

SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

1. INTRODUCTION

Assembly members are invited to read this report in the context of the Church's great and profound calling to participate in God's mission through Christ. As a council of the UCA, the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (VicTas) welcomes and embraces the challenge to be a pilgrim people and a fellowship of reconciliation, in the faith and hope that through this, Christ may bear witness to himself. The Synod's responsibilities in sharing with this great and profound calling are undertaken in many ways, and framed by the Synod vision:

*Following Christ, walking together as First and Second Peoples,
seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation*

2. MAJOR UNDERTAKINGS

2.1 Strategic directions

Further to its report to the 16th Assembly, the Synod continues undertake its activities in light of the responsibilities set for it through the UCA's Basis of Union, Constitution, and Regulations; along with its Strategic Framework (SF) (<https://victas.uca.org.au/vision-and-mission/>) to guide the implementation of these responsibilities. The ongoing engagement by Synod committees and units with the SF continues to be heartening as it provides a shared context for the governance and operations that are undertaken by the Synod.

Upon consideration of the SF's scheduled review, reflection was given to developing a shared strategy between the presbyteries and the Synod. When approached, presbyteries were generally very willing to share in a process that would result in common strategic directions for each Presbytery and the Synod. The joint work on this project is known as the Faithful Futures project. This consultative and collaborative project, shaped by a steering committee and a wider project group comprising presbytery and Synod representatives, has been underway since March 2023. It is anticipated that the Faithful Futures project common strategic directions will be in place by the end of 2024.

The Synod's current vision (as noted above) has been affirmed as the ongoing and guiding vision for the Faithful Futures project.

The engagement of presbyteries and the Synod on Faithful Futures is a practical sign of generally very constructive and trusting relationships between and across these councils of the Church.

One key theme in the presbyteries and Synod developing common strategic directions is to ensure that these key oversight councils of the Church will have common directions for encouraging, resourcing, and supporting ministry and mission within the bounds of the Synod as any potential changes from Act2 unfold.

2.2 Enhancing the Synod's governance oversight of its institutions

The VicTas Synod has three incorporated subsidiary institutions. These institutions are: Uniting AgeWell, Uniting Ethical Investors (U Ethical); and Uniting Vic.Tas. These institutions undertake the strategic work of the Synod in areas of community service and/or advocacy and/or social enterprise that the Synod considers it is appropriate to participate in, reflecting the Synod's vision and strategic directions, and for which, specialist skills in governance and executive leadership are needed.

The Synod continues to mature in its governance oversight responsibilities for these relatively large and 'outward facing' expression of the Church that engage with the wider community. As part of this, the



Standing Committee is engaging with the Synod's subsidiary institutions to augment processes for Standing Committee involvement in board member/director recruitment, orientation to the Uniting Church in general and the Synod in particular, and, similarly annual engagement with all board members regarding developments within the Uniting Church in general and VicTas in particular.

2.3 Congregations Insights Report

The Synod has undertaken congregation community life surveys and reporting on congregation financial returns for many years. This material has tended to be used discretely and in very limited ways. Through developments in software, the Synod has been able to collate this information to be able to provide comprehensive missional and financial reporting on congregations, clusters of congregations, congregations across a presbytery, and congregations and presbyteries across the Synods. This resource, now known as the Congregations Insights Report (CIR), is becoming an invaluable tool for presbyteries and the Synod to support congregations and wider Church mission planning. The CIR has become a great aid to understanding the nature of the breadth and depth of parts of Church for which particular councils have oversight.

2.4 Synod meetings

Since the 16th Assembly, there have been two meetings of the VicTas Synod: 30 June–3 July 2022; and 18-21 November 2024. The 2022 Synod meeting theme was “Arise, come with me” (Song of Solomon 2: 10-14), The meeting commenced with installing the current Moderator, Rev David Fotheringham. The 2023 Synod meeting theme was “We belong to the day” (1 Thessalonians 5:8). At the meeting, the Synod elected Rev Salesi Faupula as Moderator-elect, who will be installed as Moderator at the 2025 Synod meeting.

Both the 2022 and 2023 Synod meetings were rich opportunities to gather together as the Church from across the bounds of the VicTas Synod to form a Christian community and to share in worship and Bible study as we reflected on key areas of:

- the life of the Synod and its institutions and opportunities for the ministry and mission;
- the Synod exercising its responsibilities for the general oversight, direction and administration of the Church's worship, witness and service within its bounds.

These meetings have been significant in shaping future directions of the Church within Victoria and Tasmania and have been rich opportunities for members to learn from each other, discern, make decisions together, and to express their gifts, graces and discipleship through the various meeting processes.

2.5 Money For Mission Program

As reported to the 16th Assembly, the Money For Mission program (MFM) was established following very enthusiastic discussion in working groups at the 2019 Synod meeting, regarding the stewardship of surplus to use property for enhancing mission opportunities. This is a collaborative program between the presbyteries and Synod. MFM provides for Responsible Bodies to opt in to sell properties that are not used directly for missional purposes and to invest the proceeds into a high yielding and ethically invested fund to resource both local and wider Church ministry and mission. All capital is invested in the MFM Fund, with the interest being used to enhance worship, witness, and service, within congregation and wider Church contexts.

The role of presbyteries, through their responsibilities for strategic missional leadership and oversight of congregations, is crucial in MFM's development and implementation across the Church in VicTas. The Synod resources presbyteries and congregations with missional, theological, and property expertise in their discernment regarding engaging with MFM as a contextually appropriate way to utilise resources for ministry and mission in the current realities of the Church and society.

MFM continues to be well received and utilised, and continues to grow. Congregations, presbyteries, and the Synod engage constructively and missionally through the program's related processes. Many congregations and presbyteries have either discerned, or are in a discernment process, to change their use of building resources that they have largely inherited from previous generations, to provide



resourcing ministry and mission using income from MFM, rather than maintaining property that is surplus to mission needs and is very often no longer fit for purpose.

2.6 Financial sustainability

Whilst addressing a number of factors such as ongoing financial challenges from COVID impacts, changes in Mission and Service Giving, clarification regarding UCA institutions' financial support of the Synod, development of the Money For Mission **program** (see above), streamlining of budget expenditure, and so on, the Synod continues to move toward financial sustainability for the purpose of enhancing ministry and mission sustainability across the Church. There is still much work to do related to financial sustainability processes, but it appears that the elements which have been put into place will be of great assistance in helping to achieve this in a reasonable period of time.

The VicTas Synod's Financial Sustainability Principles (as reported to the 16th Assembly) continue to guide the Synod's approach to financial sustainability.

3. CONTEXT IN WHICH MINISTRY AND MISSION IS BEING UNDERTAKEN

As has been reported to recent Assemblies, this Synod continues to address general structural decline in congregations' membership and resourcing. There are a number of exceptions to this trend, but overall, the Church in Victoria and Tasmania is much smaller numerically and has a very different resource base (people and finances) than it did, say, 20 years ago. This change in congregation capacity has flow-on effects for the challenge of developing leadership (both ministry roles and elected office bearers) for other councils of the Church, its institutions, and ecumenical and inter-faith partners. In some cases, there are very significant leadership gaps which are having an impact on some councils' capacity to both undertake their responsibilities and develop an 'horizon-thinking/strategic posture' to plan for future opportunities and challenges with which the Church may need to engage.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there continues to be an emerging assurance (in the best sense of the word) across the UCA in VicTas that we are sharing in an appropriate expression of God's mission in Christ, which reflects gospel values of justice, inclusion, compassion, the building up of Christ's body, and also reflects the nature of the UCA as envisioned in the Basis of Union. Given this context and these challenges, there is an understanding that we are unlikely to again have the number of large congregations and the community-wide influence that we once had. This is coupled with the prayerful hope that, as occasion demands, we will be faithful and thoughtful with the resources we have, to share the experience of the transforming experience of the gospel to confess Christ in fresh words and deeds.

The emerging confidence needs to be supported by deep reflection on the reason and purpose of the Church, drawing upon understanding of the Church's theological and missional underpinnings, and vision for future expression of these – to develop suitable ministry and missional responses for the contemporary Church. These responses are being experienced in many and varied collaboration opportunities across councils and institutions of the Church. Of course, this journey has had, and will continue to have, great times of celebration and challenging soul-searching periods as we seek to be faithful in response to Christ's calling (as it has been ever thus for the Church through the ages). However, it is a journey that as an inter-conciliar Church we are called to travel on together, in response to Christ reaching out to command people's attention and awaken faith, and in his own strange way constituting, ruling, and renewing us as his church.

Prayerful consideration of factors such as:

- deep and faithful theological reflection on the nature of being church in a post-Christendom and pluralistic society;
- realistic projections of Church membership and resourcing trends; and
- honest consideration by members about the sort of Church they want to pass onto future generations;



have led some councils of the Church across the Synod to make bold decisions to provide for ministry and mission that reflect and engage with contemporary social settings and community needs. This understanding and resulting action has been informed by future hopes and visions for how we may continue to be faithful in response to our calling. As change continues to unfold in the Church's life and practices within VicTas, we understand some of the potential challenges that are ahead, and the need we have as Christ's body to call upon the foundational role of the fruits and gifts of the Spirit for this journey.

Related to the above comments, the Synod continues to share in developing supportive relationships and activities between the councils and institutions of the Church. As, typically, the 'footprint' of institutions is becoming larger and the 'footprint' of congregations/presbyteries is becoming smaller, the Synod is very conscious of ensuring that links between congregations, presbyteries, and institutions are supported and nourished, and opportunities are developed to enhance all of these various expressions of the Church understanding the contribution that each makes to the Church's worship, witness, and service.

4. MATTERS RELATED TO ROYAL COMMISSIONS

4.1 Appearance at the Yoorrook Justice Commission

The Yoorrook Justice Commission (YJC) is the first formal truth-telling process into historical and ongoing injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria. The YJC has been established by the State Government of Victoria and has the powers of a Royal Commission. YJC's website is: <https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au> The YJC is a key element in providing the background, context, and 'why' for the Victorian State Government's commitment to progress a treaty process within the lands of what is now called the State of Victoria.

In February 2024 the Synod was approached informally to participate in the YJC's hearing related to 'Land, Sky, and Waters'. Along with the Anglican Church in Victoria and the Catholic Church in Victoria, the UCA in Victoria (via the Synod) were formally approached in March 2024 to provide a submission and participate in a panel to provide the churches' views on matters related to Land, Sky, and Waters. The Synod's submission related to 14 questions (many with multiple parts) asked by YJC regarding the UCA and its predecessors, in relation to topics including its structure, Aboriginal missions, acquisition and use of land, engagement with First Peoples, and particularly Traditional Owner groups.

A panel of Anglican, Catholic and Uniting Church leaders appeared at the YJC on 1 May 2024. The Moderator, Rev David Fotheringham, represented the Uniting Church at the hearing. Preparing for, and appearing at, the hearing was helpful for the Synod's reflection on its relationship with First Peoples and the land upon which we undertake worship, witness, and service: its acquisition and its ongoing use – and the issues of justice and reconciliation that emerge from this. At the time of writing this report, the Synod is waiting for feedback and any follow up questions and/or further information that the YJC may request responses on.

As is the YJC's practice, it is anticipated that it will collate its key learnings and findings from its hearings (and related follow up) on 'Land, Sky, and Waters', and provide a report and recommendations on this subject to the State Government and the Victorian First Peoples' Assembly. The YJC's final report and recommendations, will be presented in mid-2025 to the Governor, the State Government, and Victorian First Peoples' Assembly for consideration. It will be up to the State Government to determine any legislative changes and/or other action which may result directly from the YJC's recommendations. The YJC's final report, along with other YJC reports will inform the treaty negotiations between the State Government and the Victorian First Peoples' Assembly.

Preparing for, appearing at, and follow up from the YJC hearing was a major piece of work undertaken over a very short period of time. At least nine staff teams from Synod units were involved in contributing to this process, with relevant governance committees being briefed through the processes of preparing for, and following, the hearing.

It has been a significant experience to research and to reflect on the origins and use of land by the Uniting Church and its predecessors in the lands now called Victoria. The Church has learnt much about its historical acquisition and use of land, and ways in which it may further its awareness of First People's engagement with land use in current and future contexts.

4.2 Disability Royal Commission

Along with other Synods and the Assembly, the VicTas Synod established a Synod Disability Royal Commission Task Group. This Task Group is comprised of Synod and Uniting Vic.Tas staff, along with members of the Church who have experience and/or professional expertise in areas of Disability Services delivery. The Task Group has provided significant leadership for the Synod in the development of papers and resources for use in the wider Church, and contributed with other Synod Task Groups to the work of the Church's National Disability Royal Commission Task Group.

At the time of writing this report it is anticipated that the Synod Disability Royal Commission Task Group's final report will be presented to the VicTas Standing Committee at its June 2024 meeting.

5. HOPES, PLANS, MAJOR MATTERS REQUIRING ATTENTION THAT FACE THE SYNOD OVER THE NEXT THREE YEARS

The Synod will continue to exercise its responsibility for the general oversight, direction and administration of the Church's worship, witness and service in the region allotted to it. The strategic directions emerging from the Faithful Futures project will be key elements of the Synod's resourcing and engagement commitment with other councils and the institutions of the Church. Also, of course, resolutions from the 17th Assembly regarding Act2 are likely to be very influential in the approaches to ministry and mission, oversight, governance, resource allocation, and so on, that the Synod will need to address.

The Synod's commitment to its Financial Sustainability Principles will continue to be a strong influence on the resource allocations that are made over the next three years. This commitment will be approached with due consideration, as discernment is given to resourcing – missionally and financially – for today's and tomorrow's Church. This discernment may have challenging impacts on various elements of the Synod budget: Synod committees and units; presbyteries; other councils of the Church; and ecumenical and interfaith partners.

It is anticipated that as: directions from the Faithful Futures project are finalised; implementation from Act2-related resolutions unfold; the Money For Mission Program gathers momentum, along with other initiatives, the Church's profile/footprint in VicTas will continue to change. This will be guided by faithful and thoughtful discernment for contextually appropriate expressions of ministry and mission, for today and for the future. These expressions will be guided by insights gained through collaboration between councils and institutions of Church.

The Synod will continue its commitment to respond positively and appropriately to the regulatory and compliance requirements that are inherent within its responsibilities, both within and beyond the Church. This response will include any responses that may emerge directly from legislative and/or regulatory changes resulting from the Yoorrook Justice Commission's recommendations that may be adopted by the Victorian Government, as well as awareness of, and engaging with, (as appropriate) the Victorian treaty process. Fulfilling all of these requirements are essential elements of shaping the Church's readiness to engage in ministry and mission within the Church's and contemporary society's expectations and requirements, and are part of the Synod's commitment to demonstrating and expressing values such as justice, inclusion, and community.



The Synod's vision of:

*Following Christ, walking together as First and Second Peoples,
seeking community, compassion and justice for all creation*

will continue to frame the Synod's ministry and mission emphases and resource allocation that is undertaken over the next three years.

Rev Dr Mark Lawrence
General Secretary

