

COUNCIL UPDATE NOVEMBER 2023 Uniting Church in Australia Transformation – Act2

The Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) is engaging in a transformation and renewal process and is inviting engagement and response from Uniting Church councils and individuals. On behalf of the St Michael's Church Council, Chris Phillips has prepared a report to update the St Michael's community about the Act2 report, what it is, what it proposes, and how you can have a say in the future direction of the Uniting Church.

LEARN ABOUT ACT2

It's been over 45 years since the Uniting Church in Australia was founded. The Uniting Church looks very different now than in 1977. In response, the UCA is currently engaged in a major transformational change project called Act2, a comprehensive review of the structure and functioning of the Uniting Church.

As a Uniting Church congregation, St Michael's is governed by the UCA Constitution and regulations. It also means St Michael's has been offered the exciting opportunity to engage with the Act2 report to ensure our needs, collectively and individually, are met going forward. There are proposed changes that will affect St Michael's. For example, the responsibilities of the other councils (Presbytery, Synod, Assembly) are likely to be restructured; and regulations regarding the responsibilities of and flexibility available to St Michael's as a congregation are also to be discussed.

The Act2 project is seeking feedback on some of the options and proposals on its latest report *Act2: In Response to God's Call* (<https://www.act2uca.com/act2report>)

St Michael's Council has submitted a response, but every person's individual feedback is also helpful and welcome to shape the changes to come.

WHERE ARE WE?

In previous phases of the Act2 project, the team has consulted widely with the congregations, faith communities, agencies, and councils of the Uniting Church. They saw some difficult challenges and some signs of hope. In a lot of instances, the current structures and regulations are not serving the Church of today well and will need to respond to the needs of the future.

There are some areas that have been identified by the 16th Assembly as core commitments regardless of the way forward for the Uniting Church.

The Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (<https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/310>) is one, and the commitment to being a Multicultural Church is another

(<https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/494>). Finally, our ethical, legal, and social obligations are also to be considered.

The areas that have been identified as priorities for renewal have been divided into four Workstreams. The Act2 team is currently seeking the discernment of individuals and councils of the Uniting Church, particularly regarding the Four Directions and Four Options presented in two of the Four Workstreams.

FOUR, FOUR, FOUR

Four Workstreams

The Four Workstreams are:

- Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship, which relate mostly to the governance of congregations and faith communities. From these, there are proposals in the Four Directions (see below).
- Workstream 2: National Identity, which relates to the (national) Assembly and the Uniting Church's relationship to Australia, Asia, the Pacific and the world. Workstream 2 is being progressed through a series of national forums, the Uniting in Prayer events, and the drop-in events available fortnightly on Zoom.
- Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing, which relate to the responsibilities and connections between the councils of the Uniting Church. There are Four Options that feedback is being sought for (also see below).
- Workstream 4: Theological Culture and Education, which relates to the theological underpinnings and expressions of our faith. There are contributions being published on the Act2 website to discuss ideas, and there will be a meeting of the Theological Colleges of the Church to discuss national frameworks.

Four Directions (Workstream 1)

- Direction 1: Encourage local communities of discipleship and mission. This direction invites us to refocus the work of communities on ministry and mission, away from administration and compliance.
- Direction 2: Align with the vision of congregations in the Basis of Union. The Basis of Union describes congregations' responsibilities as a) meeting regularly to hear God's word, b) celebrating the sacraments, c) building one another up in love, d) sharing in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and e) serving the world. This direction invites us to treat communities which fulfil these responsibilities as worthy of equal treatment as congregations, even if the Uniting Church of today does not (yet).
- Direction 3: Support fit-for-purpose governance arrangements. This direction invites flexibility in governance to allow for variation in how a Church Council conducts itself, and assistance where welcome.

- Direction 4: Recognise there is a time for everything. This direction invites less pain in beginnings and ends of communities in the Uniting Church.

Four Options (Workstream 3)

I find the four options easier to talk about in a different order than they are listed in the Act2 report. In all options, there will be greater resource distribution between areas, clarification of responsibilities, and flexibility to allow for different contexts.

- Option 4: Similar to the current responsibilities of the councils that exist, however, with a pool of funds to redistribute from relatively resource-rich (e.g. Metropolitan and/or south-eastern) to relatively resource-scarce (e.g. Regional and rural, and/or northern or western) areas.
- Option 2: Draws on the strengths of the current Synods/Regional Councils to give more power to this level. This would mean a Presbytery/Area Council focused on supporting the ministry and mission of local communities (and reducing administration at this level) and an Assembly/National Council that only deals with core or constitutional concerns (and less public voice or coordination on a national stage).
- Option 1: The most radical change, with a reduction in number of councils from four to three. This would effectively see Presbyteries and Synods merge to form 15-20 Field Councils, likely covering one or parts of one state or territory. The role and responsibilities of the Assembly/National Council would increase, especially in the administration and compliance areas.
- Option 3: Similar to Option 1, except there would be two Regional Councils with the role of administering property trusts and redistributing resources (and both spanning from the resource-rich south-east to other areas of Australia).

I WANT TO TAKE PART OR LEARN MORE

For frequently asked questions and to further clarify the vision of the Act2 report:

<https://www.act2uca.com/faq>

To submit your response as an individual to the Act2 team (due 30 November 2023):

<https://www.act2uca.com/s/IndividualResponseForm.docx> or

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/73BRT7E>

For the National Online Prayer Gathering on 30 November 2023:

<https://act2uca.com/nationalprayergathering>