Conferences have been an important national gathering point for communities to come together and celebrate and strengthen their collective life.

Systemically, the national Church can still do more to address the barriers which impede the full participation and belonging of CALD communities and members. In addressing questions of membership, property, recognition of communities and leaders, decision-making processes and theological education there is work to do. As Michelle Cook observes, we have struggled to find ways to address gaps between statements and the material reality of our life.<sup>19</sup> The Assembly has an important role to hold before the Church its theological commitments and wisdom, and to create a regulatory environment consistent with those commitments. However, it alone cannot shift cultural practices and behaviours.

### Our National Theological Culture

Our theological culture is the collective responsibility of the whole Church, but the national Church has certain roles. Its roles in doctrine and worship are found in the Basis of Union. Those roles are performed within a broader network of institutions, practices and texts. We are cautioned that the national Church should not be about narrowing our theological horizons. It should resist theological conformity. Rather its role is to keep us connected to the church catholic and point us to the compelling theological vision found in Christ's call to us. It has a particular role to animate our theological culture through theological signposts. At times it is called upon to lay down boundaries through its role in relation to doctrine. It should do this carefully.

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<sup>19</sup> Michelle Cook, "On being a covenanting and multicultural church: Ordinary theologians in the Uniting Church explore what it means to be church," (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2020), 2.

Communicating and cultivating an understanding of our existing theological wisdom as a Church was a common theme. People saw that the national Church has a particular role in creating space to explore our diversity and disagreements in constructive ways. Alongside its role to 'communally authorised theology'<sup>20</sup> (in matters of doctrine and worship), it must be effective at communicating those decisions. This is not only at the time but in an ongoing way, as a reminder of the signposts we have established and as an invitation to the whole Church to grapple with their implications.

### Promoting the Mission of the Church

Communication, convening and collaboration were common words as people explored the role of the national Church in promoting the mission of the Church. Part of this role is about reflecting the Church to itself and the wider community in all its rich diversity. The national Church has a whole-of-Church view which provides a unique perspective to connect people and convene conversations. However, many people wished for those conversations to translate into productive collaboration, which can deepen connections and produce more together than we can apart.

There were cautions offered also. It is necessary in our promotion of the mission of the Church to reflect the full breadth and diversity of the Uniting Church. The national Church needs to be deeply connected to the local experience of the Church. We should avoid the national Church falling into the trap of thinking it is primarily 'doing' the mission of the Church. It does have roles in leading aspects of the Church's mission but our mission is primarily occurring in local communities across Australia. The better the connection to those communities, the better the story can be told.

### Implications for Structure and Culture

There are significant responsibilities placed on the national Church by the Basis of Union and the Constitution. There are also significant expectations of the Church. However, the resources dedicated to the national life and work of the Church are small and have been diminishing over time. Historically the national Church relied on voluntary committees, task groups and working groups with a small number of staff to undertake significant work. The era where this was a viable way to achieve the work expected of the national Church is over.

In the report *[Act2: In Response to God's Call](#)* there is a summary of the cultural challenges facing the national Church. These include the sense that the Assembly is disconnected and remote from the local communities of faith and unaware of the lived reality of many local communities of faith. This sense of remoteness and disconnection

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<sup>20</sup> Thompson, "The Theological Culture of the Uniting Church in Australia: Reflections and Possibilities." Seventeenth Assembly – B3E – Act2: The Gift of the Spirit

is also felt within the Assembly. The struggle to communicate and connect across the life of the Church is real. It feeds a harmful culture of suspicion and distrust.

To strengthen our national identity, life and work, more resources will be required. To effectively fulfil the existing responsibilities and expectations of the Assembly, it is our estimate that the national council requires an increase of approximately \$1million to its annual budget. This would strengthen our resourcing to sustain an effective public voice and international partnerships and relationships. It would also ensure we could live out our commitment to the Covenant and to be a multicultural, cross-cultural and intercultural Church. It would support high quality work on our theological culture. It would also enhance the national Church's convening and communications role to promote the mission of the Church. This needs to be considered as part of the wider resource allocation process. Further securing the financial base of the national Council is a longstanding issue which needs to be addressed.

However, finances alone are not enough. People have shared practical actions which could be taken, including:

- A shared national database so that the Church can communicate and connect.
- An integrated approach to internal and external communications across the councils of the Church.
- Shared technology platforms to enable deeper collaboration across councils.
- Common means of communicating including common website and email address protocols.
- Shared training platforms for common administration and compliance obligations.

The national council of the Church needs to be a visible and accessible council if it is going to be responsive to the needs of the Church. Its staffing should continue to be geographically dispersed so that it can collaborate with the whole Church in fulfilling its responsibilities and effectively play its part in our unity and mission.

## Chapter Four Building One Another Up in Love: Life-giving Communities of Faith and Discipleship

*"Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world."*

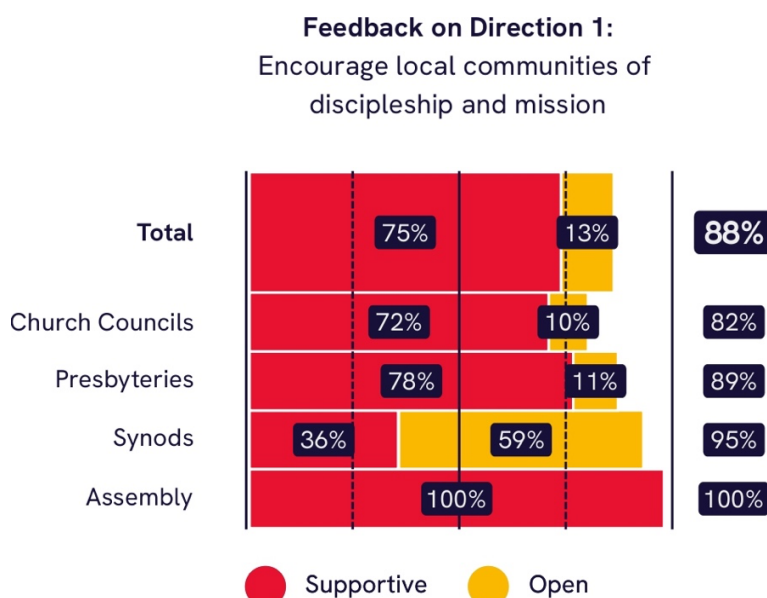
- Paragraph 15, Basis of Union

In [Act2: In Response to God's Call](#) the Act2 team put forward four Directions for local communities of faith and discipleship. Throughout the Collective Discernment phase communities of faith, councils, governing bodies, focus groups and individuals discussed and gave feedback about these Directions. In this section is a summary of the quantitative and qualitative feedback, and the Project's response, which gives rise to the proposals in [Chapter 7 Going Forward Together – A Way Forward](#).





## Feedback on Direction 1: Encourage local communities of discipleship and mission<sup>21</sup>



There was generally widespread support for this Direction. The Church recognises that local communities of Christian disciples are the beating heart of our life. Over time many of these communities have become smaller and older. Some people see this as limiting our ability to do new things. Communities have told us that in some places it is. But ultimately, these communities find identity and meaning in belonging to Jesus, sharing in the practices of faith and participating in God's mission in their context.

People are concerned that the language of 'structured and consistent approach' to making and growing disciples suggests uniform practices across communities of faith. People are nervous about this due to our diversity of contexts, sizes, shapes and theological perspectives. People also recognised that an intentional approach to faith formation and discipleship is greatly helped by resourcing from the wider Church, but that there are many examples of resources failing to get broad take-up. This challenge was captured well in one theological culture paper: "How will this resource be rolled out for use – not just mailed out."<sup>22</sup>

People affirmed the idea that communities of faith be oriented towards mission. There is a yearning to be at mission with other expressions of the Uniting Church within local

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<sup>21</sup> For details on the quantitative data see [Chapter One Considering Afresh: Overview of the Process](#)

<sup>22</sup> Michelle Cook, "A reflection on our culture of discipling..." Act2 Project, last modified 23 August 2023, <https://www.act2uca.com/theological-culture-contributions/a-reflection-on-our-culture-of-discipling>.

communities. However, due to some history and relationships, people see this as a cultural challenge. 'Do agencies and schools want to be in shared mission?' was a common question. Quoting the work of Geoff Thompson, one agency submission answered: 'Community services, isolated from the gathered (church) community cannot in any meaningful way be considered the church.'<sup>23</sup>

People also noted the funding and regulatory environment, and that the mismatch of capacity and capability between some Congregations and some agencies may need careful navigation. Others noted that in some places there is only one expression of the Uniting Church (e.g., just a Congregation), limiting the application of this Direction.

Many people highlighted the ecumenical imperative that 'we should only do apart what we cannot do together'. People also affirmed that shared mission need not be limited to expressions of the Uniting Church but that we can - and should - look wider. Mission is already taking place in our communities - where we can support or join in?

The Church clearly continues to struggle with the language of 'discipleship', 'mission' and 'evangelism'. We believe we need further theological guidance and reflection on these to empower our shared understanding and practice.

We have struggled to define, clarify and live out our discipleship. It has tended to be framed through a lens of personal piety and core communal practices of worship, prayer and bible study. Movements within the Church such as the School of Discipleship have sought to embrace a more holistic vision of discipleship. Some feel we have struggled to prioritise and resource the core business of making and growing faithful disciples. People have regularly expressed a desire to recentre this work in the life of our communities of faith with support from the wider Church.

As a Church we have tried to reject coercive models of evangelism and have been reluctant to embrace the modern marketing techniques of more recent church growth models. We have been open to the language of *missio Dei* (mission of God) and the call to participate in the mission of God already at work in the world, but still struggle with the practical work of mission in a post-Christendom and post-colonial world.

We are clearer about what we reject about these concepts than what we embrace.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Uniting Vic.Tas submission, 2.

<sup>24</sup> The most recent national contribution about 'mission' is "Towards a Theology Relating to Mission" March, 2010 published in Christopher C. Walker, *Building on the Basis: Papers from the Uniting Church*

*"We are unanimously warm to focusing on discipleship and mission, assuming 'consistency' of discipleship formation doesn't become rigid or overly prescriptive."*

- Church Council Response Form

*"Council members responded positively to this Direction's vision for new structures and practices enabling Congregations to be more integrated into community networks (including Uniting services) as a basis for shared ministry and mission."*

- Church Council Response Form

*"Developing discipleship really changes attitudes and energises people. This is what we are supposed to be about: enabling what people in the local area are dreaming about missionally."*

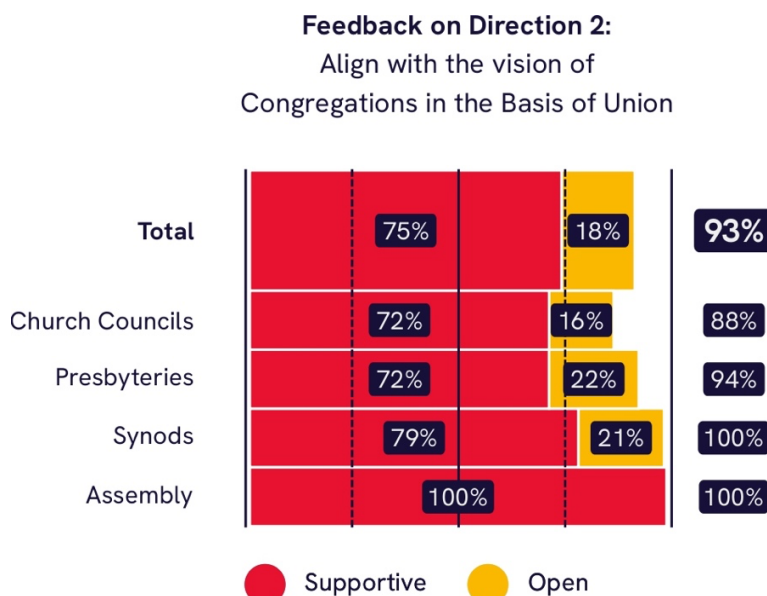
- Synod Response Form

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*in Australia*, (Sydney, NSW: Uniting Church Press, 2012).

<https://illuminate.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/12960>. Another contribution was the [Report of the National Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and The Uniting Church in Australia](#) (2002-2008), November, 2008. Neither seems to be well known or influenced the Church's discourse about mission.

## Feedback on Direction 2: Align with the vision of Congregations in the Basis of Union



While this Direction gained a generally positive response it also spoke to the ongoing ambiguity and confusion that exists about local expressions of our life. Some people really appreciated the focus on the attributes of the Congregation found in the Basis of Union and felt it could free us from what we have tended to think constitutes a Congregation.<sup>25</sup> As one group put it, "Significantly it does not say much about many of the normative assumptions we have about what a Congregation looks like." Some Presbytery leaders felt these attributes could help Congregations think differently about their responsibilities alongside an ongoing focus on the threefold description of 'worship, witness and service' contained in Paragraph 15(a) of the Basis of Union.

People had questions about how the Basis of Union describes Congregations in specific terms. Some pointed to the 'in one place' and questioned whether this would exclude online communities. Considering decline, others questioned whether the 'congregation' model had failed. Yet others pointed to new communities and experimentation with different forms of church that would meet the definition of Congregation as described in the Basis of Union. Some were concerned that

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<sup>25</sup> Despite a lot of discussion about different ways of being a church, normative assumptions continue to be strong, including that Congregations meet in a particular type of building, on a particular day, at a particular time, have an ordained minister as a leader and have a particular set of regulated responsibilities.

embracing all manner of expressions of the Church as 'Congregations' will further exacerbate the pressure in areas of compliance and administration.

Despite some confusion about this Direction, we heard practical stories about how our current arrangements are impeding our life. The use of Faith Community Regulations (Reg. 3.9.2) has had a series of unintended consequences; Church members in Faith Communities being ineligible to serve on wider Church bodies, impediments to conducting baptisms, restrictions on accessing and managing bank accounts and ambiguity over whether Church Councils could oversee Faith Communities.

People recognised there are local expressions of the Church which did not meet the definition of Congregation as described in the Basis of Union. The work of agencies, schools, bush chaplains and other expressions do not readily meet this definition. Some sought to encourage an expansion of the definition of 'Congregation', particularly in the context of health and community service agencies.<sup>26</sup>

*"We need to get back to the core of what it means to be a Congregation. Many of the regulations exist to order the life of the Congregations as they were at foundation, but this is not who and what we are now. If we're talking about re-aligning with the Basis of Union, the feeling was generally positive. This does not mean there was support for maintaining a status quo."*

- Synod Response Form

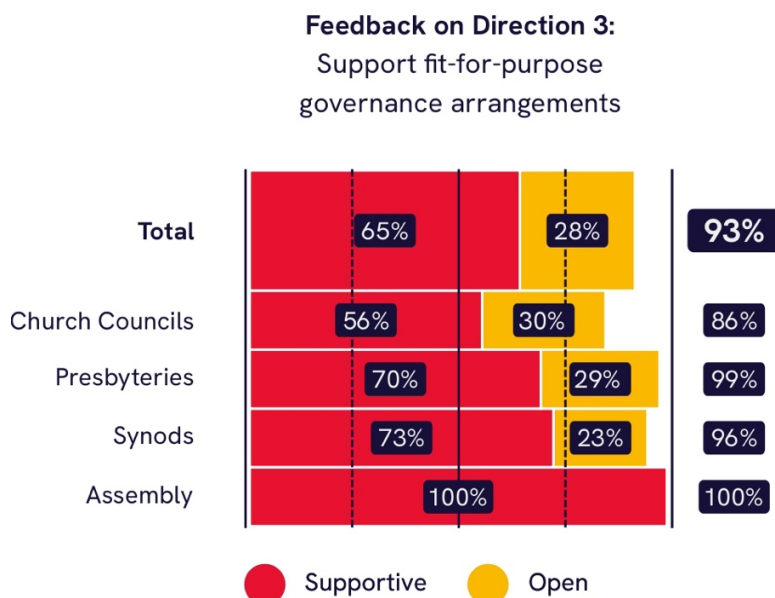
*"There was strong agreement in our Council that the vision of Congregations as described in the Basis of Union is powerful and compelling. It is important, however, that communities of faith receive adequate support to align with the Vision, not merely be expected to achieve this."*

- Church Council Response Form

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<sup>26</sup> UnitingCare Australia Board Submission #2: A Shared Future Together, 17.  
Seventeenth Assembly – B3E – Act2: The Gift of the Spirit

### Feedback on Direction 3: Support fit-for-purpose governance arrangements



This Direction was also generally supported, with people affirming the need for greater flexibility in local governance and administration. Many affirm that the compliance and administration obligations of local Congregations have become onerous and that support from the wider Church is required. As one community put it, “We would welcome anything that will lift the burden of governance.” The idea of greater clustering received support, whilst recognising there were some similarities between this and the parish concept which was phased out following decisions of the 1997 Assembly.

There were a range of concerns expressed about the implementation of this Direction. Some were concerned about managing differences between Congregations sharing a common Local Council. Some were concerned that the idea of the wider Church taking on responsibilities may disempower local Congregations. There was some interest in the idea of people from the wider Church being appointed to Local Councils, but also some concern about the scope and purpose.

Many were able to identify and describe how fit-for-purpose governance arrangements had been implemented in their own context, with both the benefits and challenges. Some were unsure how this approach would apply to certain contexts, particularly rural contexts. Some were concerned that greater flexibility may mean Congregations diverge from the theology, values, polity and ethos of the Uniting Church as a whole.

While not directly addressed by this Direction, the issue of our constitutional and regulatory arrangements for church membership continued to arise. The gap between our church law on this important issue and the reality of our life in local communities needs to find a resolution. This will likely require considering constitutional change.

*"We feel very strongly that a one-size-fits-all approach is holding back the potential of the Congregations of the Uniting Church. In conjunction with the overduplication and under-resourcing of the many councils that constitute the Uniting Church, this has led to frustration, burnout and fatigue, and is resulting in reduced ability to resource our ministry and mission. Fit for purpose governance and greater support Options offered by Area Councils may go some way to remedying this."*

- Church Council Response Form

*"This depends on sound principles - compliance to a number of regulatory principles is necessary. Simplicity is not our highest principle - we need to be flexible for missional and congregational life purposes. We need to be really clear on articulating our values to give direction - then seek flexible ways to live out these values in a range of different situations."*

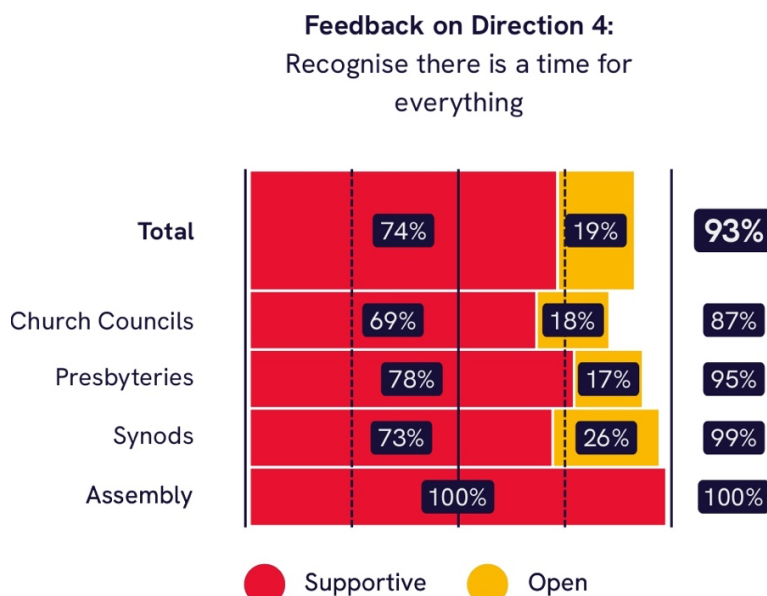
- Synod Response Form

*"Our Congregation favours flexibility, however, we need to ask ourselves: 'Is the system driving us or are we driving it?'. We have numerous examples of how our local engagement is bearing fruit, pretty much unsupported by other structures of the church other than glowing praise. We need functional support, but at the same time we are worried about whether this 'appointing people' is genuinely feasible."*

- Church Council Response Form



## Feedback on Direction 4: Recognise there is a time for everything



As one respondent put it, "[T]his Direction provoked longer emotional and thoughtful responses." The balance of feedback on this Direction was focused more on endings than beginnings, pointing to the current balance of focus in our Church. Those that did focus on new and emerging communities affirmed the need for simplified pathways. Many were searching for specifics about what new pathways were required. Feedback from communities that had trod this path into the Uniting Church indicated that our processes need simplification, clarity and transparency. New and emerging communities were expected to 'prove' their bona fides. This was captured well in one response which said they felt that there was a "sense that we held a huge 'burden of proof' rather than a sense of excitement and optimism that a vibrant community wanted to join the UCA..."

There may always be a clash of cultures for any group seeking to find a pathway into the Uniting Church. CALD communities face particular challenges. We seem at times to get caught up in the complexity of our structures and processes. As one group observed, "Complex structures mean we spend a lot of time talking about who and what the UCA is instead of talking about Jesus." We are concerned to assure ourselves about new communities' commitment to us and our identity. As one group put it, "How do you ensure there is alignment of new communities with the governance, polity and ethos of the Uniting Church and its regulations?"

There were many responses about communities coming to the end of their life. The metaphor of 'dying' was prominent in this discussion. There was sadness. The

relationship between the end of a Congregation's life and grief at the loss of lifelong faithful members was prominent. The question of who has responsibility for decisions related to the closure or amalgamation of Congregations was contested. This demonstrates different understandings about the respective roles of the councils of the Church. Some were confused about the need for this part of the Direction at all, pointing to Regulation 3.4.3 (Dissolution of a Congregation) and 3.4.4 (Amalgamation or Division of Congregations) as clearly placing the responsibility for these decisions with the Presbytery. Others were equally adamant that these decisions must be made locally. This is captured well by one respondent, "[A] Congregation has the right to make its own decision about whether it will continue or not."

Questions of the end of a Congregation's life were inextricably linked to questions of property. This drew in the responsibility of Synods in relation to property, further complicating the respective roles and responsibilities of the various councils. Some see the end of a community and the sale of property as an opportunity to support a new community and leave a legacy. Others were suspicious that the wider Church was seeking to close Congregations for the financial resources it would generate through the sale of property assets. As one group observed, "The letting go is very hard." While the imperative of change and the inevitability of closure in some places is clear, some reflected, "I'd prefer that you did it after I'm gone."

Many took the two parts of the Direction together as a sign of the rhythms of life and the inevitability of change. As one group put it, "We'd like to see more connections made between the ending of one Congregation and the beginnings of new ways of being church." Some pointed to the end of some Christendom patterns of life, "There was a time when we expected to have a UCA Congregation in every 'town', but we need to accept we are no longer in that time." The need for pastoral responses that are respectful of communities, whether beginning or ending, was a recurring theme. People also emphasised the role, voice and agency of communities of faith, keen to avoid 'one size fits all' approaches. The formal responsibilities, structures and practices related to this work need to be joined with effective pastoral and change strategies from well-equipped, capable leaders within Congregations and the wider Church.

*"This is reflective of our current reality. Closing a place of worship need not be seen as a sign of failure but as a change of season. It is critical, however, that we at the same time simplify life for new communities to enter the Uniting Church."*

- Synod Response Form

*"We celebrate new, small, large and diverse groups coming into the life of the Uniting Church. This provides us with a range of opportunities and challenges. In this, there is the potential for renewal of our life together as a whole wider church. Yet, there is a tension between wanting people and groups to be themselves, not "become us" or be controlled, but also the potential to be "hijacked" by others who are not within the ethos of the Uniting Church. Doing this is absolutely necessary to change our inward focus but requires skilful community engagement."*

- Church Council Response Form

### Response to Feedback on the Directions

In Barry A. Ensign-George's work on a theology of denomination he says, "Congregations are the immediate context in which our membership in Jesus Christ and one another is embodied."<sup>27</sup> The Basis of Union affirms that truth with the bold claim of the Congregation being, "the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church...". The Constitution goes on to describe the Congregation as "The primary expression of the corporate life of the Church...".<sup>28</sup> It is deeply challenging that something so central to our identity has been in such sustained decline for so long.

The call to discipleship and mission is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian community. Communities of faith should be intentional, consistent, relational and contextual in their approach to making and growing disciples. It should not be seen as an 'optional extra' once some 'core' activities have been done. Local communities of faith and the wider Church should be oriented around these tasks.

All expressions of Church which fulfil the vision of Congregations as described in the Basis of Union should have the opportunity to be recognised and experience oversight, support, encouragement and empowerment to fulfil their calling in Jesus Christ. This will require greater imagination and flexibility in the Regulations associated with Congregations and other expressions of local communities of faith. It also means continuing to question the institutional and cultural assumptions which have underpinned our understanding of Congregation.

Flexible, fit-for-purpose governance arrangements will mean less prescription and questioning the assumptions associated with Church Councils. This will require flexibility and oversight by the wider Church. However, regulation alone is not the path forward. The Assembly should also use its guiding authority to collect and share diverse examples of good local governance practice that are consistent with the theology and polity of the Uniting Church. We can also learn from the experience of

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<sup>27</sup> Barry A. Ensign-George, *Between Congregation and Church: Denomination and Christian Life Together*, (London, UK: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2018), 159.

<sup>28</sup> Clause 22, Constitution, Uniting Church in Australia, *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations*, (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, 2018).

other denominations which have moved away from prescription towards principles and guidance.<sup>29</sup>

The compliance environment in which the Church now operates means that paid administrative support is now almost always necessary, either locally or from the wider Church. Compliance requirements are an essential part of ministry and mission. There is a tendency in the Church to draw a distinction between “ministry and mission” and “administration and compliance”. They are inextricably linked.<sup>30</sup> Separating the two areas invariably leads to trade-offs as the constraints of property, finance and compliance impact the ambitions of ministry and mission. Local communities need to embrace those trade-offs to be freed from burdens that are weighing them down, so they can fulfil the ministry and mission that is aligned with the gifts God has given them.

To enable this Presbyteries need additional tools in the exercise of their oversight, encouragement and support of Congregations.<sup>31</sup> This includes the ability to vary the responsibilities of Church Councils and Congregations, and the ability to appoint people from the wider Church to a Church Council. While the agency and autonomy of local communities of faith remains an important principle, the size and capacity of many of our Congregations means wider support is needed. In combination, these changes should support communities to sustain a life of discipleship and mission while finding practical and effective ways to fulfil their ethical, legal and social obligations.

Davis McCaughey, the first President of the Uniting Church, made the following observation in his retiring address:

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<sup>29</sup> United Church of Canada, *The Manual 2024*, accessed 16 February 2024, <https://united-church.ca/handbooks-and-guidelines>. *Quaker faith & practice, Fifth Edition*, accessed 16 February 2024, <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/>.

<sup>30</sup> Some people use language about movement vs institution, worship, witness and service vs property and finance.

<sup>31</sup> We are using the existing council language in this section. We believe these changes need to be implemented quickly and irrespective of the decisions in relation to shape of our councils into the future. Seventeenth Assembly – B3E – Act2: The Gift of the Spirit

*"The Presbytery must know the congregations and love them, must see that they are fed by the Word and nourished by the Sacraments, built up through pastoral care."*<sup>32</sup>

It is never more important to know and love Congregations than at their beginnings and endings. No number of regulations or processes can ensure that Presbyteries know and love the Congregations they oversee. However, the processes laid down can be valuable enablers of this important work.

Presbyteries and the wider Church need to create pathways to get to know and love new and emerging communities, both for the sake of those communities and the wider Church. New communities hold a mirror to our culture and practices which can be mutually transforming.

Many new and emerging communities see value in the support, resourcing, encouragement and even accountability which can come from effective oversight. However, they are looking for that to be expressed in relational and culturally relevant ways rather than just through process. The complex processes are sometimes used to safeguard our values and identity. However, wisdom, judgement and relationship are more appropriate and useful in achieving this.

Presbyteries and the wider Church also need to accept and fulfil their responsibilities in relation to communities of faith that are coming to the end of their life. We need to know and love our communities enough to be able to have honest and hard conversations with them. There is no substitute for wisdom, judgement and pastoral sensitivity. It is neither fair on communities nor on the wider Church to avoid these hard conversations. Presbyteries are not a disinterested bystander in the process. They have an interest in the health and well-being of a community and of the whole Church.

Beginnings and endings are hard work, for communities and for the parts of the Church supporting those communities. They must be undertaken by capable and wise leaders. Through deepening the knowledge for and love of communities of faith, the wider Church will be both enriched and transformed as we embrace the precarious path before us as a people on the way.

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<sup>32</sup> J.Davis MCAughey, "Retiring President's Address", *Minutes and Reports of the Second Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1979*. (Sydney: The National Office of the Uniting Church in Australia, 1979). 46-49.

Local communities of faith are places of life – not problems to be solved, not activities to be maintained – but places where life is found, lives are transformed, and life is so abundant that it overflows into the community in which it shares in mission.

### *Discipleship, Evangelism and Mission*

Further work needs to be done to explore and reflect on foundational concepts such as 'mission', 'evangelism' and 'discipleship'. Many feel uncomfortable with how these concepts have been understood and interpreted within the Uniting Church, by other churches and the wider society. However, as a Church we all share these words and concepts. Claiming, exploring and further defining these concepts will serve us well. We will not find a simple bumper sticker definition<sup>33</sup>, but an ongoing and intentional conversation will help us have a better shared understanding of what it means to cultivate life-giving communities of discipleship and mission.

### *Diaconal Communities*

We have reflected on the question of local expressions of the Church which do not meet the vision of Congregation as described in the Basis of Union. These contexts might be primarily oriented towards service and justice, places where community relationships are regularly formed, and not generally centred around the regular practice of worship but may have times of gathering and a place for the sacraments.

We acknowledge that the lack of a mechanism to recognise non-congregational ministry and mission contexts has led to a feeling that 'Congregations' are the only legitimate and best form of church. However, we do not believe that expanding the definition of Congregation is a useful solution. This is not to say that Congregations cannot arise within settings such as agencies and schools. We believe the work done in *Being Church Differently* and *Ecclesiology: Alternative Communities of Faith* remain valuable resources for such instances.<sup>34</sup>

Rather than expanding the definition of a Congregation, we believe it will be more fruitful to address the gap in other ways. We already have some resources to assist us in understanding these contexts and communities and their place in the life of the Church. The renewal of the diaconate that occurred in the 1990s through the ordering of our ministries could be extended into how we consider the ordering of our

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<sup>33</sup> As Sally Douglas notes in her paper on our theological culture, "...in the Uniting Church we do not have the luxury of a 'bumper sticker' faith". Douglas, "Say What? The Ineffable within the Theological Culture of the Uniting Church: Origins, Gifts, Shadows, and the Invitation into Intentionality."

<sup>34</sup> "Being Church Differently" and "Ecclesiology: Alternative Communities of Faith" can be found in Walker, *Building on the Basis: Papers from the Uniting Church in Australia*.



communal life. The concept of 'a diaconia' is not simply confined to a ministry or an office but also refers to institutions in contexts focused on the service of the poor.<sup>35</sup>

Our work on the Ministry of Deacon provides a valuable starting point to explore how we may order our communal life in fulfilling the diaconal ministry to which the whole church is called. This is not an attempt to domesticate or institutionalise a ministry of radical discipleship.<sup>36</sup> Nor is it to reinforce a separation of service from worship and witness. Rather, in understanding the respective roles of different communities within the Church and their relationship to one another we can strengthen our connections and have a more flexible understanding of our collective ministry and mission.<sup>37</sup>

### Next Steps

The Directions offered to the Church were widely supported and generally resonated with the various diverse experiences of communities of faith. No matter where a community was on their journey they could find something within the Directions which could make a difference in their life. In response to the feedback, we have reshaped the Directions into an integrated set of proposals which seek to bring them to life.

The recommended changes alone will not bring about the vision or renew the Church, however they renew the toolkit available to the Church.

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<sup>35</sup>S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Diakonia," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. (Geneva Switzerland: WCC Publications, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Assembly Commission on Doctrine, "Ordination & Ministry in the Uniting Church in Australia", in Bos and Thompson, *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected theological documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*.

<sup>37</sup> Diakonia: UCA, "Renewed Diaconate Is Sacramental", in Bos and Thompson, *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected theological documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*.

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## *Summary of Recommendations*

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### **Vision for Life-giving Communities of Discipleship and Mission:**

Communities of faith will sustain a life of worship, build one another up in love, grow disciples of Jesus and participate in God's mission. These diverse communities of faith will shape their life in response to God's call in their context and deepen their relationship with God, one another, the wider Church and the world.

- Focus on discipleship and mission.
- A new toolkit for 'fit for purpose' local governance.
- Better beginnings and endings for communities.
- Review of church membership to align our rules and our reality.

For more detail see the proposals and rationale in [Chapter 7 A Way Forward](#).

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## *Imagine...*

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Imagine networks of local communities of faith sharing and growing together in faith and love through consistent, intentional, relational and contextual discipleship. Imagine networks of communities of faith, agencies and schools participating in shared mission within their local community. Imagine new communities sharing in the life of the councils of the Church to transform our life and practices. Imagine communities coming to the end of their life committing resources to new and emerging communities in another part of the country. Imagine communities of service beginning communities of faith on a weekday in a workplace. Imagine a mix of communities working together in a shared governance arrangement, sharing their strengths and gifts with one another as they bear one another's burdens and build one another up in love.



## Chapter Five To Hear Anew: Cultivating Our Theological Culture and Education

*"...commit their members to acknowledge one another in love and joy as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, to hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations, and daily to seek to obey his will."*

- Paragraph 1, Basis of Union

### Theological Culture

Throughout 2023 the Project encouraged a conversation about the Uniting Church's theological culture. In releasing the Call for Papers on this theme, we offered the following working definition:

"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."<sup>38</sup>

Through the Call for Papers, a National Forum and many informal conversations a rich and diverse collection of themes has emerged. It has been a vibrant and honest conversation. It is only a step in an ongoing journey which needs further growth and development. The nature, timing and format has meant some voices are under-represented or absent. As a church committed to a diversity of theological perspectives and to reflecting deeply upon God's living Word this conversation must continue, broaden and deepen.

In reflecting on our theological culture people explicitly resisted the idea that the Uniting Church has a single 'theological culture'. People also struggled to distinguish between theological culture and the culture of the Church. The focus on discipleship formation, mission and context remains strong. Alongside scripture, our 'instruments of unity', as described by Geoff Thompson, are foundational texts for our life. However, the lack of awareness of some of these is a source of frustration. This may point to the gap between our aspirations and our reality.

Explicit areas of weakness identified include:

- Theology/theologies embedded in a culture of colonisation and 'whiteness'.

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<sup>38</sup> "Call for papers: our theological culture," Act2 Project, accessed on 15 January 2024, <https://www.act2uca.com/theologicalculture>.

- A lack of biblical and theological literacy related to a failure to theologically resource and engage lay people.
- A culture of 'over-intellectualising' faith has fed a disconnect between 'scholarly' and 'ordinary' theology.
- The perception that theology is not relevant to some in our Church.

At the National Gathering on Theological Education there was a time of intentional reflection on what we had learned about the Uniting Church's theological culture. Key emerging themes included:

- The centrality of the Covenant and revised Preamble to our theological conversations, enriching us with Indigenous theology, spirituality and biblical interpretation.
- The need to strengthen our cross-cultural, inter-cultural and multilingual conversations within and about our theological culture.
- Finding places to encourage dialogue across diverse theologies and perspectives, including the courage to have and stick with hard conversations.
- The value of critique of our theological culture, helping us recognise our conscious and unconscious biases.
- The need for our theological conversations to be visible and accessible with all invited and able to participate as part of our discipleship.

In response to the conversation, further work has occurred on our definition of theological culture. The following is a revised definition which responds to a range of the feedback provided:

"The theological culture of the Uniting Church is the network of practices, institutions and texts which expands, critiques and disciplines the Uniting Church's theological imagination. Embodied in the discipleship of members of the Uniting Church in their many relationships and responsibilities, it produces pastoral wisdom, prophetic speech and doctrinal decisions about God, Christ and the world."

#### **Theological Education:**

A National Gathering on Theological Education was held in December 2023 in Melbourne. This followed on from conversations with every theological college and a meeting of the Heads of Colleges. There were a diverse range of participants including key leaders in theological colleges, leaders in the work of ministry formation and lay education, emerging scholars and First Nations theologians.

Over two days, extended consideration was given to the role of our theological education institutions in:

- Cultivating a vibrant theological culture in the Uniting Church.
- Equipping those called to 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.

It was informed by previous work done in this area including the extensive reports of the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Assemblies<sup>39</sup>, along with submissions and reflections from colleges and individuals and the theological culture papers.

As with many conversations across the Church, there was a focus on the practices of discipleship and local communities of faith. As Craig Mitchell described it:

“Christian practices are an opportunity for intentional formation and intentional education. Intentional formation means that we do practices together purposefully in order to shape people in the Way of Christ. As leaders we work on how to encourage people to grow as disciples by regularly engaging in faith practices or disciplines.”<sup>40</sup>

We have observed that many of the most life-giving communities of faith across the Church were those focused on intentional faith formation as a regular part of their communal life. This continued to resonate with the Directions and the close relationship between life-giving communities of faith and the role and place of theological education for the whole people of God.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> “Report of the Task Group to Review Ministerial Education,” in *Reports and Working Papers of the Eighth Assembly* (1997) accessed 15 January 2024, <https://illuminate.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/3965>. “Task Group on the Teach Ministry and Mission of the Church,” in *Reports and Working Papers of the Ninth Assembly* (2000), accessed on 15 January 2024, <https://illuminate.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/3967>. “Report of the Task Group on Theological Education,” in *Reports and Working Papers of the Tenth Assembly* (2003), accessed on 15 January 2024, <https://illuminate.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/19713>.

<sup>40</sup> Craig Mitchell, seminar handout on *Forming Disciples in Mission*. For more on Mitchell’s work in this area see his website: <https://craigmitchell.com.au/research/>, accessed 15 January 2024.

<sup>41</sup> For more on the Directions see [Chapter 4 Building One Another Up in Love: Life-giving communities of Faith and Discipleship](#).

In considering the equipping of people for specified ministries we particularly explored formation. The following quotes from the Report of the Task Group to Review Ministerial Education to the Eighth Assembly continued to resonate:

“Formation is the creative interplay between many aspects of a person’s life, but particularly the interaction of experience and knowledge with the development of wisdom and discernment...

Formation for ministry is an interactive process which occurs at all stages in our life. As we all grow and develop in faith and understanding, so we necessarily continue to be formed and re-formed spiritually, vocationally and personally.”

From here we explored the place of theological education for the whole of life and the whole of the Church. Our horizon for formation needed to take in all the specified ministries and the whole of our ministry.

The two days highlighted the relationship between the future life and faith of the Church and the future of theological education. The demands of ministry in a contemporary context require ongoing and rigorous formational approaches for all those in specified ministry. Local communities of learning and discipleship are foundational to a flourishing and life-giving Church. Collaboration was a watchword of the two days. There was ambition for deep, productive collaboration which could enable and support an inspiring vision for the Church.

That vision can be summarised as:

**A National Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership:** A visible and accessible network of intentional communities engaged in life-long learning to equip people to courageously follow Jesus and participate in God’s mission in contemporary Australia.

A more detailed set of principles is outlined in [Chapter Seven Go Forward Together: A Way Forward](#). To enact the vision outlined it is proposed to establish a National Commission for Theology, Formation and Leadership incorporating some responsibilities currently undertaken by the Standards for Ministry Committee and the Ministerial Education Boards. It would seek to strengthen the productive collaboration across the existing institutions of theological education. It would also be responsible for establishing a national, multi-campus theological college.

At the heart of this vision is a network, a web of intentional communities which are visible and accessible. A national Commission is about establishing a body for

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leadership and accountability. The idea for a national, multi-campus theological college is part of the vision for a network. It would connect with other institutions, communities of practice and networks within and beyond the life of the Uniting Church as part of the fulfilment of the vision.



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## *Summary of Recommendations*

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### **Vision for A Network for a Flourishing Theological Culture:**

A visible and accessible network of intentional communities engaged in life-long learning to equip people to courageously follow Jesus and participate in God's mission in contemporary Australia.

- A Commission for Theology, Formation and Leadership.
- A national, multi-campus theological college.
- A national structure to support national responsibilities for theological culture.
- Theological work on 'discipleship', 'evangelism', 'mission' and 'diaconal communities'.

For more detail see the proposals and rationale in [\*\*Chapter 7 Going Forward Together: A Way Forward\*\*](#).

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## *Imagine...*

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Imagine a National Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership that unlocks opportunities for theological education to be more accessible to more parts of the Church than ever before. Imagine opportunities for local communities of faith to be involved in learning opportunities directly relevant to their context, offered in diverse ways across the country. Imagine deep collaboration between our teachers and scholars so that students can have access to diverse expertise. Imagine opportunities for more original research. Imagine agencies working with theological educators to establish and enhance formation programs for leaders within our agencies.<sup>42</sup> Imagine the excitement across our theological educators that this longed-for idea may finally become a reality.

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<sup>42</sup> UnitingCare Australia Board Submission #2: A Shared Future Together, 17.  
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## Chapter Six In Service of the Gospel: Ordering Our Life

*"...so that the whole body of believers may be united by mutual submission in the service of the Gospel."*

- Paragraph 15, Basis of Union

"If law can be brought into disrepute by too frequent and radical changes, it can also be brought into disrepute - and probably more frequently - by leaving, in the law of the Church, regulations and instructions which no longer open up the way of the Gospel. The dignity and sanctity of the law can be maintained only if we think highly, but not more highly, than we ought to think of particular laws. There is for the Church, as for the community as a whole, no escape from or finality in the exercise of law. When a final sanction is claimed we do a disservice to the very thing we wish to protect."<sup>43</sup>

These words from the second report of the Joint Commission on Church Union would morph into paragraph 17 of the Basis of Union on law in the Church:

"The Uniting Church acknowledges that the demand of the Gospel, the response of the Church to the Gospel, and the discipline which it requires are partly expressed in the formulation by the Church of its law. The aim of such law is to confess God's will for the life of the Church; but since law is received by human beings and framed by them, it is always subject to revision in order that it may better serve the Gospel. The Uniting Church will keep its law under constant review so that its life may increasingly be directed to the service of God and humanity, and its worship to a true and faithful setting forth of, and response to, the Gospel of Christ. The law of the Church will speak of the free obedience of the children of God, and will look to the final reconciliation of humanity under God's sovereign grace."

This paragraph became the opening preamble to the decision of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly on the work of Act2.

Throughout the Collective Discernment phase, councils, boards, committees, communities and individuals wrestled with the ordering of our conciliar life through the

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<sup>43</sup> Joint Commission on Church Union, "The Church: Its Nature, Function and Ordering," in Bos and Thompson *Theology for Pilgrims: Selected theological documents of the Uniting Church in Australia*, 146.

lens of four Options presented in [\*Act2: In Response to God's Call\*](#). These four Options arose from the insights of the Exploration phase reflected across the whole report.

The engagement of the wider Church with these Options has helped to clarify the diverse contexts and imperatives across our Church and the principles, parameters and priorities of different parts of the Church in how we shape and order our life. As an Act2 team, we believe we have heard from across the breadth and depth of the Church's life through a variety of engagement mechanisms. We believe we have heard from across the diversity of perspectives.

Below we have synthesised and reflected on many of the themes arising from the discernment. We have then gone on to summarise the quantitative and qualitative response to the four Options. Finally, we have offered our conclusions which give rise to the proposals in [\*Chapter 7 Going Forward Together – A Way Forward\*](#).

### Reflections on Themes from the Feedback

*"Let's be bold!"*

We have heard a call from the Church to be bold and ambitious in renewing our collective life for the Uniting Church's second act. A call to harness the ambition of our founders in the precarious enterprise of union. The support for more radical change from across the life of the Church reflects a call to that boldness. We hear questions like, "Will the Assembly really act?" and "When can we get started implementing change?" People are not naïve to the state of the Church or the challenges of implementation. They are calling for courage. They see that change for a future-focused, flourishing Church is essential. It is those parts of the Church facing the most acute challenges which are most supportive of ambitious change.

In his commentary on his work of the World Council of Churches' Commission on Faith and Order, Davis McCaughey points to the role of councils in linking the past, present and future in a single life. Many people have tapped into that hope for the future including those asking what we want to gift the next generation.<sup>44</sup> As one group put it "...[W]e have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to act mindfully and decisively." In whatever we do we must keep faith with those hopes and expectations.

*"We need to focus on discipleship and mission"*

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<sup>44</sup> McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia*, 87-88.

Is a focus on structure and systems a distraction from discipleship and mission? This question has continued to arise throughout the Project. Some believe if we just focused on discipleship and mission then the structure and system will take care of itself. Some believe that bold structural and systemic reform will impede and divert us from core tasks of discipleship and mission. Nevertheless, there is a consistent voice, particularly from local communities of faith, which says that the current structure and system is already impeding discipleship and mission. Culture and structure are not competing solutions to the problems we face; both are essential. Structural and systemic reform can either enable discipleship and mission or distract from it. It is our choice. How we choose to approach the implementation of change will determine our choice.

*"Where is the power?"*

The dynamics of power within the Church cannot be ignored. The Regulations rarely use the word 'power', preferring the language of 'responsibilities' and 'duties'. Yet in any human system power is a reality. The Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice<sup>45</sup> points to the place of power in ministerial roles and pastoral relationships. The principles about appropriate and professional use of power ought to extend to the councils, governing bodies, office holders and personnel involved in our decision-making.

Power in our conciliar structure follows size and resourcing (both financial and personnel) much more than it follows responsibilities and duties. Davis McCaughey reflects that our conciliar structure rejects the judicial courts of Presbyterianism and the top-down governance of Methodism.<sup>46</sup> More recently Geoff Thompson has observed that it is also not meant as an endorsement of bottom-up conciliar structures which is more a feature of Congregationalism.<sup>47</sup>

Our inter-conciliar model does have an inherent distribution of power built into it. It recognises that no one council or individual has ultimate authority. That Christ alone is supreme head of the Church.<sup>48</sup> However responsibilities and power are distributed

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<sup>45</sup> Section 3.6, "The Uniting Church in Australia Code of Ethics and Ministry Practice," Uniting Church in Australia, *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations*, (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> McCaughey, *Commentary on the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church in Australia*, 87-88.

<sup>47</sup> Geoff Thompson, "In His Own Strange Way": A Post-Christendom Sort-Of Commentary on the Basis of Union, (Unley, SA: MediaCom Education, 2018), 92.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson, *"In His Own Strange Way": A Post-Christendom Sort-Of Commentary on the Basis of Union*, 83. To further emphasise this point, Thompson says very clearly 'The Uniting Church has no head office.'

amongst the councils, they ought to be exercised, as D'arcy Wood describes it, prayerfully, consulting together in light of the Word of God.<sup>49</sup>

It is clear from the feedback, and consistent with the Basis of Union, that there should be a balanced distribution of responsibilities and power across the respective councils. There is an inherent suspicion of any one council being too powerful. However, it is also unhelpful if too many councils have a decision-making role in the one area or responsibility. This leads to confusion, duplication and ultimately disempowerment. Underlying this is the inherent power that arises from resources (financial and personnel). Irrespective of the allocation of responsibilities as described in the Regulations, those councils with more resources accumulate to themselves more power and therefore a *de facto* role in many aspects of the Church's life allocated to other councils. Any way forward must account for and seek to address these realities.

*"Are we too tired and set in our ways to tackle bold change?"*

We recognised in [\*Act2: In Response to God's Call\*](#) that the Church, particularly in local communities of faith, is tired. The current way of working as a Church is one contributor to that tiredness, along with the decline in the number of people participating in local communities of faith and the aging demographics of our communities. Therefore, we have been encouraged to see the appetite for change which has arisen out of Church Council responses, Presbyteries and Synods. As we reflect on our past, present and future, those with responsibility for our life in the past and present may find the prospect of significant change a challenge. However, as we look with hope to the future, we may find that God does refill our cup and new and renewed voices will help us pursue a bold future.

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<sup>49</sup> D'Arcy Wood, *Building On A Solid Basis: A Guide to the Basis of Union* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1986), 52f. Wood uses the phrase 'Word of God' here in the way it is used in the Basis of Union to refer to, "Christ who is present when he is preached among people is the Word of God..." (Paragraph 4).

*“What authority would the Property Trust have?”*

The establishment of statutory Property Trusts under state and territory acts of Parliament were historically the legal entity for the Church to hold property and enter legal relationships with other entities. The changes in trusts law, challenges in? amending legislation and increasing reliance on property and proceeds of sale have meant that Property Trusts and the related Synod boards and committees for finance and property have played a more prominent role in the governance and resourcing of the Church.

This reality needs careful legal and governance consideration. However, it ought not be determinative in the shape of our future. As we have seen, many parts of the Church have departed from using the Property Trusts as the legal vehicle, particularly in agencies but also in other parts of our life. In its submission, UnitingCare Australia proposes the utilisation of different legal vehicles (including contemporary company structures).<sup>50</sup>

The roles, responsibilities and relationships between different councils and governing bodies is the most important priority to define. From there it is necessary to find the most effective and efficient legal arrangements to give effect to roles, responsibilities and relationships.

Ultimately the statutory Property Trust arrangements are the legacy of Australia’s colonial history and a Christendom model of church. If we are to be a truly Australian church in a post-Christendom world then we need to ensure the Property Trusts serve rather than impede the mission to which God has called us.

*“How will we deal with the different State and Territory laws?”*

The other issue often raised about the broadly state-based model of governance is state and territory legislation. Expertise in different (but similar and related) legislative areas is important in the Church fulfilling its ethical, legal and social obligations. However, there is not a compelling case for why that expertise needs to be attached to a large state-based council. National (and international) corporations, charities and other organisations do work across state and territory boundaries without needing separate governing structures. Indeed, even now many of our Synods are working

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<sup>50</sup> UnitingCare Australia Board Submission #2: A Shared Future Together, 17.

across multiple states and/or territories. Expertise in different state and territory laws is essential, however it need not be determinative of our structural arrangements.

*“Are we really ready to share resources and take a ‘common-wealth’ approach?”*

Resource sharing and redistribution has been a part of the life of the church since its origins, as described in Acts 2. Equally it has been the case throughout the life and history of the Uniting Church. Congregations have contributed to the wider Church through mechanisms such as Mission and Service Funds. Synods have had a regulated responsibility to collect funds to support the work of the Assembly.<sup>51</sup> At various times support has been provided on an ongoing or ad hoc basis between Synods.

The changing resourcing landscape of the Church has meant we have not settled upon a shared, consistent and sustainable approach to resource sharing and redistribution. We are culturally conditioned to see the resources we have responsibility and oversight of as ‘ours’. The responses to the joint funding mechanism proposed in Option 4 indicate that we still have a lot more work to do to build the mechanisms and relationships which can sustain our common life together. As Michelle Cook has observed:

*“Although the ecclesiology of the UCA is one of unity, fellowship and pilgrimage, there appears to be an inability to view the Uniting Church as a national Covenanting and Multicultural Church that requires the Church to live as a commonwealth holding resources in common and shared with those in the greatest need. To be a commonwealth requires us to apply our ecclesiological identity of unity, reconciliation and pilgrimage to more than our aspirational doctrinal and ecclesiological statements. To fully live out our call as a church in Australia we need to interrogate our failure to address the unequal distribution of material wealth, along with our desire to live as a Covenanting and Multicultural Church.”<sup>52</sup>*

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<sup>51</sup> Regulation 3.1.5(g), Uniting Church in Australia, *Basis of Union, Constitution and Regulations*, (Sydney: Uniting Church in Australia, 2018).

<sup>52</sup> Cook, Michelle, “The Ecclesiology of a Covenanting and Multicultural Church,” *Uniting Church Studies* 24, no.2 (December 2022): 32.



This prophetic challenge should continue to shape us as we look not only to the structural ordering of our life but how we use the plentiful gifts God has given us, including our financial resources.

*“Who are the culture-bearers in our Church and can we change our culture?”*

In every part of our Church people point to different places as bearers of our culture. Congregations, seen as the beating heart of our Church, are significant bearers of culture. So too are Synods, with their historically significant role in gathering, resourcing and offering leadership to the missional life of many parts of our Church. Presbyteries, particularly in rural areas, have been culture-bearers as relational pastors and partners in ministry and mission. The Assembly is a culture-bearer on matters of core identity, particularly through its responsibility for doctrine, worship and government.

There is a shadow side to culture which is also prominent in our life – that we are resistant to change, want to entrench our own power, remote from one another and particularly the local context, divided down theological and geographical lines and unwilling to put the collective interests ahead of our own contextual interests. We are responsible for changing the cultural narratives we tell ourselves. We can change our posture, attitude and behaviour towards one another – and we need to – for the sake of the gospel and our witness to that gospel in our time and place.

## Option Comparison Charts

Below are charts outlining the comparative responses to the four Options outlined in Section 6 of [\*Act2: In Response to God's Call\*](#). The data for each Option is then presented individually.

A reminder that the four Options are summarised as follows:

- **Option 1:** Four councils of the Church are reduced to three – Local, Field and National.
- **Option 2:** Four Councils, with a large Regional Council and a smaller National Council.
- **Option 3:** Four councils with larger National and Area councils, and Regional councils to administer property trusts.
- **Option 4:** Four councils, with a resource-sharing mechanism administered by the National and Regional councils.

This data represents responses from 223 discernment groups representing 2,028 participants across the Church Councils, Synods, Presbyteries and the Assembly:

- Church Councils (115 discernment groups, 1,080 participants)
- Presbyteries (39 discernment groups, 428 participants)<sup>53</sup>
- Synods (63 discernment groups, 499 participants)
- Assembly (6 discernment groups, 21 participants)<sup>54</sup>

The definition of the three responses was as follows:

- **Supportive**, generally warm to this Option
- **Open**, open to this Option with questions or concerns
- **Not supportive**, generally cool to this Option

For more detail on the source and analysis of the quantitative data please see [\*\*Chapter One Considering Afresh: Introduction\*\*](#).

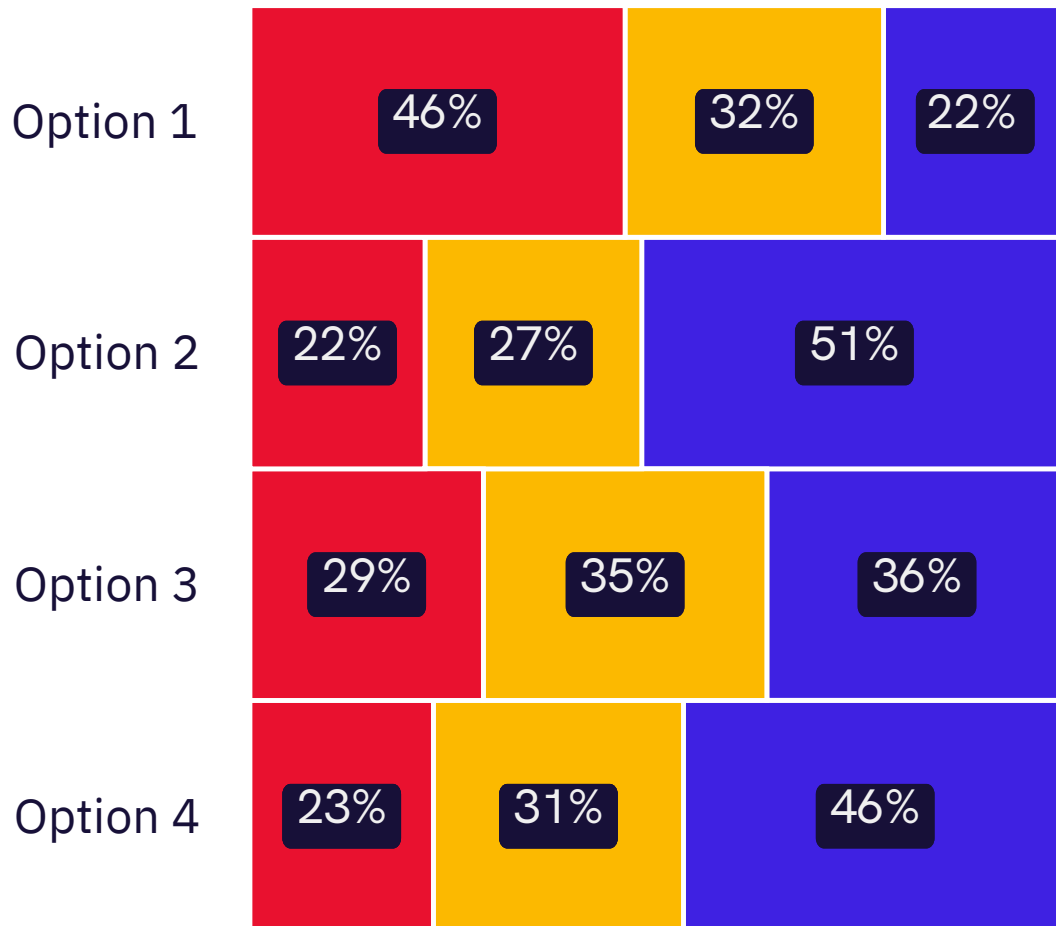


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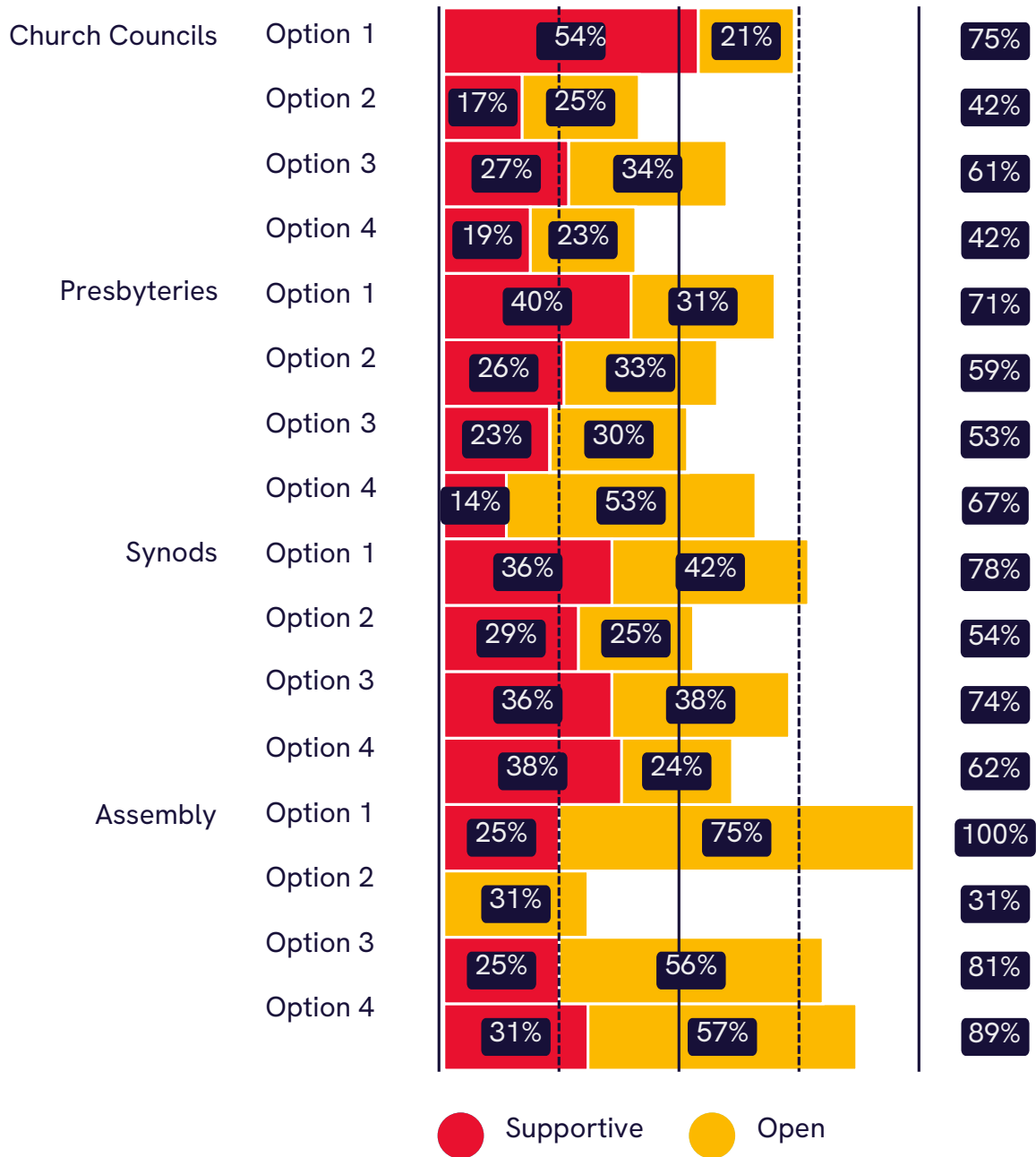
<sup>53</sup> In addition, there was qualitative feedback on the Directions from a Presbytery representing 80 participants.

<sup>54</sup> Note that these are responses from the Assembly Standing Committee.

## Total Supportive, Open and Not Supportive Comparison of Options

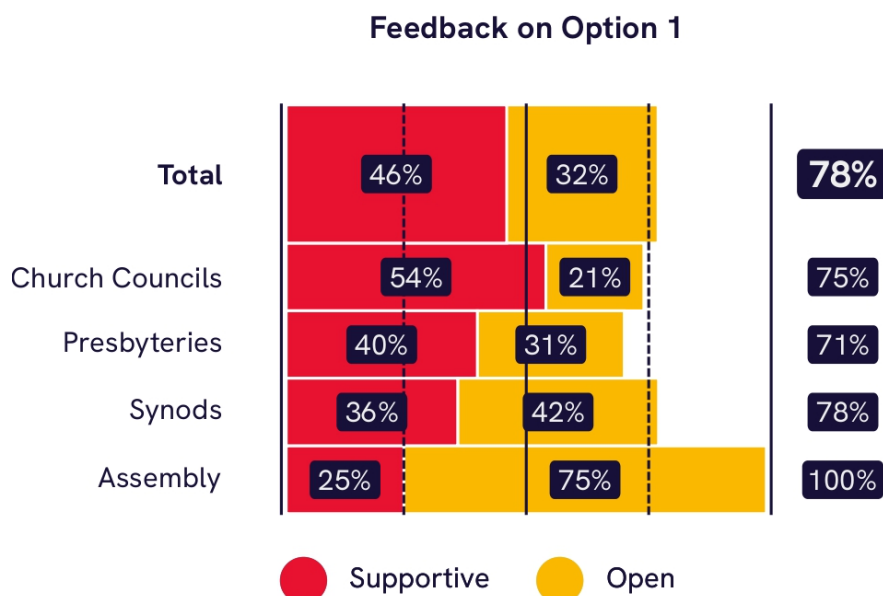


# Supportive + Open Comparison Chart by Council Type



## Feedback on Option 1<sup>55</sup>

*Four councils of the Church are reduced to three – Local, Field and National*



Option 1 received the highest level of support of all the Options. It was the Option to which councils were most open, with Church Councils and Presbyteries expressing the most support.

Responses affirmed the following aspects of this Option:

- It is seen as bold, courageous, imaginative and meeting the moment with the scale of change that is required of the Church.
- The reduction of duplication between councils.
- A stronger national council, particularly in encouraging unity and promoting a stronger public voice.
- Reducing duplication through sharing certain administration functions for greater efficiency.
- Locating administrative support in Field Councils closer to local Congregations.

Responses expressed questions and concerns about the following:

- The cost and effort of transition was the greatest concern.
- The disruption and potential to lose expertise which currently resides within councils (particularly Synods).

<sup>55</sup> For an overview of the quantitative data see [Chapter One Considering Afresh: Overview of the Process](#).

- The legacy, power, resources and role of Synods was seen as a significant impediment to implementing this Option.
- This concern was related to the cross-jurisdictional implications, loss of state-based expertise and the implications for the property trusts.
- Ensuring the National Council and the Field Councils were not too remote from each other and from local Congregations.
- There were questions about how different contexts would be accommodated including Congress, CALD Communities, urban and rural communities.

Generally, people were attracted to the outcome of Option 1 while acknowledging the effort required to get there. People who were supportive of this Option were not naïve to the effort required to achieve this Option, however they affirmed that in the end it would be worth it. The greatest level of support for this Option came from Church Councils. Those that were least supportive of this Option were generally those that would be most impacted by the change. They were concerned that the effort required would not be worth it, that it would distract the Church from ministry and mission and prove more costly and less impactful than hoped.

*"While we acknowledge this Option is the most challenging of the Options presented, we feel it is the simplest, most agile and most suitable for the future of the church. It is bold and ambitious, but we feel significant change is needed if Congregations and communities of faith are to be able to fulfil their mission/s and remain relevant. We must be brave and take risks to meet future challenges. We feel this Option has the best opportunities for change."*

- Church Council Response Form

*"Transitioning to this will be complex, and time-consuming. There are state legislature implications and state-by-state differences in systems that will be costly and complicated to streamline."*

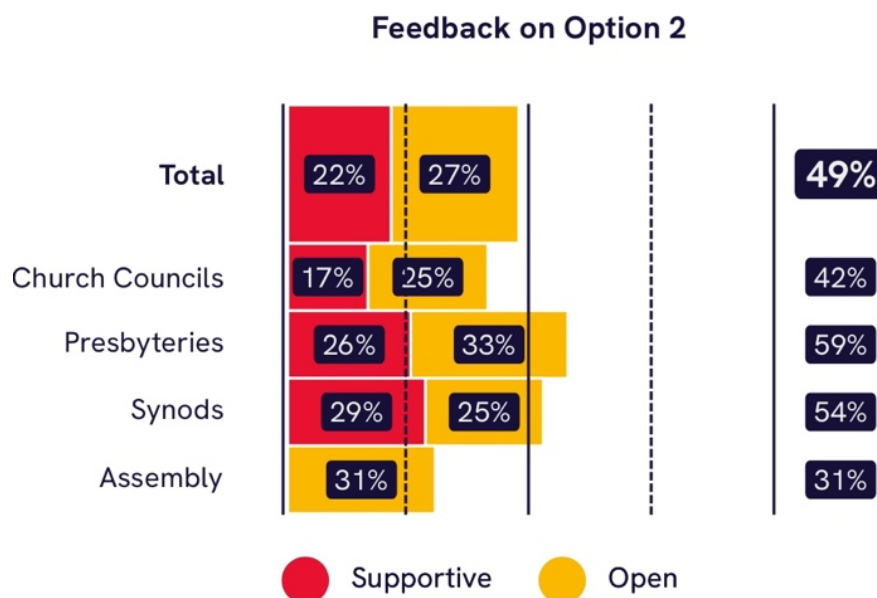
- Synod Response Form

*"Do we have the capacity to give up power? Not sure we have that capacity, it's hard and it hurts."*

- Synod Response Form

## Feedback on Option 2

*Four Councils, with a large Regional Council and a smaller National Council*



This Option received the lowest level of support of all the Options. It was the least preferred Option from Church Councils, Synods and the Assembly.

Responses affirmed the following aspects of this Option:

- Locating administration with the Regional Council and freeing up Area Councils to be focused on ministry and mission.
- Locating administration functions in the Regional Council was seen to simplify the liaison required by Local Councils on administrative matters.
- Some were supportive of a smaller National Council with more limited responsibilities.

Responses expressed questions and concerns about the following:

- The most common concern about this Option was the impact on the Church's public voice. A small National Council combined with the authority of Regional Councils to speak on public issues was seen to diminish and splinter the Church's impact and voice.
- This Option was seen as having a detrimental impact on national identity. The size and strength of the National Council was generally seen as important for unity and identity.

- The authority of Regional Councils to make regulations was not widely commented upon, however those that did saw it as undesirable. The most compelling argument was that it would inhibit further structural change over time.

Generally, people were cool to the overall concept of Option 2. At its core it appears that the imbalance of responsibilities between the councils was a significant factor in the lack of support for this Option. Responses indicated a desire for a balance of responsibilities, resources and therefore power. It was seen as exacerbating some of the existing cultural and relational weaknesses of the current situation without delivering significant benefits.

*"Importance of having a strong unified national body and how we speak into a rapidly secularising Australian public. If the National Council is shrunk then the authority of the President to make public statements is weakened. Idea of Regional Councils speaking separately into the public arena seems really confusing and lessens our impact."*

- Synod Response Form

*"I am particularly concerned that the Regional Council is dealing mostly with administration and yet is also the public voice of the church. I believe that this would run into difficulties with mission being adversely affected by an emphasis on administration. The staff of each Council would have little to do with one another on a daily basis. It is not good for the more powerful Council to be skewed toward property and finance with its underlying paradigm that can clash with the missional paradigm."*

- Individual Submission

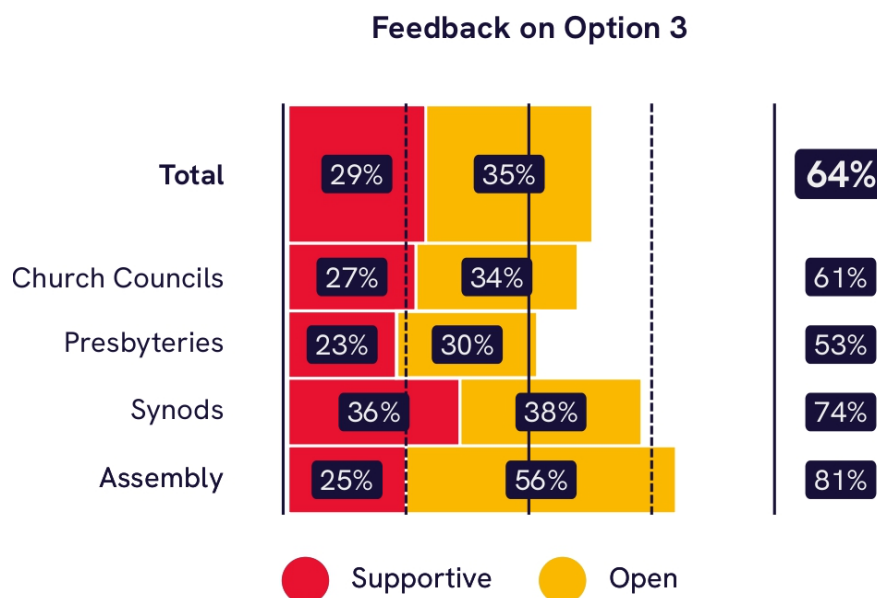
*"...in the Congregations and communities where I have participated and served, the Assembly voice has been the most damaging and destructive force in the life of the church... So reducing that may not be such a risk."*

- Individual Submission



## Feedback on Option 3

*Four councils with larger National and Area councils, and Regional councils to administer property trusts*



This Option received the most mixed level of support of all the Options. It was not really anyone's most preferred Option nor anyone's least preferred Option.

Responses affirmed the following aspects of this Option:

- It was seen to focus on providing more support to Congregations through strong Area Councils.
- Those that value the work of the National Council affirmed that this Option strengthened that council.
- It was seen as being more pragmatic than Option 1 and removed some of the barriers to implementation, particularly around the management of property.

Responses expressed questions and concerns about the following aspects:

- The explicit decoupling of property management from ministry and mission.
- How the two regional councils would be decided, and concern that issues of property would be managed remote from local councils.
- Those concerned about a strong National Council and its remoteness from the local context particularly highlighted that risk in this Option.
- That the culture-bearing role currently held by Synods might be replicated in the two Regional Councils (despite their narrow mandate) and that cultural influence would cover vast geographies of the country.

- Questions about whether this was a significant change.

Generally, this Option was seen as either a second-best option to Option 1, or a stepping stone towards Option 1. For that reason, there was an openness to it for people who preferred Option 1. Some supported it on a pragmatic basis where they believed the amount of change required to achieve Option 1 was simply too great. The prominence of the role of the property trusts raised the vexing and contested issues of property more in this Option than in others.

*"This is our second choice after Option 1. Having a body focused on property is good but could be part of the Field Council rather than in isolation."*

- Presbytery Response Form

*"We are concerned about the equitable distribution of resources across the whole Church under this model. The Property Trusts need to respond to the needs of the Church and resourcing the mission."*

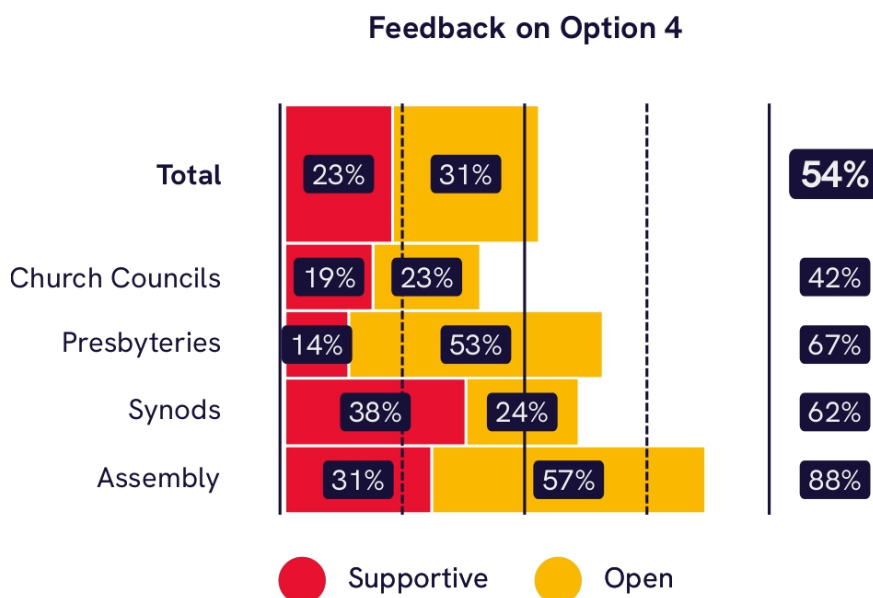
- Presbytery Response Form

*"There was a general feeling that this model was a more practical/achievable version of Option 1. Some preferred Option 1 but recognised this may be easier."*

- Presbytery Response Form

## Feedback on Option 4

*Four councils, with a resource sharing mechanism administered by the National and Regional councils*



This Option received a mixed level of support, with Church Councils and Presbyteries generally not supporting this Option while Synods and the Assembly were more supportive of this Option.

Responses affirmed the following aspects of this Option:

- It is seen as manageable and achievable for parts of the Church that are tired and worn out.
- It causes least disruption to the status quo for parts of the Church relatively satisfied with the current situation.
- The concept of a joint funding mechanism has an appeal.

Responses expressed questions and concerns about the following aspects of this Option:

- Many saw it as too close to the status quo and therefore not addressing the scale of the challenges the Church faces.
- Some people hope that structural change can be a lever to drive cultural change. This Option was seen to not provide sufficient leverage.
- There were many questions about how the joint funding mechanism would work in practice. It was seen by some as a recipe for conflict. While theoretically it

could provide funding for parts of the Church where there is need but not resources, the who and how of the resource allocation process was not clear.

Generally, there was little enthusiasm for Option 4 reflected in the qualitative responses. It was seen as an incremental approach to address what most respondents saw to be far-reaching systemic challenges. Some even saw it as an initial starting point to much more substantial reform. The phrase 'status quo' was consistently used along with scepticism that an idea like the joint pool of funds could translate from a good idea into reality.

*"We are least supportive of this Option. It basically retains the status quo with just one change. This will not solve the problems we are currently facing."*

- Church Council Response Form

*"This seems to be mainly 'keep the current arrangements, but tweak the capacity to manage resourcing'. We need to do more than merely preserve the current structure. We need to be brave in embracing a new future!"*

- Synod Response Form

*"This Option is close to what we know and is achievable in a time frame of 3 years. We affirm the idea of the administration of a joint pool of funds."*

- Assembly Response Form

## Fulfilling Our Ethical, Legal and Social Obligations

As a Church, we need to maintain our commitment to fulfilling our ethical, legal and social obligations. The Act2 team has continued to hear the challenges the Church faces in seeking to fulfil our obligations. The five draft principles we proposed in [Act2: In Response to God's Call](#) are a helpful set of principles to guide how we fulfil our obligations in whatever direction we take in the order and shape of our common life.

### Principles:

As an expression of God's call and will for our life we will fulfil our ethical, legal and social obligations guided by the following principles:

1. Enable healthy and safe ministry and mission: Fulfilling our obligations in a way that enables the kind of ministry and mission to which we believe we are called.
2. A consistent standard: Applying common standards across the Church and only varying where absolutely necessary.
3. Efficient administration: Administration which is focused on the simplest, lightest, most streamlined processes possible.
4. Proportionate to the risk: A risk-based approach to standards and administration, focusing effort and resources where there is the greatest risk.
5. Alignment of accountability, responsibility and capability: Assigning responsibilities and resources to maintain consistent alignment between accountability, responsibility and capability.

### Next Steps

The breadth of responses we received to the various Options did reflect the breadth and diversity of the Church. The differences in context drove different priorities and imperatives in where change was required and how quickly it was required. However, through all those different perspectives, one thing was clear – people accept that change is required to our governance and resourcing model.

Our governance and resourcing model for the wider Church, which includes 40 councils (33 Presbyteries, 6 Synods and an Assembly), is not sustainable and we have found too many instances where it is hindering our efforts to serve the gospel and participate in God's mission. While in many places the wider Church is making an important contribution, it is also very clear that there is both opportunity and an imperative for change so we might better serve the gospel and enter more fully into God's mission. We believe that the ordering and resourcing of the wider Church should be shaped by the following Vision:

***Sharing Our Life and Our Common Wealth:*** A network of deeply connected councils responding to God's call to enter more fully into mission through healthy oversight of ministry and mission, celebrating our diverse and shared identity and being faithful stewards of our common wealth.

In light of this Vision, our long-term needs and the potential for a *Kairos* moment in which God might transform our life, the Act2 Project Steering Committee believes that a staged implementation of a three-council model (building on Option 1) is the best way forward for the Church. This would be a significant change in the way the Uniting Church orders its life and will require further work to assess and test the feasibility of this model. In order to ensure that the Church is able to move forward with a better governance and resourcing model the proposals in Chapter 7 also include assessing the viability of a renewed four council model to fulfill the Vision of *Sharing our Life and Common Wealth*.

Drawing from the experience of other churches that have undertaken significant change we are proposing a three-stage approach led by a Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration that draws its membership from across the life of the Church.

- **Stage 1 Transition** (July 2024-December 2024): This stage is focused on transitioning from the existing project approach towards the new Commission.
- **Stage 2 Assess and Prepare** (January 2025-June 2027): This stage is focused on progressing the Vision guided by the Principles through:
  - Conducting a feasibility assessment of both a three-council model and a four-council model.
  - Preparing proposals for the 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly including a roadmap for implementation underpinned by a resourcing model.
  - Identifying other ways to fulfill the Vision and Principles which can be achieved between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly.
- **Stage 3 Decide and Approve** (July 2027 onwards): This stage would include decisions by the 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly about a final model. These decisions would be followed by implementation and any necessary approvals by other councils.

Now is the moment to have the courage of our founders, stepping out in faith so we might be a more deeply connected church, exercising healthy oversight of ministry and mission, celebrating our diverse and shared identity and being faithful stewards of our common wealth.

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## *Summary of Recommendations*

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### **Vision for Sharing Our Life and Our Common Wealth:**

A network of deeply connected councils responding to God's call to enter more fully into mission through healthy oversight of ministry and mission, celebrating our diverse and shared identity and being faithful stewards of our common wealth.

- A Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration.
- To seek ways to more deeply connect across our councils so we can exercise healthy oversight, celebrate our identity and share our common wealth.
- Assessing the feasibility of both a three-council model and a four-council model consistent with the Vision and Principles.
- Developing proposals and a roadmap for implementation underpinned by a resourcing model.

For more detail see the proposals and rationale in [Chapter 7 A Way Forward](#).

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## *Imagine*

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Imagine a network of Councils with people who know, love and support all the diverse communities within their area. Imagine local communities of faith getting the support they need in areas of administration so they can focus on discipleship and mission. Imagine a network of shared administration hubs providing timely and efficient support to local communities of faith, councils, agencies and schools. Imagine a resource model which ensures that ministry in the remotest parts of Australia can be supported by our common wealth. Imagine the opportunity to unlock resources to invest in our newest communities, whether in metropolitan, regional or rural Australia. Imagine a national public voice connected across the country to local communities of prophetic activism.

## Conclusion

There are many strengths in the life of the Uniting Church which we can further build on towards a life-giving and fruitful future:

- Our shared identity in Jesus Christ is expressed by a common set of markers expressed in the Basis of Union and our 'instruments of unity'.
- There is a passion in the Church for local communities of faith to be focused on discipleship and mission.
- Capable and effective oversight, support and encouragement which helps local communities of faith be life-giving.
- There is an appetite and opportunity to strengthen our theological culture which includes finding shared spaces to grapple with both our shared theological convictions and our theological differences.
- There is an appetite and opportunity for deep and productive collaboration in the provision of theological education.

There are also parts of our life which are impeding a life-giving and fruitful future for the Uniting Church:

- Many of our local communities of faith are struggling to fulfil their responsibilities due to their size, capability and demographics.
- Our people feel tired and stretched. The model of many volunteer-led councils, committees and processes does not match our size and energy. We need to free ourselves from these burdens so we can focus on life-giving discipleship, ministry and mission.
- The current Regulations related to local communities of faith and their implementation are at times insufficiently flexible and impeding communities being life-giving and effective.
- The Church is still struggling to find ways to hold together our rich and diverse theological perspectives and create shared forums in which we grapple together with our theological differences.
- The current conciliar structure of the wider Church (40 councils: 33 Presbyteries, 6 Synods, 1 Assembly) is not sustainable and, in some places, not currently viable. Some councils are unable to fulfil their responsibilities, there is too much duplication and councils are not well connected to one another.
- We do not have a whole-of-Church resourcing model that ensures councils have the resources they need to fulfil their responsibilities. This means that there is not adequate sharing of our common wealth. Some councils are in precarious financial positions while others possess significant wealth.



To have a faithful and fruitful future for the Uniting Church, we need:

- To orient our life and resources towards local communities of faith being focused on discipleship and mission.
- A new toolkit for more flexible fit-for-purpose local governance.
- Systems and processes for better beginnings and endings for communities.
- To review and renew our constitutional and regulatory arrangements for Church membership.
- A network for theology, formation and leadership including a national multi-campus theological college.
- A national structure to undertake further theological work on discipleship, evangelism and mission.
- Theological reflection on how to recognise our local service and justice work including consideration of the concept of 'diaconal communities'.
- To seek ways to more deeply connect across our councils so we can exercise healthy oversight, celebrate our identity and share our common wealth.
- To assess the feasibility of both a three-council model and a four-council model.
- To develop a roadmap for implementation underpinned by a resourcing model.

Further details of these steps have been outlined in [Chapter Seven Going Forward Together: A Way Forward](#). This represents an integrated set of proposals for the consideration of the Assembly about how to move forward in response to the work of the Act2 Project. [Chapter Eight Implementing A Way Forward](#) outlines an approach and timeline for implementation.

These specific steps alone will not lead to a faithful and fruitful future. We need to continue to invest in our culture, including our theological culture. We will need to let go of things we hold dear so that we can go forward together. We will need to deepen our connection to God, one another and the wider world. We will need to die to self so that we can rise with Christ. We will need to focus less on what is 'mine' and more on what is 'ours' so we can share together in our common wealth. We will need to find the grace and commitment to participate in spaces with those with whom we disagree. In doing the systemic, structural, cultural and relational work required we can more faithfully be a church uniting with one another to participate in the mission to which Christ has called us.

Peter Walker and Chris Budden caution us:

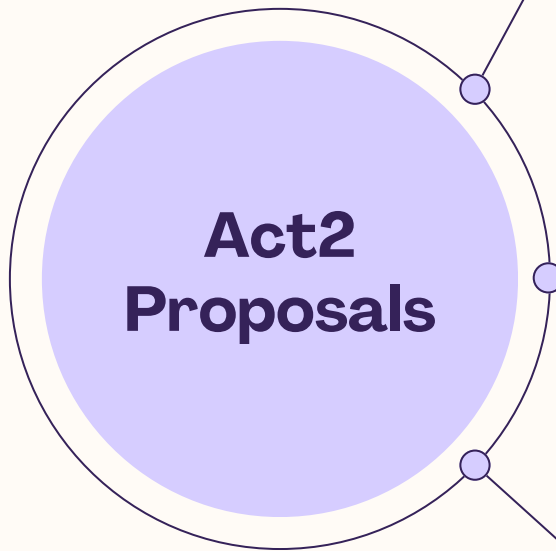
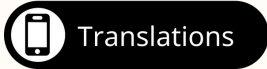
"We institute the church in *structures*, and we constitute the church in *motion*. Both are needed. However, an undue focus on instituting the church in structures puts at risk our understanding of, and energy for, constituting the church in motion. The church is helped by stability, but it must have fluidity. Those spaces of fluidity are important for they are where the church event<sup>56</sup> happens."<sup>57</sup>

If in implementing new structures, systems and processes, we simply replace one rigid approach with another then we will miss the opportunity to embrace the precarious path God has called us to; where in the fluid and dynamic parts of our life God breaks in and points us again to the way of the risen, crucified one.

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<sup>56</sup> "Church event" is used here in a way popularised by Lutheran scholar Vitor Westhelle (Vitor Westhelle, *The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant*, 2009, Minneapolis: Fortress Press). Referenced by Walker and Budden, not only as the church gathered but rather as a movement of God and in and through God's people located in time, which cannot be so easily confined to buildings, territories and denominations.

<sup>57</sup>Peter Walker and Chris Budden, "Reflecting on Act2: In Response to God's Call" Act2 Project, last modified 4 October 2023, <https://www.act2uca.com/theological-culture-contributions/peterwalkerchrisbudden>.



For full details see  
*Act2: The Gift of the Spirit*  
(**Chapter 7** Go Forward  
Together: A Way Forward)



VISION



### A. Life Giving Communities of Discipleship and Mission

Communities of faith will sustain a life of worship, build one another up in love, grow disciples of Jesus and participate in God's mission. These diverse communities of faith will shape their life in response to God's call in their context and deepen their relationship with God, one another, the wider church and the world.

KEY CHANGES

- Focus on discipleship and mission
- A new toolkit for fit-for-purpose local governance
- Better beginnings and endings for communities
- Review of church membership to align our rules and our reality

VISION



### B. A Network for a Flourishing Theological Culture

A visible and accessible network of intentional communities engaged in life-long learning to equip people to courageously follow Jesus and participate in God's mission in contemporary Australia.

KEY CHANGES

- National multi-campus theological college
- National theological culture structure
- Theological work on 'discipleship', 'evangelism', 'mission' and 'diaconal communities'

VISION



### C. Sharing our Life and Common Wealth

A network of deeply connected councils responding to God's call to enter more fully into mission through healthy oversight of ministry and mission, celebrating our diverse and shared identity and being faithful stewards of our common wealth.

KEY CHANGES

- Conduct a feasibility assessment of a three council model and a four council model.
- Develop a roadmap for implementation underpinned by a resourcing model.
- Identify and implement other actions to progress the Vision and Principles.

## Chapter Seven Go Forward Together: A Way Forward

*"To this end they declare their readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church; they remain open to constant reform under his Word; and they seek a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit."*

- Paragraph 1, Basis of Union

### A note to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly Members

This chapter includes all the proposals of the Act2 Project, approved by the ASC, for the discernment of the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly.

That the Assembly:

In response to the *Act2: The Gift of the Spirit* report:

*We open ourselves to the gift of the Spirit, given in order that we may not lose the way. With thanksgiving for the past 47 years of our life, and after taking a long, loving look at the reality of our present, and with hope in God's faithfulness for our future, we commit to continue our journey together. We believe now is the time to reshape our life so we may better live into God's call in our time and place. By centring life-giving communities of discipleship and mission, cultivating a flourishing theological culture and deeply sharing in our common life and common wealth we will treasure Christ's gift of abundant grace, share this gift with our world and pass it to future generations.*

### Stream A. Life-giving Communities of Discipleship and Mission

1. Adopt a vision for local communities of faith:

*Communities of faith will sustain a life of worship, build one another up in love, grow disciples of Jesus and participate in God's mission. These diverse communities of faith will shape their life in response to God's call in their context and deepen their relationship with God, one another, the wider church and the world.*

2. Call on the Church to orient its life towards life-giving communities of discipleship and mission including:

- a) Our communities of faith<sup>58</sup> orienting their lives towards intentional, consistent, relational and contextual approaches to making and growing disciples;
  - b) Our various expressions of the Uniting Church within local communities (e.g. communities of faith, agencies and schools) to seek structural and relational ways to deepen connections to be more intentional about participating in shared mission;
  - c) The wider Church to orienting resources (financial, personnel, property) towards resourcing and supporting communities of faith towards that task.
3. Establish the principle that any communities which exhibit the marks of a Congregation as described in the Basis of Union<sup>59</sup> may be recognised as a Congregation. Invite all communities of faith and councils of the Church to reflect on this principle and its implications for our life as a Church and the fulfillment of their responsibilities.
4. Amend Constitution to read<sup>60</sup>:
- 24.** For the effective exercise of their responsibilities and for the better ordering of the life of the Congregations, bodies and agencies:
- (a) ~~each Congregation shall form a Church Council~~ shall be formed to have oversight over:
    - (i) a Congregation by the Congregation; or
    - ~~(b)(ii) a group of more than one Congregation, body or agency by agreement amongst them and each relevant Presbytery; where authorised by the Presbytery, more than one Congregation may form a joint Church Council; and~~
    - (eb) ~~one, or more than one, Congregation~~ any Church Council may form such other committees or agencies as may be necessary or desirable.

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<sup>58</sup> Community of faith is defined as including Congregations, Faith Communities, Parish Missions and other communities of disciples within the Uniting Church that exhibit the marks of a Congregation as described in Paragraph 15(a) of the Basis of Union.

<sup>59</sup> "[M]eet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world." (Basis of Union, Para. 15(a))

<sup>60</sup> See Schedule of Constitutional Amendments for both the strike through and underline version and the proposed final text version (p.83).

The Church Councils and other committees or agencies shall have such membership, responsibilities and relationships to one another as may be prescribed."

**3. Church Council** means the body established ~~in each Congregation~~ to have oversight of ~~its~~ the total life and mission of:

(a) a Congregation; or

(b) a group of more than one Congregation, body or agency.

**10(b).** Church Council shall be responsible for the maintenance and review of the rolls of members of each Congregation, body and agency for which it is has oversight.

**19.** ~~Unless the Presbytery shall authorise otherwise:-~~

(a) ~~each~~ A Congregation which is under the oversight of a Church Council shall recognise and appoint confirmed members or members in association of the Congregation as Elders.

(b) A group of more than one Congregation, body or agency under the oversight of a Church Council, shall by agreement determine how to recognise and appoint relevant representatives and how many such representatives would be recognised and determined from each Congregation, body or agency in the group as Elders, provided that in the case of each Congregation in such a group, each of its representative must be a confirmed member or member in association of the Congregation.

(c) The Elders are to share with the ~~each~~ leaders (including Minister where relevant) of each Congregation, body or agency ~~Minister of a Congregation (as relevant) and each other~~ in oversight and building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining it's the members of each relevant Congregation, body or agency (as relevant), in hope and leading them into a full participation in Christ's mission in the world.

(~~b~~d) The Elders shall be members of the Church Council and shall comprise at least one half of its membership.

(~~ee~~) Elders may be called 'Elders' or 'Leaders'.

5. Authorise the ASC to review and amend the regulations to:

a) Align the regulations with the principle established in A.3

b) Increase the flexibility for communities of faith to be governed by fit-for-purpose governance arrangements. Include in the review the fulfillment of the following principles:

- (i) Moving away from the normative structure being one Congregation with one Church Council;
  - (ii) Enabling various types of communities of faith to be governed by a single Church Council;
  - (iii) Providing for effective structures under a Church Council to support local ministry and mission overseen by the Church Council;
  - (iv) Encouraging clustering of communities of faith under a single Church Council;
  - (v) Encouraging Presbyteries to ensure alignment between local ministry arrangements and local governance arrangements;
  - (vi) Providing mechanisms by which Presbyteries can assure themselves that local governance arrangements are adequate to fulfil the responsibilities of a Church Council;
  - (vii) Providing flexibility to new and emerging communities to evolve their governance as their life matures over time;
  - (viii) Seeking to consolidate Regulations 3.9 (Alternative Local Church Structures) into revised Regulations for Congregations and Church Councils;
- c) Provide for a Presbytery to vary the responsibilities of a Congregation and/or a Church Council;
  - d) Provide for Presbyteries, with appropriate safeguards and limits, to appoint people from the wider Church to be members of a Church Council.<sup>61</sup>
6. Urge Synods and Presbyteries to simplify pathways for communities of faith such as new and emerging communities, CALD communities, church plants and fresh expression to belong to and participate in the life of the Church including:
- a) Ensuring fit-for-purpose governance arrangements;
  - b) Using the ability to vary responsibilities of Congregations and Church Councils to align responsibilities with the capacity, capability and needs of a community;
  - c) Ensuring access to and participation in the wider councils of the Church;
  - d) Providing opportunities for two-way learning between communities.

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<sup>61</sup> This is an extension of the existing arrangements within Reg. 3.1.3(n) to provide for Presbytery Liaison Person during a placement vacancy and 3.9.1 to provide for the Presbytery and the Synod to appoint people to the Church Council of a Parish Mission.

7. Urge Synods and Presbyteries to exercise their responsibilities pastorally and effectively regarding the dissolution and/or amalgamation of Congregations, including:
  - a) Timely intervention when a Congregation or Faith Community is reaching the end of their current form;
  - b) Provision of resources to manage any transition;
  - c) Exploring the application of any financial resources from the dissolution or amalgamation of Congregations to areas of ministry and mission across the life of the Church based on need, opportunity and responsibility.
8. Request the ASC provide guidance to the Church on the recognition of Congregations and local fit-for-purpose governance arrangements consistent with any amended Regulations and continue to monitor implementation, reflect on and refine guidance and Regulations.
9. Request the ASC review and bring a report and proposals to the 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly (including any changes to the Constitution and Regulations) required to implement a simplified approach to church membership.

### **Stream B. A Network for a Flourishing Theological Culture**

1. Adopt the vision for a National Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership:

*A visible and accessible network of intentional communities engaged in life-long learning to equip people to courageously follow Jesus and participate in God's mission in contemporary Australia.*
2. Establish a **Commission for Theology, Formation and Leadership** to progress implementation of the vision and authorise the ASC to finalise the terms of reference, including if necessary assigning responsibilities to the Commission currently fulfilled by other bodies in the Church if necessary.
3. Adopt the following principles to guide the Commission for Theology, Formation and Leadership:
  - a) The purpose for which the Uniting Church constitutes and resources intentional theological communities<sup>62</sup> is to equip the whole people of

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<sup>62</sup> Theological communities are found throughout the Uniting Church including within theological colleges, Congregations, agencies, schools and other institutions and networks of theology, formation and leadership.



God to participate in the prophetic, disruptive, healing and reconciling reign of God in the church and the world;

- b) These communities will manifest the cultural, geographic and theological diversity of the Church in their people, programs and processes.
  - c) Christian theological education for discipleship, mission and ministry is a gift and responsibility of the church for the whole people of God;
  - d) As an expression of our Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and in response to the Preamble, Indigenous theology needs to be a core part of theological education and formation;
  - e) As an expression of our commitment to be a multicultural, cross-cultural and intercultural Church, our theological education and formation needs to be cross-cultural, inter-cultural and multilingual;
  - f) As an expression of our global and ecumenical scholarly commitments, our communities of theological education will draw upon and contribute to local, global and ecumenical scholarship and research;
  - g) National collaboration in theological education and ministry formation will enable more effective, equitable and adaptive education of the people of God for discipleship, mission and ministry;
  - h) National collaboration in theological education and ministry formation will occur most effectively if structural change is made to establish a governing body for integrated national oversight, leadership and accountability;
  - i) National unity in the oversight of theological education and ministry formation does not mean national uniformity. Diversity and contextuality are of fundamental value to theological education and ministry formation. A new national governance body will be responsible for preserving those values;
  - j) The Church is committed to high quality and accessible theological education and formation in a variety of modes and locations, including in person, online and by distance. Formation for discipleship and ministry is most effective within a formation community.
4. Authorise the Commission to work with Ministerial Education Boards to establish a national, multi-campus theological college as part of implementing the vision of a Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership outlined in B.1.
  5. Request the ASC establish a more visible, accessible and resourced structure for the Assembly to exercise its responsibilities in relation to the Church's

theological culture as part of implementing the vision of a National Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership outlined in B1.

6. Request the ASC provide theological guidance and reflection to the Church:
  - a) Exploring our understanding of 'mission', 'evangelism' and 'discipleship' and implications for our life;
  - b) Exploring the possibility of recognising contexts and communities as an expression of a diaconal ministry of the church, particularly through our community service agencies.

### **Stream C. Sharing Our Life and Our Common Wealth**

1. Adopt the vision for the ordering and resourcing of the wider Church:  
*A network of deeply connected councils responding to God's call to enter more fully into mission through healthy oversight of ministry and mission, celebrating our diverse and shared identity and being faithful stewards of our common wealth.*
2. Call to the Church, in living out the vision for sharing our life and common wealth, to prioritise sharing our resources with one another for the benefit of the whole Church.
3. Acknowledge that through the changes of history the shape of our life means we need to continually seek new ways of serving the gospel. As we look to the future with hope, we recognise that our reality is a source of grief for many in our Church which will require us to be united in love, service, suffering and joy.
4. Establish a **Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration** to lead the work of implementing the Vision and authorise the ASC to finalise the terms of reference including a reporting framework to councils of the Church.
5. Adopt the following principles to guide the Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration:
  - a) The purpose of our ordering is in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission and therefore we do so in a way that lives out our unity in mutual submission in service of the Gospel;
  - b) Christ alone is the supreme head of the Church, and we are entrusted with responsibilities to serve Christ by virtue of our gifts and graces through the councils of the Church in relation to the Church and the world;

- c) The responsibilities, authorities and powers of the respective councils should be clearly defined, balanced across the respective councils and avoid confusion and ambiguity so that all councils can be accountable for the exercise of those responsibilities;
  - d) Councils should have the ability to establish bodies for the fulfillment of their responsibilities with limited prescription from the regulations;
  - e) Resources should be allocated to the respective councils so that they can fulfil their responsibilities. There will need to be some financial redistribution between the councils of the Church to ensure all councils have the resources they need to fulfil their responsibilities. This may include the adoption of minimum resource standards for respective councils;
  - f) Efficient and accessible shared administrative functions across the Church on the principle of 'only doing separately what we cannot do together' should be established to unlock more resources for ministry and mission.
6. Noting that in *Act 2: The Gift of the Spirit* there is a preference to explore implementation of a three-council model, request the Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration to:
- a) Investigate the feasibility, consequences, risks, opportunities and possible roadmap to implement:
    - (i) A three-council model consistent with the vision and principles;
    - (ii) A four-council model consistent with the existing Constitution of the Uniting Church, the vision and principles;
  - b) That investigation of both models include collaboration with leaders from Church Councils, Presbyteries, Synods, the Assembly, the Congress and agencies of the Church, and bring a report, proposals and any roadmap to implement to the 18th Assembly;
  - c) Identify ways to implement other actions to make progress towards the vision consistent with the principles between the 17th and 18th Assembly
  - d) Request the ASC to establish a process to draw the membership of the Commission from the Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries, agencies and Congress.

## Schedule of Constitutional Amendments

<b>Amended form:</b>	<b>Final Form</b>
<p><b>Clause 24: Council of the Congregation</b></p> <p>Amend to align with the Vision and Principles for <i>Stream A: Life Giving Communities of Faith</i>:</p> <p>For the effective exercise of their responsibilities and for the better ordering of the life of the Congregations, <u>bodies and agencies</u>:</p> <p>(a) <del>each Congregation shall form a Church Council</del>  <u>shall be formed to have oversight over:</u></p> <p>(i) <u>a Congregation by the Congregation; or</u></p> <p><del>(b)(ii) a group of more than one Congregation, body or agency by agreement amongst them and each relevant Presbytery; where authorised by the Presbytery, more than one Congregation may form a joint Church Council; and</del></p> <p>(c) <del>one, or more than one, Congregation any</del>  <u>Church Council</u> may form such other committees or agencies as may be necessary or desirable.</p> <p>The Church Councils and other committees or agencies shall have such membership, responsibilities and relationships to one another as may be prescribed.</p>	
<p><b>Clause 3: definition of "Church Council"</b></p> <p>Amend to make clear that a Church Council may have oversight of more than one Congregation.</p> <p>Amended clause:</p>	<p>For the effective exercise of their responsibilities and for the better ordering of the life of the Congregations, bodies and agencies:</p> <p>(a) a Church Council shall be formed to have oversight over:</p> <p>(i) a Congregation by the Congregation; or</p> <p>(ii) a group of more than one Congregation, body or agency by agreement amongst them and each relevant Presbytery; and</p> <p>(b) any Church Council may form such other committees or agencies as may be necessary or desirable.</p> <p>The Church Councils and other committees or agencies shall have such membership, responsibilities and relationships to one another as may be prescribed.</p> <p><b>Church Council</b> means the body established to have oversight of the total life and mission of:</p> <p>(a) a Congregation; or</p>

<p><b>Church Council</b> means the body established in <del>each Congregation</del> to have oversight of <del>its</del> <u>the</u> total life and mission of:</p> <p>(a) <u>a Congregation; or</u></p> <p>(b) <u>a group of more than one Congregation, body or agency.</u></p>	<p>(b) a group of more than one Congregation, body or agency.</p>
<p><b>Clause 10(b): responsibility of Church Council for rolls</b></p>	
<p>Amend to make clear that a Church Council can be responsible for the rolls of one or more Congregations, bodies and agencies.</p> <p>Amended clause:</p> <p>Church Council shall be responsible for the maintenance and review of the rolls of members <u>of each Congregation, body and agency for which it is has oversight.</u></p>	<p>Church Council shall be responsible for the maintenance and review of the rolls of members of each Congregation, body and agency for which it is has oversight.</p>
<p><b>Clause 19: Elders of a Congregation being members of the Church Council</b></p>	
<p>This clause can be retained in its current form for situations where the Church Council only has oversight of one Congregation but should be expanded accordingly once membership of a Church Council for more than one Congregation, body and/or agency over which the Church Council will have oversight is decided upon.</p> <p>Amended clause:</p> <p><del>Unless the Presbytery shall authorise otherwise:-</del></p> <p>(a) <u>each A Congregation which is under the oversight of a Church Council</u> shall recognise and appoint confirmed members or members in association <u>of the Congregation</u> as Elders.</p>	<p>(a) A Congregation which is under the oversight of a Church Council shall recognise and appoint confirmed members or members in association of the Congregation as Elders.</p> <p>(b) A group of more than one Congregation, body or agency under the oversight of a Church Council, shall by agreement determine how to recognise and appoint relevant representatives and how many such representatives would be recognised and determined from each Congregation, body or agency in the group as Elders, provided that in the case of each Congregation in such a group, each of its representative</p>

<p><u>(b) A group of more than one Congregation, body or agency under the oversight of a Church Council, shall by agreement determine how to recognise and appoint relevant representatives and how many such representatives would be recognised and determined from each Congregation, body or agency in the group as Elders, provided that in the case of each Congregation in such a group, each of its representative must be a confirmed member or member in association of the Congregation.</u></p> <p><u>(c) The Elders are to share with the each leaders (including Minister where relevant) of each Congregation, body or agency Minister of a Congregation (as relevant) and each other in oversight and building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining it's the members of each relevant Congregation, body or agency (as relevant), in hope and leading them into a full participation in Christ's mission in the world.</u></p> <p><u>(d) The Elders shall be members of the Church Council and shall comprise at least one half of its membership.</u></p> <p><u>(e) Elders may be called 'Elders' or 'Leaders'.</u></p>	<p>must be a confirmed member or member in association of the Congregation.</p> <p>(c) The Elders are to share with the leaders (including Minister where relevant) of each Congregation, body or agency (as relevant) and each other in oversight and building up in faith and love, sustaining it's the members of each relevant Congregation, body or agency (as relevant), in hope and leading them into a full participation in Christ's mission in the world.</p> <p>(d) The Elders shall be members of the Church Council and shall comprise at least one half of its membership.</p> <p>(e) Elders may be called 'Elders' or 'Leaders'.</p>
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## Rationale

The way forward we have offered is shaped by three visions for:

- Life-giving communities of discipleship and mission deepening their relationship with God, one another, the wider Church and the world.
- A network for theology, formation and leadership that sustains a flourishing theological culture.
- Sharing of our common life and our common wealth so we can enter more fully into mission.

We have proposed a set of concrete steps to bring these visions to reality.

### *A. Life-giving Communities of Discipleship and Mission*

This is the most urgent task and asks all parts of the Church to orient themselves towards this vision. It also requires work to overhaul the constitutional and regulatory toolkit available to the Church to lift the burdens faced by communities of faith so they can refocus on discipleship and mission. The timeline for this work is the first 12 to 18 months of the next triennium. It is designed to make our regulatory framework more flexible and responsive to the reality of our life. It seeks to rely less on prescription and more on guidance. It also anticipates that we will seek to reflect on and refine this work in response to the Church's experience of the implementation.

It also flags the need for longer-term work on our theological understanding of mission, evangelism, discipleship and diaconal communities which is taken up in B (see below).

It also points again to the need to reform our practices in relation to church membership. This has been a long-standing issue in our life which has been considered by the Assembly.<sup>63</sup> It is not an area which we believe requires extensive work and consultation. We do believe there are points in our life where our current membership arrangements are an unnecessary impediment. A simplified framework consistent with our theology would be helpful. This will likely require constitutional change to achieve.

A collective focus on discipleship and mission along with flexibility to establish fit-for-purpose local governance arrangements which relieve burdens and support healthy ministry and mission is essential to having a Church of life-giving communities of faith.

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<sup>63</sup> *A Church of passionate disciples: rethinking church membership* (2007), accessed 14 February 2024, <https://illuminate.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/20483>.

For more detail see [Chapter 4 Building One Another Up in Love: Life-giving Communities of Faith and Discipleship.](#)

### *B. A Network for a Flourishing Theological Culture*

This task is focused on the establishment of a Commission for Theology, Formation and Leadership to oversee, lead and hold accountable our national collaboration. The purpose of this Commission is to establish a National Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership. It includes pursuing the implementation of a national theological college with multiple campuses as part of the National Network.

It also seeks to renew the Assembly's particular role in relation to the Church's theological culture through establishing a more visible, accessible and resourced structure for this work. It identifies (as foreshadowed above in A) four areas of immediate focus - our theological understanding of mission, evangelism, discipleship and diaconal communities.

Deeper collaboration in our theological education has been a long-held dream for so many in our Church. This approach is designed to bring that dream to fruition in a way that reflects both the unity and diversity in our life. Our theological culture and our institutions of theological education are essential to our future vision of our Church. Envisaged as a network, we look with hope to the possibility that this will create a vibrant and dynamic web of communities of learning and formation where all in our Church can be caught up in an imaginative engagement with theology.

For more detail see [Chapter Five To Hear Anew: Cultivating Our Theological Culture and Education.](#)

### *C. Sharing Our Life and Our Common Wealth*

This task is focused on collaborating to transition to a more sustainable and effective governance and resourcing model for the wider Church. It includes:

- Assessing the feasibility of both a three-council model and a four-council model consistent with the Vision and Principles;
- Developing proposals and a roadmap for implementation underpinned by a resourcing model;
- Seeking ways to more deeply connect across our councils so we can exercise healthy oversight, celebrate our identity and share our common wealth.



The implementation of this new model is overseen by a Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration. The membership for the Commission is drawn from across the life of the Church.

The Vision and Principles will be important anchors for the work of the Commission. The Commission will be responsible for ensuring that any significant change the wider Church makes to its governance and resourcing is done collaboratively and with appropriate due diligence. This is designed to ensure the transition both mitigates the risks of change while moving forward together and seizing opportunities.

This is the most ambitious of the three packages of proposals. To be successful it will require collective dedication and effort from all those impacted by the change. It will not be easy or straightforward but if undertaken in a spirit of unity and collaboration, and focussed on orienting towards better supporting the ministry and mission of the Church, it could make a truly significant contribution to achieving the collective vision to which God is calling us.

For more detail see [Chapter Six In Service of the Gospel: Ordering Our Life.](#)

## Chapter Eight Implementing A Way Forward

The work of implementing decisions arising from the Act2 Project will be the work of the whole Church. It will touch every aspect of our life together and should be oriented towards our vision of building more life-giving relationships with God, one another and the world. We should be constantly focussed on how these changes are in response to God's call to enter more fully into mission. In particular, how we cultivate life-giving communities of discipleship and mission.

The implementation of the specific proposals would take a staged approach. The focus of the proposals is on the work to be undertaken over the coming triennium (2024 to 2027) There would be three broad streams of work. These would be:

- A. Life-giving Communities of Discipleship and Mission
- B. A Network for a Flourishing Theological Culture
- C. Sharing Our Life and Our Common Wealth

### A. Life-giving Communities of Discipleship and Mission

Much of the work in this area will be undertaken within Congregations, Church Councils, Presbyteries, Synods, agencies and schools around the country. The ongoing work of orienting our resources to support communities of discipleship and mission is a task all councils are responsible for over the coming triennium.

The focus of the Assembly's implementation work is on amending and providing guidance on fit-for-purpose local governance arrangements. A small task group with dedicated staffing, in consultation with the Assembly Legal Reference Committee would undertake this work. The goal would be to have this work completed by November 2025 for implementation from 1 January 2026.

Alongside this is the work of considering changes to church membership with a view to bringing proposals to the 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly for constitutional and regulatory change. This could be undertaken by a small task group supported by a small amount of staffing.

### B. A Network for a Flourishing Theological Culture

The focus of this work is on establishing the Commission for Theology, Formation and Leadership to pursue the vision and principles outlined in the proposals. The Commission membership would be drawn from across the life of the Church. It too would require dedicated staff with expertise in theological education and higher education.

Its initial establishment, including terms of reference and membership, should be in the second half of 2024, with a view to an initial two-to-three-year time horizon. By this point the shape of the National Network would have become clearer and ongoing staffing for the Network could be established.

Alongside this is work overseen by the ASC to establish an ongoing structure to resource the Assembly's work on our theological culture. Areas of priority for this would initially include theological guidance in relation to 'mission', 'evangelism', 'discipleship' and 'diaconal communities'.

### C. Sharing Our Life and Our Common Wealth

This is the most substantial piece of work and would be focused on:

- Seeking ways to more deeply connect across our councils so we can exercise healthy oversight, celebrate our identity and share our common wealth;
- Assessing the feasibility of both a three-council model and a four-council model;
- Developing a roadmap for implementation underpinned by a resourcing model;

The implementation is designed to occur over three stages, aligned to the trienniums of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Assemblies.

- **Stage 1 Transition** (July 2024-December 2024): This stage is focused on transitioning from the existing project approach towards the new Commission governance model supported by a small transition team.
- **Stage 2 Assess and Prepare** (January 2025-June 2027): This stage is focused on progressing the Vision guided by the Principles through:
  - Conducting a feasibility assessment of both a three-council model and a four-council model. This will include further defining the two models to be tested.
  - Preparing a set of proposals for the 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly, including any Constitutional amendments required and an implementation roadmap underpinned by a resourcing model.
  - Identifying other ways to fulfill the Vision and Principles which can be achieved between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly irrespective of the final conciliar model adopted.
- **Stage 3 Decide and Approve** (July 2027 onwards): This stage would include consideration and decision by the 18<sup>th</sup> Assembly about the final model. If required by the Constitution it would also include a stage of approval for other councils, such as approving constitutional amendments. This would then be followed by implementation in line with the roadmap agreed by the Assembly.

This entire process would be overseen by a Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration, with membership drawn from across the Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries, agencies and Congress. It would be supported by a staff team which included a team working across governance, resourcing, project management, change management, business analysis, communications and administration. There would also be resources to work collaboratively with the wider councils of the Church and/or contract specialist expertise in finance, legal, human resources and technology to support the feasibility assessment and design and test any implementation roadmap.

As part of the planning for implementation of the proposals to the 17<sup>th</sup> Assembly a high-level indicative budget has been developed. This includes a transition phase between August and December 2024. A budget for this has been included within the 2024-25 Assembly budget.

In addition, cost estimates for each of the financial years of 2024-25, 2025-26, 2026-27 have been undertaken. This includes resourcing required to support the governance arrangements proposed, core staffing requirements and the external expertise required to support the work following the transition phase. We recognise that the expertise could be sourced either from within the Uniting Church or from an independent external provider. Work continues to further develop the high-level indicative budget.

Consistent with the decision of the 16<sup>th</sup> Assembly which affirmed the importance and urgency of this work, conversations continue across the life of the Church about the resourcing collectively available to support this whole of Church work. We hope and pray that resourcing this work will be part of our collective commitment to go forward together in the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Implementation Timeline

### A. Life-giving Communities of Discipleship and Mission

Jul-Dec 24	Jan-Jun 25	Jul-Dec 25	Jan-Jun 26	Jul 26-Jun 27
Ongoing work of orienting resources towards supporting local communities of discipleship and mission.				
Establish a staff-supported task group to review Regulations and guidance on governance for local communities of faith.  Seek approval from Synods and Presbyteries to amendments to the Constitution.	Develop revised Regulations and guidance.	Test and approve Regulations.	New Regs Commence.	Monitor implementation and revise Regulations and guidance as necessary.
Establish task group to review church membership.	Review existing work on church membership.	Develop revised proposals on church membership.		Prepare constitutional and regulatory changes on church membership for consideration by the 18 <sup>th</sup> Assembly.

## B. A Network for a Flourishing Theological Culture

Jul-Dec 24	Jan-Jun 25	Jul 25-Jun 26	Jul 26-Jun 27	18 <sup>th</sup> Assembly (July 2027)
Develop terms of reference and appoint Commission.	Scope and prioritise opportunities for deep and productive collaboration.	Design National Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership.	Commence transition to National Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership.	Establish ongoing Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership including ongoing governance.
Establish mandate and resourcing structure for Assembly theological culture work.	Develop terms of reference for further work on 'mission', 'evangelism', 'discipleship' and 'diaconal communities'.	Develop and engage with the Church theological guidance and reflection in relation to 'mission', 'evangelism', 'discipleship' and 'diaconal communities'.		Proposals regarding theological guidance and reflection on 'mission', 'evangelism' and 'discipleship'.  Proposal regarding theological guidance and reflection on 'diaconal communities' including any implications for structures and practices.

### C. Sharing Our Life and Our Common Wealth

Stage 1: Transition	Stage 2: Assess and Prepare			Stage 3: Decide and Approve	
Jul-Dec 24 Transition	Jan-Jun 25	Jul 25-Jun 26	Jul 26- Jun 27	18 <sup>th</sup> Assembly (July 2027) on	Jul 2027 onwards
Develop terms of reference for the Commission, including size, scope and appointment mechanism.  Appoint the Commission.  Continue work to document an understanding of the current state of governance, resourcing and administration in the wider Uniting Church.	Define the models in more detail consistent with the Vision and Principles.  Identify which areas in the proposed models require feasibility assessment.	Assess the feasibility of the three-council model and the four-council model including consequences, risks and opportunities.  This assessment includes assessing both future models as well as the impact and resourcing implications of the transition to both models.	Commission to prepare a report including proposals and any roadmap for implementation for the 18 <sup>th</sup> Assembly.  The proposed roadmap for implementation should include an assessment of the resourcing implications of the proposed model and the resourcing required to pastorally and effectively transition.	Decision on model, roadmap for implementation (inc. any Constitutional changes, if required)	If required, approval by other councils of the Church (i.e., Synods and Presbyteries)
	Identify other actions consistent with the Vision and Principles that can be progressed in parallel with the feasibility assessment of the two models.	Work in collaboration with leaders from across the Church to implement actions consistent with the Vision and Principles between the 17 <sup>th</sup> and 18 <sup>th</sup> Assembly.			

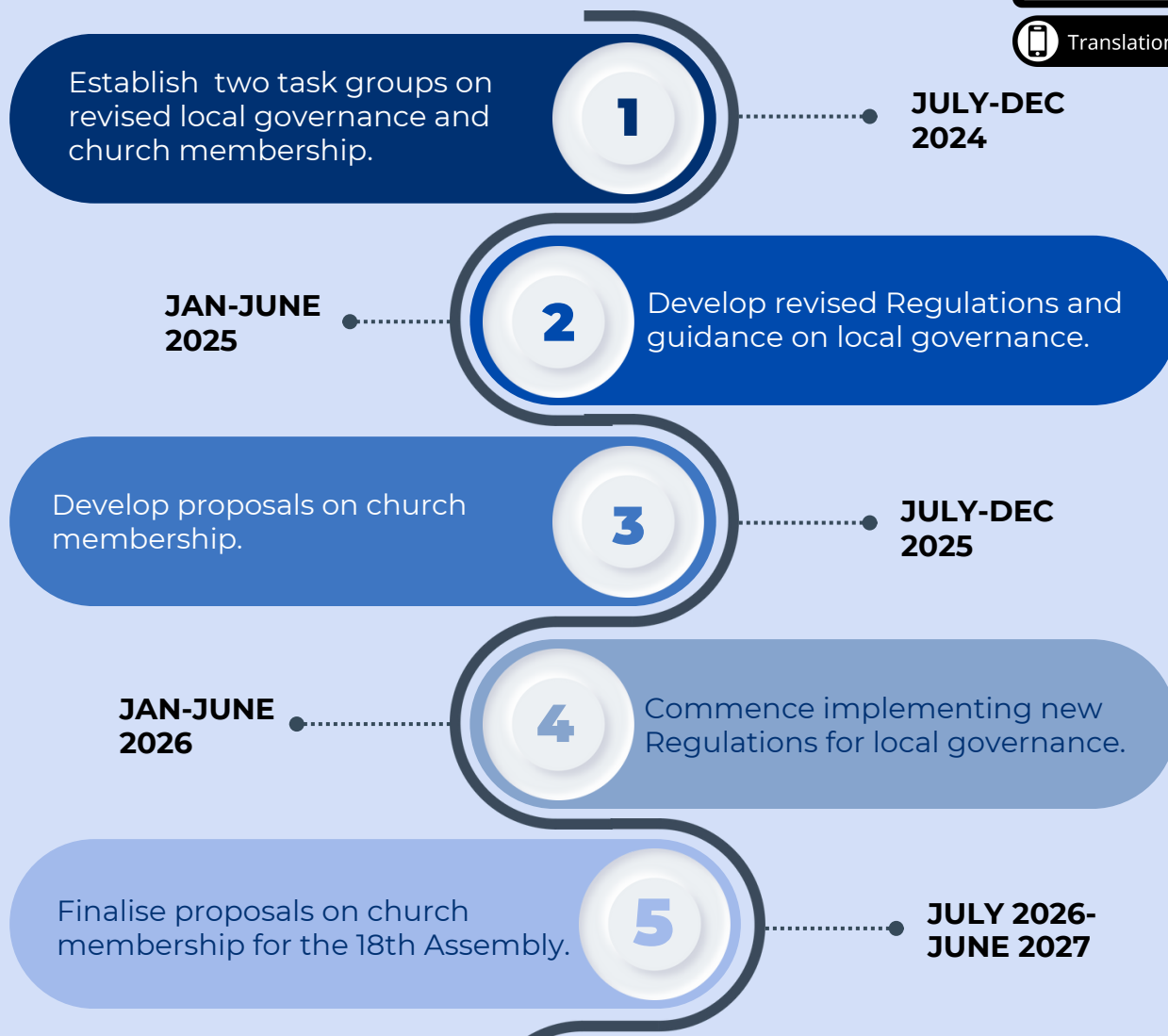
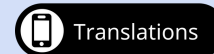
# Life Giving Communities of Discipleship and Mission

July 2024-June 2027

Key features of this stream include:

- A whole of Church response to orient resources to discipleship and mission.
- New Regulations on local governance arrangements.
- Constitutional and Regulation changes on church membership to be brought to the 18th Assembly (July 2027).

This stream will be overseen by the Assembly Standing Committee.



**July 2024 - ongoing** Whole of Church orients resources to discipleship and mission.





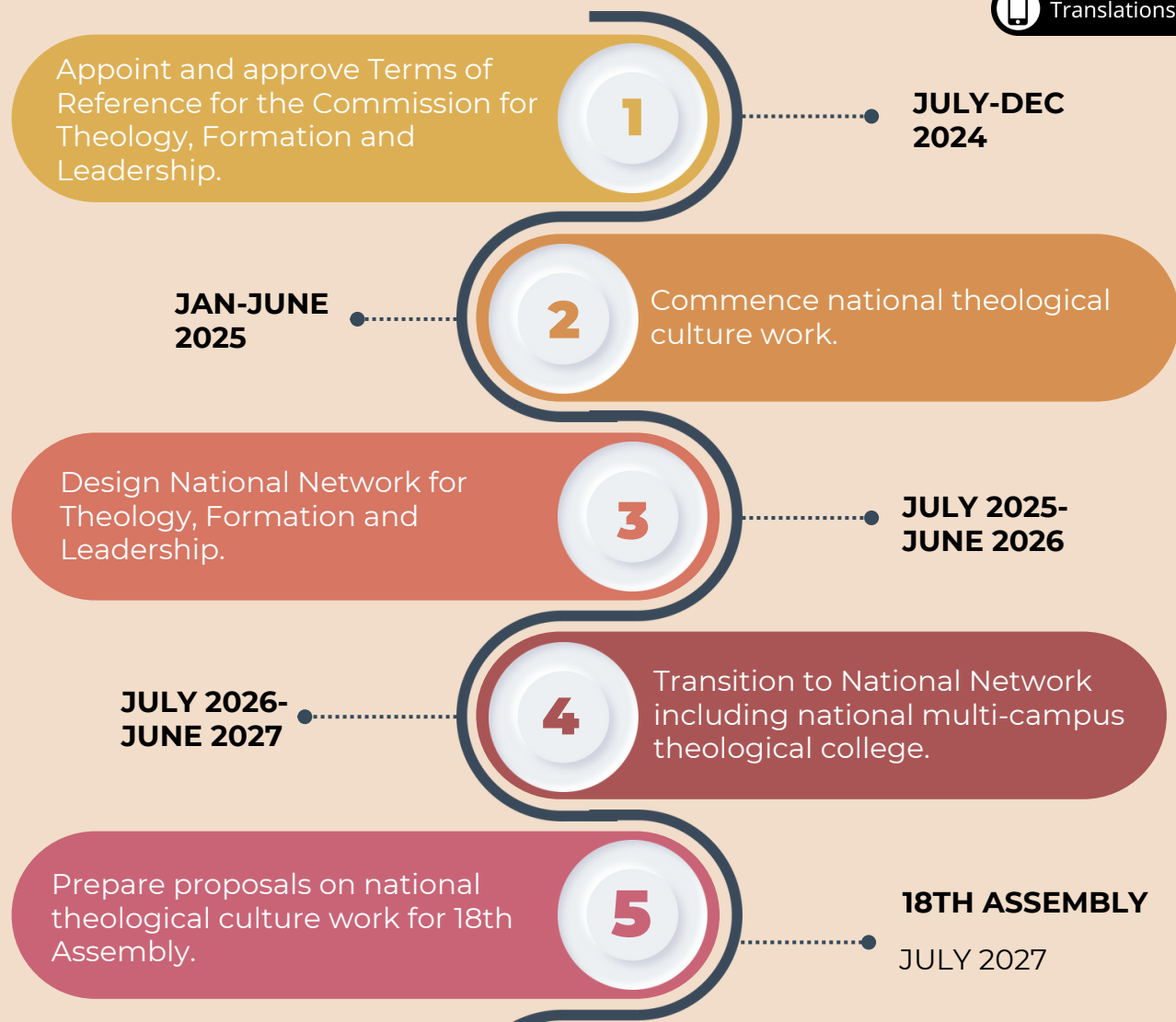
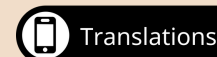
# A Network for a Flourishing Theological Culture

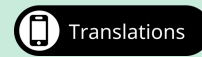
July 2024-July 2027

Key features of this stream include:

- Designing and transitioning to a new National Network for Theology, Formation and Leadership.
- A national multi-campus theological college.
- National theological culture work on 'mission', 'evangelism', 'discipleship' and 'diaconal communities'.

This stream will be overseen by a Commission for Theology, Formation and Leadership.





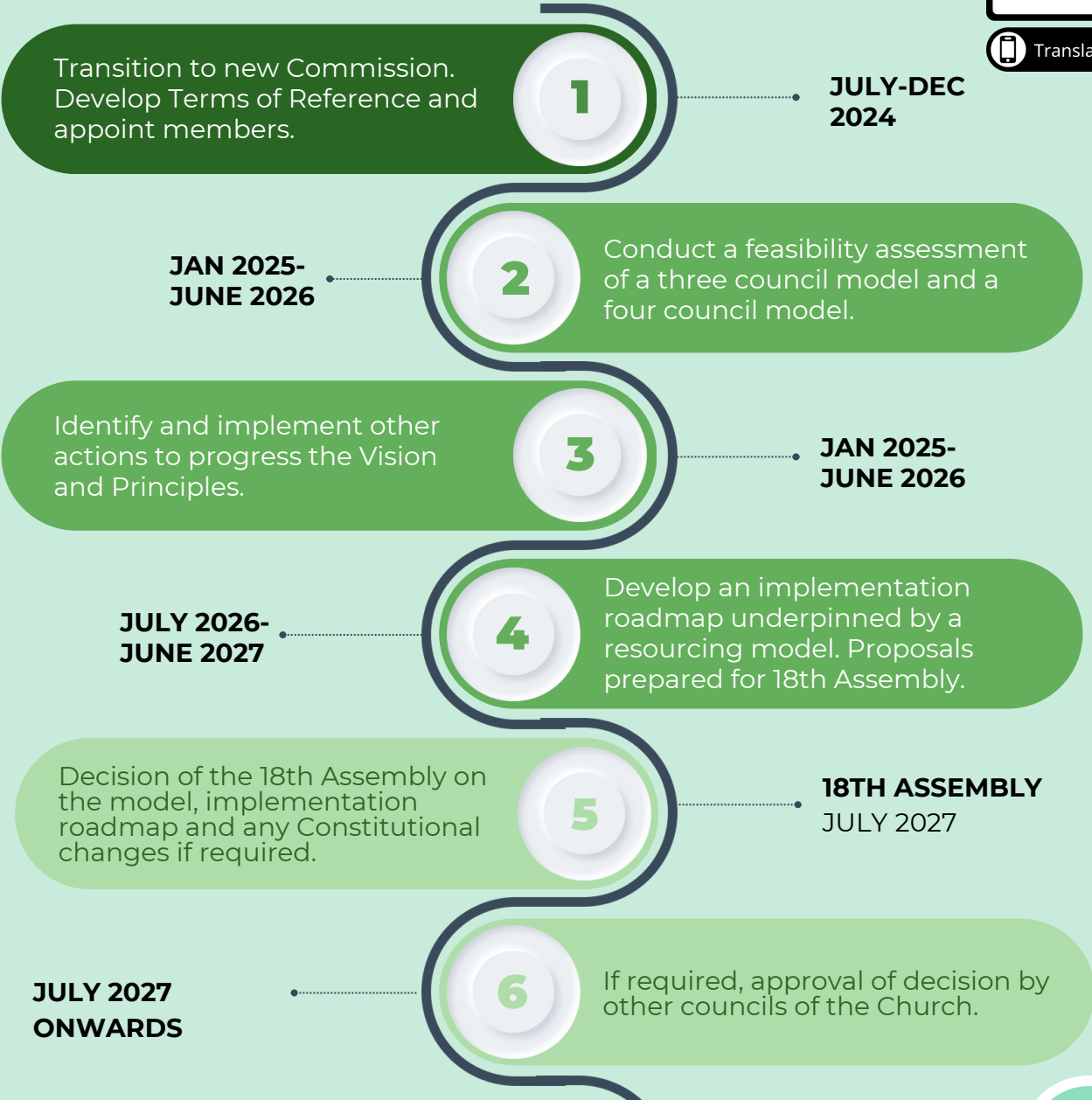
# Sharing our Life and our Common Wealth

July 2024-July 2027

This stream will take place in three stages.

- **Transition (July-Dec 2024):** Transition to Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration.
- **Assess and Prepare (Jan 2025-June 2027):** Assess feasibility of future governance model. Identify other actions to progress Vision and Principles. Prepare report, proposals and timeline for 18th Assembly decision on the model.
- **Decide and Approve (July 2027):** 18th Assembly decision on the new model and approval of any Constitutional change.

This stream will be overseen by a Commission for Governance, Resourcing and Administration.



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