

Section 2: Exploration Phase: What have we heard?

“...meetings that encourage community, and listening to one another in a spirit of openness and humility, are more likely to discern the will of God.”

Introduction, Manual for Meetings

Workstream 1: Local communities of faith and discipleship

Local communities of faith are the beating heart of the Uniting Church, “the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshiping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ” (Basis of Union paragraph 15). In these places of belonging the Word is preached, the bread of life broken and shared, disciples made and true community formed in love and care. They are a visible presence of the church in the local community. We recognise that flourishing local communities of faith is essential for our future. While affirming their significant role in the life of our Church, we seek to reflect the current state, life and significant challenges of our local communities.

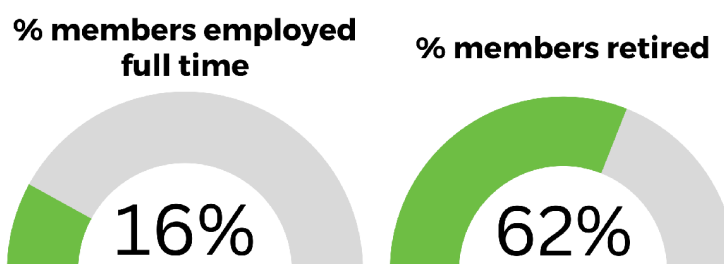
At the time of the 2013 NCLS census of the Uniting Church there were 2,078 Congregations. As part of the Act2 Project, we have contacted every Presbytery and attempted to contact every Congregation. Currently our records indicate approximately 1,672 communities of faith (Congregations, faith communities, communities within clusters). We estimate approximately 380 of these communities belong to clusters.

The commitment of our members to Christ and to one another, many of us living out a life-long commitment.

- Church Council Conversations

In the responses from local communities of faith, most reported an ageing membership and shrinking numbers.

The NCLS bears this out, indicating the average age of Uniting Church attenders is 68 years and 57% of attenders are over the age of 70. A decade ago the typical median weekly attendance of a Uniting Church was 35 people. Today the median is 28.

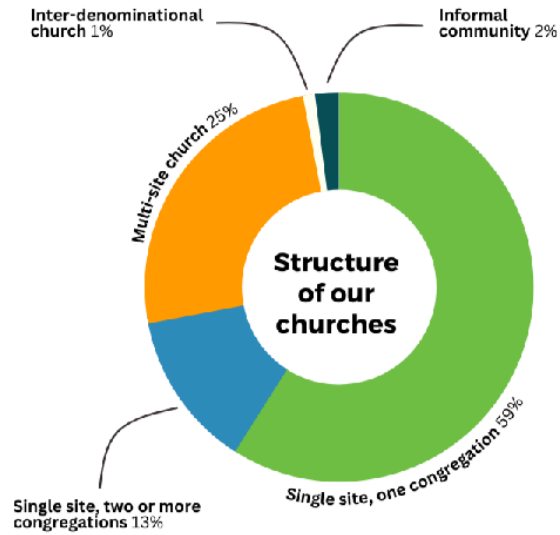


Alongside our worshipping communities is our vast network of community services that are serving local communities. Our services agencies are one of the largest networks of services in the country comprising over 50,000 staff, 1,700 volunteers and 1,634 service locations around the country with government funding the largest source of revenue.

Responses indicate we have few Congregations left which fit into the simple formula of: one Congregation, one minister, one Church Council, funded by the giving of members.

Property income is now a significant source of revenue for local congregations. While this has relieved some pressures it has created others.

The ability of congregations to meet the local costs of their life - ministry, administration, insurance, property maintenance - limit their ability to contribute to the wider ministry, mission or administration of the Church.



Life-giving local communities of faith

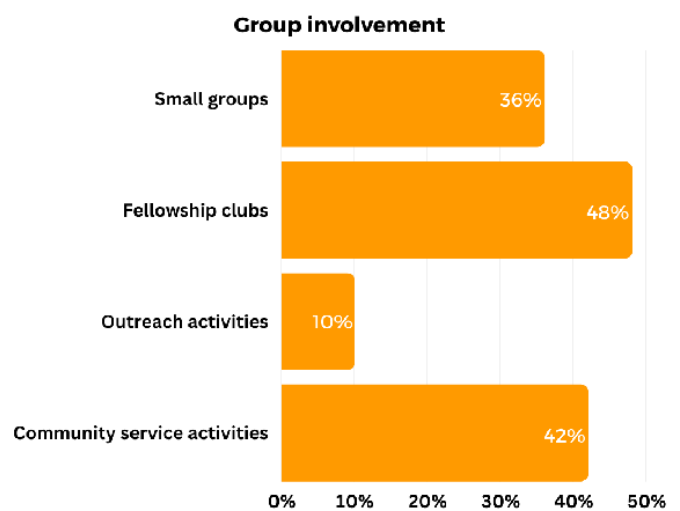
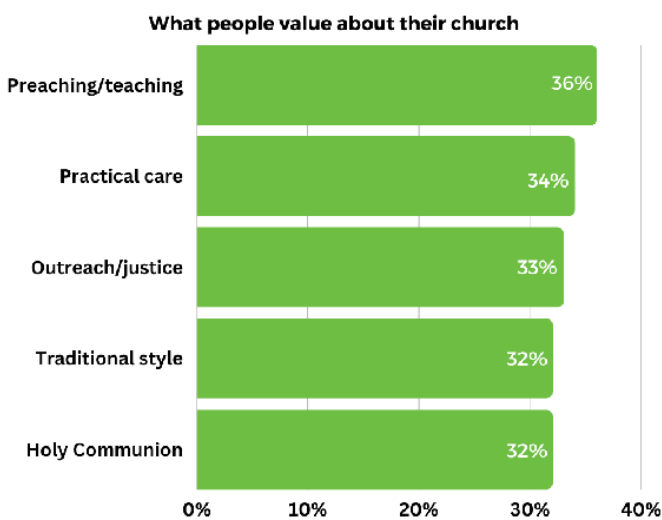
Worship and pastoral care remain at the heart of our local communities of faith. This is reflected in both the Church Council conversations and the NCLS results with preaching and teaching (36%) and practical care in times of need (34%) as the highest responses in what people value about their church.

People also highlight engagement with the wider community as a high priority both in Church Council conversations and in the NCLS results (33%). However, there is also a sense that people are struggling with how to engage with their wider community due to decline in capacity. There is a mismatch between the demographics of many of our communities of faith and the demographics of the wider community.

Discipleship is also both a source of life for our communities and a place for further work. Many identified faith practices such as personal prayer and devotion as a way they express their discipleship along with communal activities such as prayer or bible study groups.

NCLS reports 36% of people are involved in a prayer, discussion or bible study group. This is lower than fellowship groups (48%) or community service activities (42%).

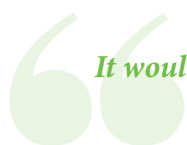
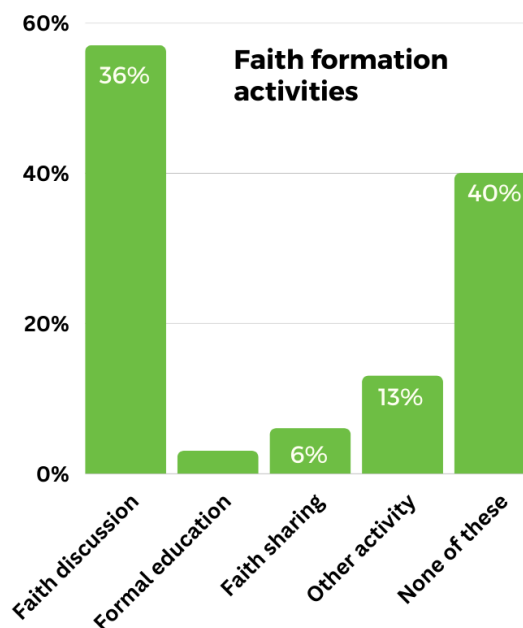
Unfortunately the responses indicate that many local communities of faith see new attenders as potential sources of volunteers to relieve faithful but tired existing volunteers rather than disciples in search of a life-giving community.



Others we have engaged express some concern about the discipleship formation practice within the Church.

Some express concern about what they perceive as a lack of structured and consistent discipleship formation, and some express concern about the nature of the Christian faith we are cultivating. People lament the decline of distinctively Uniting Church discipleship and formation materials that are consistent with our theological culture.

There is an appetite for more work on the issues of discipleship, evangelism and mission however there is a diverse range of perspectives on the relationship between these different concepts.



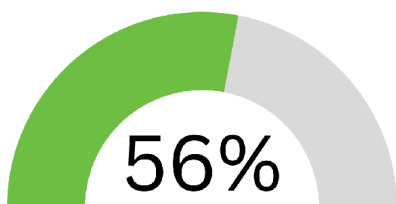
It would help us to have more resources for discipleship development.

- Church Council Conversations

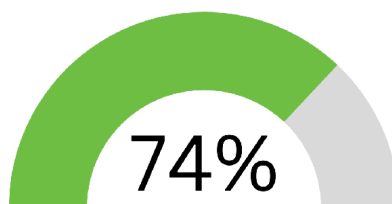
People also put a high value on being a community of faith that is open to diversity and being inclusive. Some point to specific groups they are open to welcoming while others express it as general value of inclusion. This aligns with the NCLS results which put a strong sense of belonging at 93% and an inclusive church at 90%.

Many also identified their Church as welcoming. While NCLS reports that 88% say their church is friendly, only 58% said they would welcome new arrivals and even less were likely to follow up someone drifting away from church (52%).

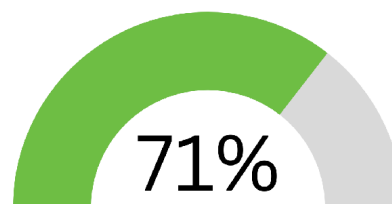
% have run an event to intentionally engage the community in the last 12 months



% provided or run social services or social action activities in the last 12 months



% Agree that their local church is always ready to try something new



Being part of a church family, being supported with love and prayer.

- Church Council Conversations

Church planting, fresh expressions and experimentation has also become more widespread. These have tended to remain relatively small but carry signs of life and hope for the communities which support them, many of which named them as life-giving. As we talked to Presbyteries we found they were eager to support new ministry initiatives however there continue to be challenges in how these communities fit within the existing order of our life.

Communities of faith and the wider Church

Most local communities of faith recognised there is support from the wider Church which does enable them to be life-giving communities of faith.

They describe the Presbyteries as a source of support and encouragement - there in times of crisis, conflict or transition. Some point to the support their minister receives from the Presbytery and the role of the Presbytery in the absence of paid ministry leadership.

They also see the Presbytery as playing a role as an intermediary in areas of administration and compliance and acting as a buffer, bridge or translator for compliance requirements. However, the experience of the value of the Presbytery is very mixed. This may in part be due to how the capacity and resourcing of different Presbyteries across the country varies so significantly.

There needs to be more strategy development between congregations in close proximity, facilitated and encouraged by Presbyteries.

- Church Council Conversations

The Presbytery does appear to be the council where there is the greatest gap between the significant responsibilities they have and the resourcing they have available to fulfill those responsibilities. We heard from some Presbytery leaders challenges in balancing the priority of supporting growing communities, such as our culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, with the reality of the time investment to deal pastorally with communities coming towards the end of their shared life.

Most communities of faith see the Synod as an administrative hub for the Church in areas of property, finance, legal, insurance, regulation, compliance, and communication. While the expertise of the Synod is appreciated by many, people find engaging with Synod processes opaque, cumbersome and convoluted. There is some acknowledgement of personnel and other mission and ministry resources, however this is perceived as secondary to its administration and compliance role.

Agencies and schools registered little mention in the responses other than appreciation for the work they do and a desire that this be better known in the wider community. Some expressed anxiety about their relationship to the Congregations and councils of the Church and the visible connection of agency brands to the Church.

It often feels like the wider church considers local congregations to be of little worth.

- Church Council Conversations

For more details on what local communities of faith value about the Assembly see *Workstream 2: National Identity*.

Local communities of faith identify two main ways they contribute to the wider life of the Church. The first is through their contributions to what most Synods call the “Mission and Service Fund”, the contribution Congregational budgets make to the wider administration, mission and ministry of the Church. The second is through the participation of volunteers in the wider councils and committees of the Church. Some also identify the way they fundraise for agencies of the Church, mainly through inviting members to make direct contributions rather than out of Congregational budgets.

We're challenged by diminishing resources: decline in numbers, participation and finances. Key lay people are aging and are tired. Many have been doing roles for decades, but there is a limited pool of people to draw on to raise up new leaders.

- Church Council Conversations

Challenges for local communities of faith

Communities of faith identified seven key areas that were hard, frustrating or hindering ministry and mission:

- Ageing and declining community of faith.
- Administration and compliance work.
- Decline in volunteer capacity and skills.
- Convoluted, time consuming wider church processes.
- Tired and burnt out leaders and volunteers.
- Effort and cost in maintaining buildings.
- Decline in finances.

Responses from local communities expressed many general concerns about the 'regulations' of the Church. Two specific areas emerged for most criticism: the placements process and property processes. Both were seen as complex, time-consuming, opaque and confusing. Both deserve thorough review and change.

However, they are also symptoms of deeper problems about the patterns of ministry, the reliance on property income, contests over the proceeds of sales and broader issues of limitations on capacity and disconnection.

A current frustration for the Church Council is the lack of progress in calling a new minister resulting in a sense of not knowing where we are heading.

- Church Council Conversations

For example, the challenges in the placement process are symptoms of underlying issues including limited availability of ministers, limitations in ministers' movement to different places, anxiety about the ability to afford paid ministry or the difficulty in negotiating the implications of part-time placements.

Property is often a proxy for missional choices. How a community of faith uses its property says a lot about their missional priorities. It also highlights the different sets of assumptions about the legal arrangements of the Church. The sale of property also leads to contested space around the use of proceeds of sale. This issue is addressed in more detail in Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing.

These issues also speak to more ingrained systemic and cultural norms across the Church. Some of these are not directly due to 'the regulations' but are about how they are implemented by councils of the Church. Some norms, customs and practices have become equivalent to formal regulations. Many made sense in the context they were created, but now simply seem bizarre or unworkable in a different time and place.

When systems are working effectively the detailed mechanics are less important, however when things are not working well everyone is looking under the hood at how the engine works.

There is a further broader point about Uniting Church processes. Most processes assume a high level of collaboration between the councils of the Church. This assumes each council has the capacity, capability and expertise to fulfill those responsibilities and there are effective working relationships across the councils. Our conversations indicate that we can no longer safely make these assumptions.

Problems navigating a very complicated church administrative structure involving the congregation, Presbytery and Synod resulting sometimes in less than satisfactory outcomes. This can have a very negative impact on morale and hope.

- Church Council Conversations

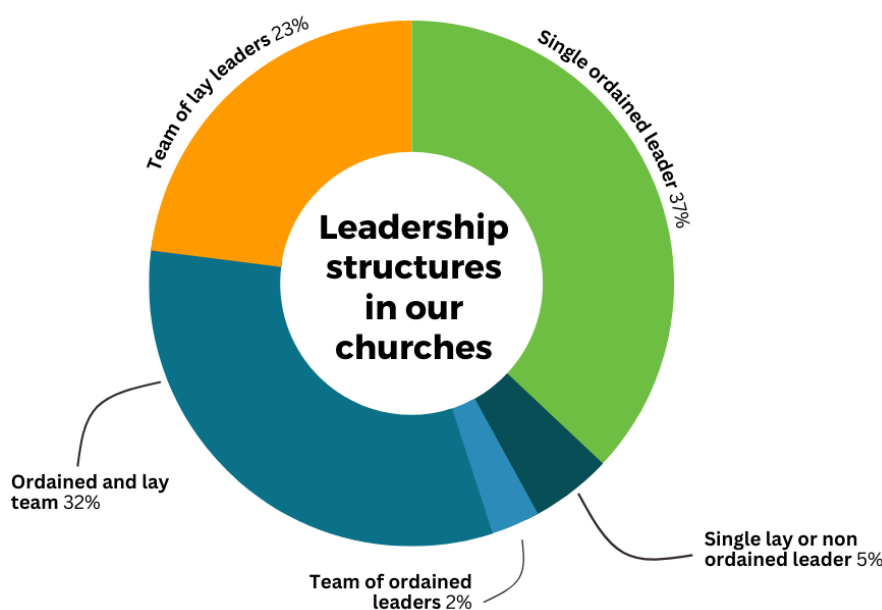
As we have explored what the wider Church can do about the challenges faced by local communities of faith, we are struck by the difficulty many face in imagining what could be different. Clear practical asks include:

- Simplification, streamlining and flexibility in processes and compliance requirements.
- Greater access to information - people, processes and forms.
- Leadership, support and encouragement.
- A greater focus on ministry and mission.
- Contribution of financial support from the wider Church.

These practical suggestions sit alongside a general acceptance that the system as currently designed is not working. Some see places for efficiency in the consolidation of administration. Some are simply looking for the expectations of the wider Church to reduce, however most acknowledge this is often a function of expectations of external legal, regulatory or compliance obligations.

So many smaller congregations like ours are without ministers and that puts too much pressure on lay leaders (who try and do things as if there was a minister) and they burn out.

- Church Council Conversations



A significant number of our communities of faith are shrinking, aging and tired. Property is now a significant source of revenue so despite the burden it presents it is also an economic lifeline. This impacts on the ability of local communities of faith to fulfill the significant responsibilities of being communities of faith.

Capacity and capability has declined at the same time ethical, legal and social obligations have increased. The wider church works to scaffold and manage the risk of this mismatch.

The ability of Congregations to meet the local costs of their life - ministry, administration, insurance, property maintenance - limit the ability to contribute to the wider ministry, mission or administration of the Church. It is both a pastoral imperative and a matter of good stewardship that we address this range of challenges.



We need help with how to handle the grief of what we have lost.

- Church Council Conversations

As the beating heart of our Church, life-giving communities of faith are at the heart of the Act2 Project. However, the way we conceive of, govern and resource them is changing and will need to continue to change.

There will be significantly fewer local communities of faith in our Church in the next five to ten years. How we pastorally and effectively manage that transition along with how we support and encourage those communities of faith that remain will have a significant impact on our collective health as a Church.



*We believe the congregation is fundamental to the success of the Uniting Church.
This is strongly supported in the Basis of Union.*

- Church Council Conversations



Workstream 2: National Identity

The Basis of Union continues to guide our life and is a document which inspires so many in our Church⁴. Many lament the lack of familiarity that people in the Uniting Church have of the Basis, however our experience is that it remains a source of inspiration to so many of our leaders and members. Even those unfamiliar with the document and its contents nevertheless live in a Basis-shaped Church. The images of the Church and words about the Church expressed in the Basis continue to ring down through the ages.

The Basis of Union remains our precious document.

- Church Council Conversations

There are documents to which people have constantly referred throughout our exploration. It is clear these have taken on a significant status in our life which continue to shape our life and our reading of the Basis. They include the [Statement to the Nation](#) 1977; [The Uniting Church Is a Multicultural Church](#) (1985); the [Covenanting Statement](#) (1994); [Revised Preamble to the Constitution](#) (2009).

Throughout our engagement we have heard again and again the same core themes about what people appreciate about the Uniting Church. These are the ones we have heard through the Exploration phase⁵:

- We are in a Covenant relationship with the 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.

The wider church reminds us that we are not alone but part of a network of worship, witness and service

- Church Council Conversations

For most of our Church's history, we have proudly declared we are the third-largest denomination in Australia. This is based on the religious affiliation results of the Australian Census which bears little relationship to the health and vitality of our life as a Church. NCLS data would indicate in terms of regular church attendance we rank as fifth largest. Irrespective of the data source, the decline in affiliation or attendance is unmistakable, borne out by the feedback from every part of the Church.

As a whole Church we have struggled with our identity as we have sought to hold together a broad range of contexts, beliefs and practices. There is a beauty in our diversity but it has not been without its challenges. While many people project their own theological outlook onto the whole Church (i.e., "most people in the Church believe something similar to what I believe"), the reality is we are still a very theologically diverse Church.

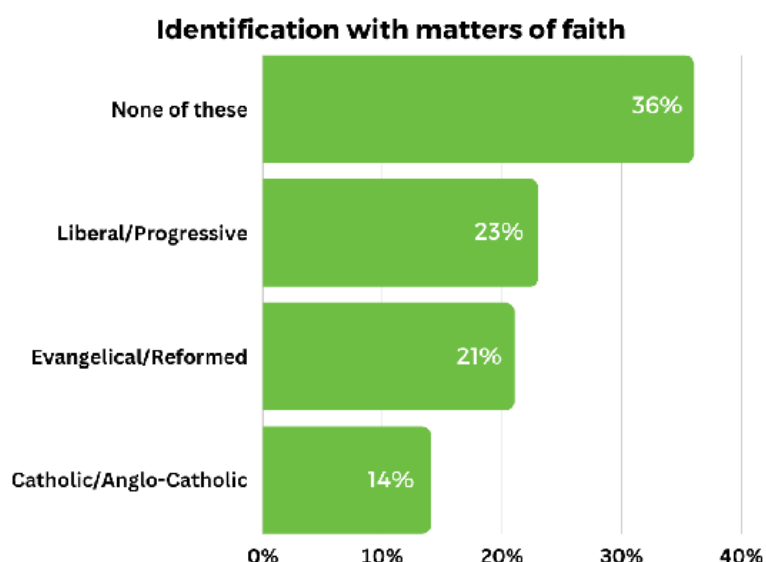
Our identity as a whole Uniting Church informs and shapes the way so many people think about our national identity and national work. The two most prominent themes reflected across all our engagement is the role of the national Church, particularly the role of the National Assembly, in casting an inclusive vision of the Church and being a voice for social justice in the Australian society.

We especially value the UCA commitment to unity in diversity, while recognising how difficult this can be (and always will be). We realise this can be targeted as a weakness by some, however sometimes our points of vulnerability are also our greatest strengths – that is the way of the Gospel!

- Church Council Conversations

Alongside these shared markers of faith and identity, there are very practical barriers to how we shape our collective life together. The public expression of the Church is disjointed. People lament the lack of identification of some parts of the Church with the “Uniting Church”. The review of the web presence of our local communities of faith indicates a very small minority present an accurate and up-to-date picture. Many of our “Find a Church” pages on wider Church websites are of little use to a faith seeker.

Some lament the decline in the Church’s voice in Australian society. This is partly about the way the Church has shifted from the centre of society to the margins in a post-Christendom era. Some also attribute this to a decline in focus and resourcing for this area of national work. There is a sense of disagreement about how and where this voice should be used.



The Assembly is perceived as primarily responsible for the Covenant with the Congress. In the responses from local communities this was a highly valued part of our national life and work. The work of the agencies is also still a highly valued part of the work of the Assembly. Many respondents specifically reference the work of UnitingWorld, Frontier Services and the work of UnitingCare agencies which is perceived to be a national effort across the country. The responses affirmed the Assembly's role in relating to the CALD communities within the Uniting Church, including through the National Conferences, and in promoting our multicultural and intercultural identity and commitments.

It is an inclusive, justice seeking, life empowering example of Christ at work in the world.

- Church Council Conversations

While the responses from local communities reflected significant support for the inclusive vision the Assembly has cast for the Uniting Church, there is a dissenting view that the Assembly has pursued priorities they believe are remote from and out of touch with the lived reality of local communities of faith. There is no doubt our deep theological disagreements cast a long shadow over our Church and the work of the Assembly.

Overall, the Assembly is considered institutionally small and remote from many local communities of faith, particularly with the declining financial resource base for the work of the Assembly staff and agencies. However, it does have important responsibilities in relation to matters of faith and our identity as a Church.

Pockets of the Uniting Church remain deeply upset with the decisions of the Assembly in relation to human sexuality and marriage. However, they tend to be getting on with ministry and mission in their own local context. A small number hold the view that much of the wider Church, including the Assembly, is of little value to local communities of faith.

The insights from the work in Workstream 2: National Identity have shaped the thinking about the place of the National Council within the options offered as part of Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing.

Irrespective of the options within Workstream 3, there remain wider opportunities to strengthen the national identity of the Church both in our sense of ourselves and the way we are perceived within the wider Australian society. Further work is required in how best to achieve this.

Churches have traditionally been a voice to government and the community on social justice issues, with agencies well placed to be active participants and thought leaders in this space.

- Church Council Conversations

Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing

Governance

Our engagement across the Church indicates that people generally consider the underlying principles which shape our governance to be sound. There are some who question the need for an inter-conciliar structure, however most accept that it is a core part of our identity and can work effectively.

People also appreciate the principles that shape how we make decisions – in community with all people, lay and ordained and regardless of gender, gathering to seek consensus. While people are sometimes frustrated by the practice of our decision-making – with some wishing people could exercise more personal authority and others suspicious of individual authority – they acknowledge the principles are worthwhile, if not always outworked well.

Although there is strong commitment to these foundations, there is also a widespread view that the system is no longer working as intended. Most say the current set of councils was designed for a time and a Church that no longer exists. Now they encounter too many layers, inefficiency in decision making and overly complicated processes.

The increased use of mechanisms which had previously been considered for use in exceptional circumstances, points again to a system under stress⁶. Councils which have been established under the same regulations look vastly different from one another in size and scale. Many of the smaller or more geographically remote councils have simply found it impossible to implement the detailed requirements of the regulations in relation to committees and other structures.

As a Church we have attempted to expand the range of voices and perspectives in our decision making, however this has not always been successful. While the ideals of our inter-conciliar and consensus decision making are an equal voice for all, the reality is some voices still hold a more prominent place than others. We heard this is particularly the case for CALD communities, younger people and people from new communities.

Our councils of the Church... do they all look the same?

We currently have six Synods and 33 Presbyteries. Some Synods have a handful of staff whereas other Synods stretch to an array of staffing Boards, committees, and functions. Synods have between about 50 communities of faith and over 400 communities of faith. Some have a deeply integrated large community service agencies while others have a diverse collection of smaller community service agencies. Some of our Synods cover multiple jurisdictions with multiple legal and policy environments whereas others are contained to a single jurisdiction.

Some Presbyteries have personnel of more than ten while others run entirely on the contribution of people in other ministry roles. Some cover thousands of kilometers across metropolitan, provincial, rural and remote contexts while others are contained within one part of a metropolitan centre. Some have more than 100 communities of faith while others have less than 20. Some have accumulated substantial financial reserves while others live on an annual budget with limited financial buffer.

As outlined in Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship, there is a high level of assumed collaboration across the councils. This is most acute between Presbyteries and Synods where the interplay of ‘oversight’ and ‘general oversight’ is significant.

Some are eager to drive a dualistic distinction between ‘ministry and mission’ on the one hand and ‘administration and compliance’ on the other.

Some are eager to drive a dualistic distinction between ‘ministry and mission’ on the one hand and ‘administration and compliance’ on the other. Generally, the sense is ministry and mission decisions should be made ‘close to the ground’, while administration and compliance can be ‘centralised’. However, we have also seen how inter-dependent these concepts are and that separating them can often exacerbate already complex and disconnected decision making.

‘Oversight’ has been a fascinating concept to explore with people. While there are some who think it is completely unnecessary, most believe that within the Church a measure of oversight and accountability is necessary. However, most would observe that it is currently not well exercised.

Some perceive ‘oversight’ as controlling and overly driven by compliance, lacking a focus on encouragement and support. Others experience a lack of oversight in their day to day life and only engaging when there is a conflict or a crisis.

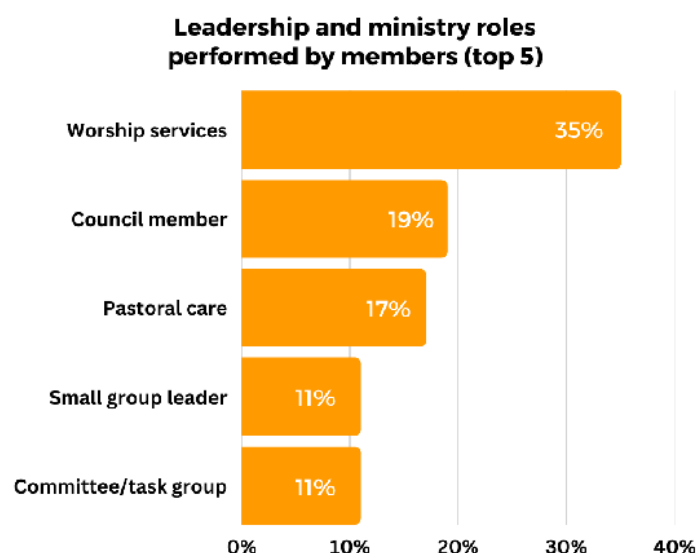
Some experience ‘oversight’ as imposing a hierarchy on what they consider to be a ‘non-hierarchical’ structure. However, others point out that an inter-conciliar Church while not strictly hierarchical does create relationships of accountability and authority in the interests of the wellbeing of people, communities of faith and the whole Church.

A recognition that Presbyteries, Synods, and the Assembly are not there to compete with each other or the Congregation, but are there, each with a part to play, in providing an appropriate framework for the work of the Congregation to be successful.

- Church Council Conversations

Make the focus of the whole church on the congregation, supporting its ministry and mission. We are becoming more top down focused, rather than congregation focused with interrelated councils in support.

- Church Council Conversations



An inter-conciliar approach to decision-making has created cultural norms around collective decision making over individual decision making. This has meant the use of committees as a ubiquitous tool in our decision making rather than empowering individuals to make decisions. Even individuals who have authority feel reluctant to exercise it without reference to a wider group. Some call for much greater empowerment of individuals to exercise authority including through longer terms for some positions and greater delegation. However even those that advocate such an approach believe it should be attached to effective accountability mechanisms.

In many parts of the Church, corporate governance principles are in widespread use. To some, this feels at odds with the objectives and values of the Church. This leads to frustration about the councils of the Church whose membership can stretch into the hundreds. The Church has also prioritised diversity and representation, while some others are looking to prioritise skills and expertise. Finding ways to value all of this in one governance system has proved challenging and complex.

We look for a willingness by those beneficiaries of the current arrangements to challenge the status quo in search of a better outcome for the UCA.

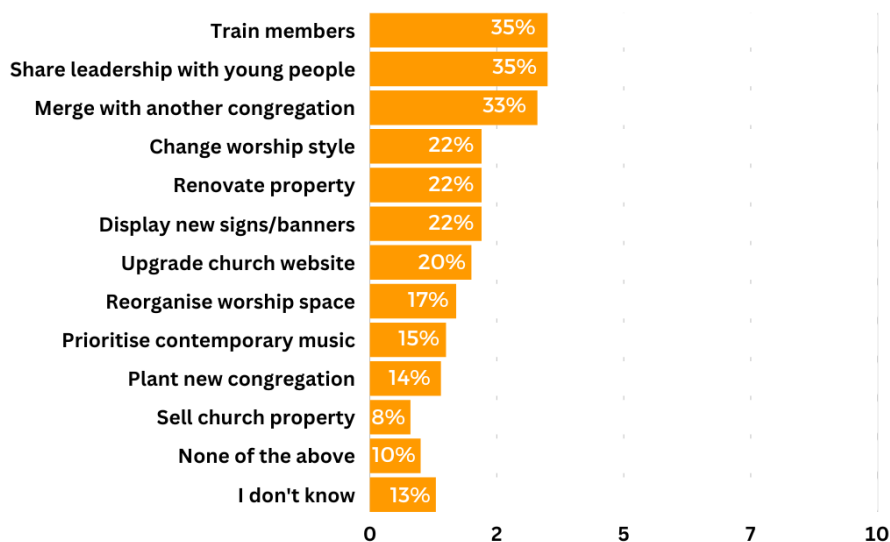
- Church Council Conversations

Agencies across the Church experience frustration with how the governance of the Church functions. As they have transitioned to skills-based boards (in some instances remunerated) they struggle with the conciliar and legal structures of the Church. In most cases agencies are searching for healthy and effective ways to be better connected to both the Congregational and conciliar life of the Church. There is a sense that the health and growth of the agencies may be a benefit which can be shared with the whole Church in ways that extend beyond finances, including a greater role in the conciliar decision making of the Church.

The organisational model entrenched in the Regulations and Constitution is one of a different era... The concept that any business can hold the same structure over a 45-year period and be successful and remain relevant needs to be challenged.

- Church Council Conversations

Would you support any of these significant actions in the denomination?



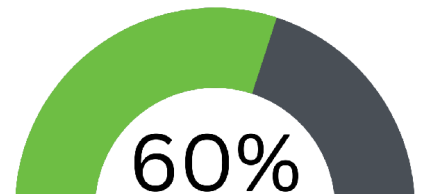
Resourcing

Many of these governance challenges are associated with the overall decline in the life of local communities of faith. We can no longer assume there is a ready pool of volunteers to sustain our governance. Many would say we are wearing out the willing. Alongside this the overlap in membership of so many parts of our Church leads to concentration of decision-making in a few. The Church prides itself on the principle of being 'lay led'. However, in local communities with a minister in placement communities of faith look to them as the "go to" on almost all matters. Those without a minister in placement simply struggle to distribute the responsibilities across already overloaded volunteers. This reality cascades into the wider councils of Church.

There is much work on the shoulders of a few. Our Ministers, other leaders and our one administration staff member. Like many congregations, we are highly committed but as a group we are ageing. Those who are available and able to work are tired from overwork.

- Church Council Conversations

% members who perform at least one leadership or ministry role



It has become increasingly difficult to fill Boards of agencies and schools with suitably qualified members of the Church. It has also become difficult to fill voluntary office bearer roles within Presbytery or synod committees. This has led to remunerated leaders and staff finding themselves filling the gaps that arise. This leads to tensions between personal and corporate leadership, and between those we employ for their professional skills and those within our Church with a deep sense of our ministry and mission.

Even in Synods with larger staffing structures, there is very little economies of scale with most staff being individual specialists. Many observe significant duplication in roles across Synods and believe this is a place where efficiency could be achieved through consolidation. However, attempts at collaboration in the past have not been all that successful.

Most Presbyteries would have at least one person in a role similar to 'Presbytery minister' and some more than one. Some observe that the responsibilities of a Presbytery extend beyond those typically within the skill set of a minister. Others have observed that Presbytery minister roles are drawing high-quality ministers out of local communities of faith.

While the focus of many conversations about 'resourcing' in the Church has tended to revolve around property and finance, the reality is that both our greatest asset and our greatest crisis in resourcing is in our people. Just as life-giving communities of faith are sustained by faithful and passionate disciples, so too are healthy, sustainable and effective governing councils sustained by people with capacity and capability.

I travel far and wide across our Church, and without our faithful, capable and diligent congregational leaders (both lay and ordained), we would be nowhere as a Church. Yet, we don't properly value our local leaders.

- Written Submission

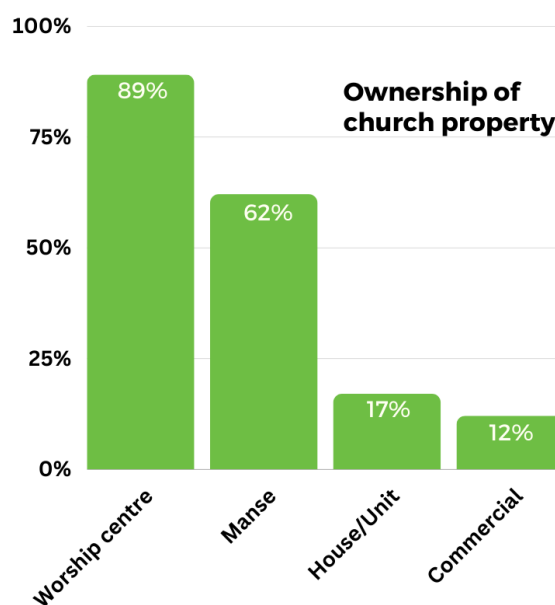
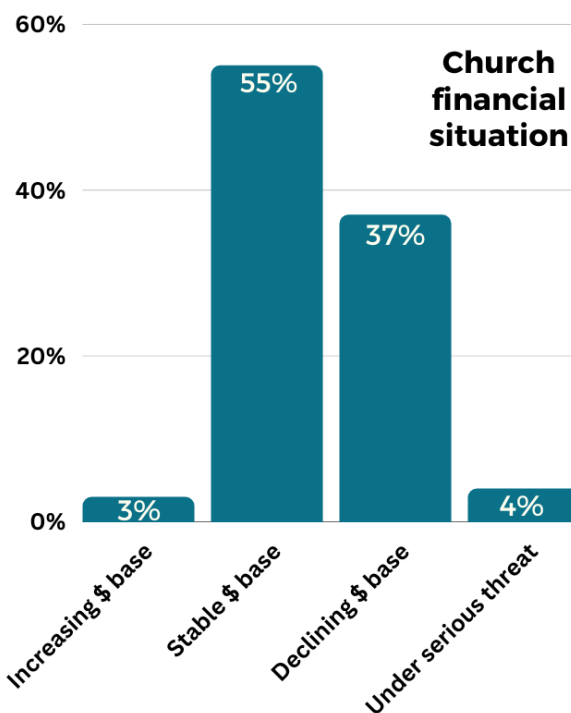
While the focus of many conversations about ‘resourcing’ in the Church has tended to revolve around property and finance, the reality is that both our greatest asset and our greatest crisis in resourcing is in our people. Just as life-giving communities of faith are sustained by faithful and passionate disciples, so too are healthy, sustainable and effective governing councils sustained by people with capacity and capability.

Financial resourcing remains a significant challenge across the life of the Church. It has become a truism to say we are asset rich and cash poor. This has meant the wider life of the Church has gone in search of new revenue streams.

Agencies are largely self-funding, either through government income or fundraising. Synods have different financial models however the common feature is a significant decline in reliance on giving from local communities of faith. Some have entered into support arrangements from agencies, schools and other institutions. All have some kind of income from investments as a core revenue stream. Presbyteries have tended to have a mix of funding from Congregations and the wider Church. Some are building significant reserves from proceeds of property sales to sustain and grow the work of the Presbytery.

In the context of declining financial resources, property has become a significant issue within the whole Church. Our covenant with the Congress acknowledges the dispossession of land at the heart of colonisation. Our weekly prayer for the offering often acknowledges that everything we have comes from God, our creator. The economics of the Australian property market has exacerbated the unjust distribution of wealth in the Church. Even within our Church property is the responsibility of communities of faith formed generations ago, irrespective of their current size.

However, when it comes to the real property assets of the Church and what to do with them we tend to live out of different values and assumptions.



We are cash poor and asset rich - it is ok to use the assets, particularly the property assets, that we do have rather than just sitting on them.

- Written submission

For many local communities of faith property is an asset, an economic life-blood and a burden all at once. The suitability and maintenance of many buildings is an acute issue in many places. This is borne out by regular discussions of insurance, building regulations, property leasing arrangements and heritage listings. This is absorbing significant effort across many Church Councils, most Presbyteries and all Synods.

Alongside this, emerging new communities, including CALD communities and church plants, are looking for a place to call home as they grow.

According to the NCLS 8% of Church attenders support selling church property. However, throughout the Exploration Phase we encountered people who constantly pointed to sale of property assets as essential to the ongoing financial sustainability of the Church and future ministry and mission opportunities.

Be serious about the redistribution of resources across the life of the Church. Something is clearly broken with our system. There is very little understanding that we are jointly involved in the mission of God together. Instead, dollars speak, and we patch protect to the detriment of our future.
- Church Council Conversations

Different parts of the Church have responded to this challenge in different ways. However, there are common themes in this challenge and the contested space this represents. First, property matters involve three councils of the Church, each with different responsibilities and imperatives which creates significant confusion and takes significant time. Property transactions generally involve a peculiar entity – a statutory property trust. Different parts of the Church understand this mechanism in different ways and its implications for who gets to make decisions and how the councils constituted under the Constitution and the boards, committees or other governing entities interact with the property trusts.

Second, different people within that system believe they have a role in the use of any underutilised property or proceeds of sale. Various contested imperatives include:

- Meeting current and historical obligations.
- Fulfilling our responsibilities to Congress.
- Funding our institutional infrastructure.
- Funding mission resourcing.
- Utilising for ministry and mission.
- Providing a physical home or funding new missional opportunities or community services.
- Providing a physical home for communities of faith without a building, such as growing CALD communities and church plants.
- Financially maintaining a local community's ministry and mission.

Our congregation has very modest funds, and our property only provides a modest income, however we are a church with potential. In an ideal world the income from assets across the Synod would go to congregations who have growth potential and can provide mission to the community.

- Church Council Conversations

There are deep pastoral and practical considerations at play. Many communities of faith with declining people and finances are sustaining their community through property income. Church leaders across the country are struggling with how to faithfully honour communities whose life is coming to an end, while investing in new and emerging communities. The place of property in this conversation is significant. A collective imagination is required for this to become a life-giving conversation for our Church.

Workstream 4: Theological culture and education

This workstream is proceeding at a slower pace than the others in recognition of both the limitations on resourcing and the specialised nature of some of this work. Therefore, this report provides a brief summary of what we have done and what we have heard. However further work is required to move forward to the final outcomes envisaged by this workstream.

We have proposed a working definition of theological culture as:

“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.”⁷

We are [inviting papers](#) from theologians and others across the Uniting Church and offered a series of questions to encourage reflection. We are inviting this through until September 2023 and have approached all of the Church’s theological colleges to contribute.

Alongside this we have met with each of the leaders involved in theological education across our Synods and colleges to discuss the workstream and to hear their insights and feedback.

Across the breadth and diversity of our colleges, the following themes emerged:

- There is broad agreement that theological culture is the right frame for this workstream.
- Theology across the Uniting Church is very diverse and a national framework for the provision of theological education should not seek theological conformity.
- There is recognition of the role theological colleges play in shaping the theological culture within their own contexts.
- Theological education needs to support ministerial and lay leadership along with discipleship formation, especially for growing, new communities where leadership emerges from within the community.
- Theological education needs to be closely linked with contexts of ministry to provide for effective integration into ministry practice.
- Any change in the structure for the provision of theological education needs to maintain and enhance the diverse context of ministry across the Uniting Church.
- Investment in theological education is a resourcing choice. The sustainability of theological education is not the same as ‘self-funding’.
- Living out our commitments as a Church, particularly the Covenant with Congress and being a multicultural Church need to be deeply embedded across theological education.

We have not one but many theological cultures. We need to celebrate this. We are very diverse, but there is in that diversity, a range of depth of allegiance to the UCA ‘brand’. We need to be careful of pushing this one too hard if we are to be open to diversity..

- Church Council Conversations

Core Commitments

Our Covenant with Congress

Throughout the Act2 Project, as with our whole life as Church, we are called to walk together as First Peoples and Second Peoples from many lands. As we shape the ordering of our life, the Covenant with Congress is essential. As Congress continues to explore its own life, we have worked to identify those things which continue to need to guide us in light of the Covenant and the Preamble.

The history of this land we now call Australia, a small part of which is contained in the Covenant and Preamble, continue to have implications for our life as a nation and the Church.

We recognise that Congress continues to seek self-determination over its own life and ministry with First Peoples. Alongside this it is a partner and participant in the decision-making of the councils of the Church.

Congress has different expressions of its life in response to the different contexts of its ministry around the country. While historically there has been a tendency for Church and Congress structures to mirror one another, this need not be the case as we both seek the best way to order our lives in response to our ministry and mission needs.

While the Covenant began between the Congress and the National Assembly, covenanting needs to remain an ongoing process throughout the Church's life. This is our collective responsibility as a whole Uniting Church and should not be seen as the province of only the Assembly and Congress.

All of this has implications how we live out our mutual relationship and mutual accountability with one another, including identity, governance and resourcing. As Congress and the Uniting Church both continue to reflect on the shape and ordering of our respective lives we will need to continue to keep open the space for exploring together the best way to live out our Covenant. This open space for conversation will be important as we consider the directions and options, particularly for *Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing*.

Our Multicultural Church

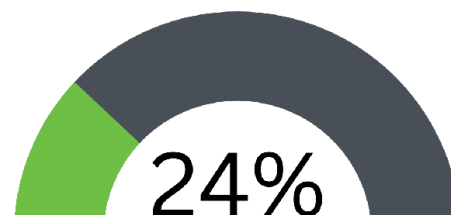
We declared in 1985 that we are a multicultural Church⁸. Time and again we have both reaffirmed and built on that commitment as we aspire to be an inter-cultural Church. How this multicultural nature manifests itself continues to change. It includes monocultural CALD communities worshipping in language, multicultural communities participating in cross-cultural ministry and mission together, new communities of migrants forming communities and seeking recognition within the Uniting Church and various cultural groups sharing the one property in a variety of arrangements amongst so many other expressions.

At various times the Church has tried to find better ways of recognising, supporting and resourcing CALD communities but we have struggled with this task. Parallel networks, structures and ways of relating such as National Conferences, multicultural committees, staffing and experiments with culturally-based structures are all expressions of those attempts. Property has been a contested space, demonstrated through the various attempts to broker property sharing arrangements with varying degrees of success.

Some of our structures and practices have been slow to adapt. As CALD communities of faith are bucking the trend in terms of size, growth and vitality, we have found Presbyteries have tended to focus on the normative experience of aging declining communities.

Ministry pathways whether through the ordained ministries, Ministry of Pastor or Reception of Ministers process have continued to be source of frustration. Pathways into leadership in different parts of the Church have been challenging for many CALD leaders, balancing the responsibility to their communities with offering leadership to the wider Church.

% attenders born overseas



Both of these commitments remain absolute touchstones for our identity as the Uniting Church in Australia and need to shape us as we seek to respond to God's call to enter more fully into mission.

Legal, ethical and social obligations

The fulfillment of our legal, ethical and social obligations is both a 'given' and one of the most vexing issues facing our Church. As we have listened across the Church we have found the accountability for many of these obligations largely rests with Synods but the wresponsibility for implementation rests with local communities of faith.

There is a perception that agencies, institutions and schools tend to be doing this well due to staffing and skills-based boards. However local communities of faith with volunteers are struggling with the way we are currently seeking to fulfill these obligations.

Synods describe seeking to fulfill these obligations through resourcing and encouragement, believing they lack the levers to ensure compliance. Local communities of faith describe feeling overwhelmed by paperwork and frustrated by what they perceive as inefficient and unnecessary processes.

At this point in the project, we consider the following areas to be the most pressing:

- Safeguarding requirements for children and vulnerable adults.
- Building safety and property insurance.
- Workplace health and safety.
- Working conditions including remuneration, employment/placement conditions, onboarding and other people and culture practices.
- Management of finances.
- The role of the property trust and its relationship to other governance and legal entities.
- Directors' duties, fiduciary obligations and obligations under the Charities Act.
- Relationship of responsibilities between the councils .
- Relationship of ministry agents to the Church, including matters of discipline.

While many of these derive from external legal, regulatory or compliance obligations, how we choose to fulfill these obligations is an expression of what we value (our ethical obligations) and how we are perceived by the wider society. This core commitment is at heart a matter of faith - it is about how we bear witness to Christ.

As we work through directions and options, particularly in Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship and Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing, we need to both continue fulfilling our obligations in those ways that are effective, and consider better ways where this is creating a burden or drawing energy and focus away from our ministry and mission.

We have therefore developed a draft set of principles to guide us in thinking about how the Church could better fulfill our calling as a Church to our ethical, legal and social obligations:

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: Approach with 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.

Conclusion

Across Australia there is deep love for the Uniting Church. There is still a compelling vision for why the Uniting Church in Australia exists and its role within the Church and the society in Australia. At its heart the Uniting Church is an inclusive church, that despite its differences does seek to hold together a very broad range of beliefs and practices. The description of the Church in the Basis of Union continues to resonate along with the centrality of the Covenant, our commitment to be a multicultural church and our pursuit of justice. The way we govern and make decisions is also a hallmark.

However, the shape of our Church is not as so many imagined it would be when we formed in 1977. We have struggled to come to terms with the decline in the size of our local communities of faith alongside the significant growth in our agencies. Deep in our hearts we know we are not the Church we began nor are we the Church we hoped we would be. We have struggled to collectively imagine a life-giving future for ourselves.

The reality of our local communities is clear from the data, the lived testimony of Church Councils and the descriptions of the wider Church. The people and financial resources invested in maintaining communities and fulfilling the obligations is crowding out energy and effort being invested in discipleship and mission. Communities of faith coming to the end of their life will be a part of our future. This trend will continue in many places for the foreseeable future. It needs to be done thoughtfully and carefully however it cannot be avoided.

Clustering, linking and sharing amongst communities of faith will also be part of our future. This should and will continue to be a part of establishing structures and ways of working that creates life-giving and healthy ministry and mission. It needs to be done in a way that aligns governance, resourcing, ministry and mission. However it is not a substitute for hard conversations about communities of faith, particularly in close geographical proximity where their life as a community is coming to an end.

Conversations about communities at the end of their life should not marginalise investing in and supporting church planting, fresh expressions and experimentation. These new expressions of communities of faith need to be supported and encouraged by the wider Church. In most instances, these communities are relatively small and this will impact on the models of governance, resourcing and ministry adopted. We must both ensure communities are life-giving, healthy and effective while not expecting them to simply function as a replacement to existing communities of faith.

Meanwhile, many of our agencies and schools have continued to thrive and grow, fueled by government funding but also responding to ever changing policy and regulatory environments. Ensuring that the agencies for which we are responsible are well governed while fulfilling our shared mission remains a priority. However, the strains and tensions within our communities of faith and councils mean we need to rethink how we do this.

The current capacity and capability of our local communities has an impact on a wider church conciliar and committee structure which has relied on the contribution of people in unpaid roles and financial contributions from local communities of faith.

It is no longer possible within the financial and personnel resources of the Church to sustain the structure of the wider Church that we currently have. Across the breadth of the Church, we believe there are a significant number of councils which can no longer fulfill the responsibilities assigned to them. Even parts of the Church which feel relatively secure are reliant on a shrinking base of resources.

Each of these councils in their own way are seeking to find contextual solutions. However, the widespread evidence of this problem points to fundamental systemic issues which we need to address collectively. The risk of not doing this is further resources drawn into managing crises, heightened conflict and further burnout of our people.

Choosing not to address these issues systemically will not maintain the status quo. Significant structural change in our life is inevitable. Choosing to address these issues together gives us an opportunity to continue to be a truly national Church, shaped by our theological culture and in service of shared ministry and mission.

The situation in we find ourselves has been coming for many years. We may struggle to engage in conversations about the viability and sustainability of our Church however collectively ignoring these problems will not make them go away. This report seeks to take a long loving look at the reality of our life. It does not seek to shy away from the hard truths but nor does it believe there is no hope. Rather than be hostage to this reality, the truth can set us free, if we face it and respond with courage.

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