

Section 5: Directions for Workstream 1: Local 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

Our insight from our exploration and listening is that the structures and practices which cultivate life-giving communities of faith are:

- Communities orient their life towards discipleship and mission.
- A ministry and local governance arrangement which is healthy, sustainable and effective.
- Area councils¹⁴ having the capacity and capability to work with local communities of faith on being lifegiving.

We recognise that how this is done varies from place to place, however there are some systemic ways we could better support this. Considering this, we have sought to identify directions we could take as a whole Church that would better enable local communities of faith. The focus of these directions is primarily on local structures and practices. The question of oversight and wider Church support is picked up in *Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing*.

Communities of faith need different governance, ministry and resourcing arrangements depending where they are on their journey. Currently we have relatively rigid structures which do not account for the degree of variation in our communities of faith. Significant adaptation and innovation has occurred in parts of our Church.

This set of directions seeks to recognise the need for that adaptation and innovation, and create a more flexible toolkit for local communities of faith and Area Councils to use in shaping the right arrangements for the context and to best enable ministry and mission.

Direction 1: Encourage local communities of discipleship and mission

This direction is the anchor and imperative for all the other directions. Reimagining local church governance structures must be attached to refocusing the work of local communities on ministry and mission, and away from being overwhelmed by administration and compliance.

If the directions outlined only lead to more efficiently run communities and not to more life-giving communities of faith, mission and discipleship, then we will not have fulfilled our purpose.

- (a) Cultivate a structured and consistent approach to local communities of faith making and growing disciples through a vibrant theological culture.

Local communities of faith and discipleship are the heart of making and growing disciples. However, the set of institutions, texts and practices that the wider Church provides and cultivates can support that work. This direction is closely connected to Workstream 4: Theological Culture. Core to this is the recognition of the diverse forms of community which the Uniting Church has within its midst.

Reliance on training people for the ordained ministry as the primary mechanism of wider Church support for discipleship formation, is not consistent with the Church we now are. Therefore, our theological culture is going to need to be more dynamic and responsive to the Church we are.

Imagine...

Imagine throughout the season of Lent and Easter each year communities of faith across the Uniting Church engaging in periods of discernment through intentional shared prayer, bible study, mission in their communities and engagement with issues of justice for our world. Where communities of faith where baptisms – of children and adults – are a point of community celebration on Easter morning. Where people new to communities learn about the life and way of Jesus. Where people who have worshiped all their life discover new things about the faith. Where integrational conversations are fostered. Where people of all ages and abilities find ways to witness and serve in their communities. Where the love of God is so visibly present in a community of faith that it overflows into the wider world.

- (b) Encourage structures and practices which enable all expressions of the Uniting Church within a local community to participate in shared ministry and mission.

In many communities across Australia there are diverse expressions of the Uniting Church through various communities of faith, agencies, schools and other expressions of our corporate life. However, in many instances this is disconnected without a shared sense of ministry and mission. If we are saying we want to cultivate life-giving communities both within the Church and the wider community, then a shared approach ministry and mission will better enable that goal.

While historically many of the service agencies arose out of local communities of faith, there are now a diverse range of governance arrangements to ensure healthy and safe ministry and mission. Fresh approaches to partnership could enable both shared mission and a more unified witness to the wider community.

Imagine...

Imagine a shared ministry and mission location in a vibrant hub at the centre of a local community. There is a worshipping community and a community service run out of the same location. The upstairs space is used for worship, training and shared community events. Downstairs is a community services hub with offices and meeting rooms used to run services during the day and for Local Council meetings, bible studies and discipleship courses in the evening. The local leaders of the Church and the community service meet together quarterly along with the Principal and Chaplain of the local school to discuss and plan shared ministry and mission priorities.

Direction 2: Align with the vision of congregations in the Basis of Union

- (a) Align our regulatory arrangements for all communities of faith with the vision of Congregations as described in the Basis of Union

The Basis of Union describes Congregations as:

“the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ.”

It describes the responsibilities in the following ways:

“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.”

This is a compelling and life-giving vision. These are the communities into which people are called and grown as disciples. Significantly it does not say much about many of the normative assumptions we have about what a Congregation looks like.

It describes a wide variety of expressions of the Church which are currently not designated as ‘Congregations’ by Presbyteries under the regulations. The most obvious example is faith communities. The definition of faith community expressed in the regulations (Reg. 3.9.2) and as observed practically in the life of the Church would meet the Basis of Union description of a ‘Congregation’.

- (b) Develop guidance for recognising communities of faith that focuses on the responsibilities of Congregations as described in the Basis of Union

There are many groups of people recognised as ‘Congregations’ by a Presbytery which it would be difficult to conclude that they fulfill the definition and responsibilities as described in the Basis. Many for instance are no longer able to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church due to size, capacity or capability. Some report the only activity they undertake is worship. This need not mean that the Church ceases to take pastoral responsibility for communities. However it does mean we need to find other ways to recognise, support and connect people and communities within our Church in a way that lives out the vision of a ‘Congregation’ as described in the Basis of Union.

For much of our life, we have talked about different forms and patterns of life for local communities of faith. There are many examples of this - new church plants, online communities, CALD communities. However, it has often happened in spite of rather than because of our institutional structures and practices. In many cases these pioneers have felt either stymied by our systems or that they simply go around the systems.

These directions seek to provide a description of how we could shift the focus of our structures and practices to help more, and hinder less, the transformation that needs to and is in fact already happening in our local communities of faith.

Imagine...

Imagine one larger regional community of faith, three smaller communities of faith and two church plants, one in a local school and another of new migrants have all joined together under a shared Local Council. Each community elects two members to participate in the shared Local Council. They have been able to call three ministers with diverse skill in placement who work in a team across the diverse communities. Along with an administrator who works to manage all the administration compliance requirements across all the communities. All the communities gather quarterly for worship and sharing. Once a year they spend a whole day together exploring their shared ministry and mission priorities. Each community has some delegated responsibility for decisions that only affect their community.

Direction 3: Support fit-for-purpose governance arrangements

- (a) Establish a regulatory and guidance framework for fit for purpose local governance arrangements for communities of faith

The Basis of Union describes the local governing council as having the following responsibilities, *“building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining its members in hope, and leading them into a fuller participation in Christ’s mission in the world.”*

It was always envisioned that this local governing body would be for a Congregation or group of Congregations. However, the drafting of the Regulations create the impression that the normative structure is one Congregation with one Church Council.

Alongside this, the responsibilities of Church Councils are vast. Local responsibility for property, finance and administration now include a wide range of compliance functions in relation to people, property and finance.

Despite the assumption of this normative structure, shared governance arrangements are widespread. The Area Council of the Church responsible for recognising communities of faith and approving local governance arrangements needs greater flexibility, guidance and support to establish fit for purpose governance arrangements.

Currently the leading driver of clustering arrangements appears to be to pool sufficient funds to afford ministry. However there needs to be greater scope for Area Councils to work with local communities of faith to make determinations about the appropriate local governance arrangements, in line with the capacity and capability of various communities. This should encourage and support shared ministry and mission.

- (b) Provide for an Area Council, subject to consultation, to vary the scope of responsibilities of a Local Council

The current arrangements mean that when a Presbytery recognises a Congregation, a significant amount of responsibilities flow from that recognition to the Congregation and its Church Council. There is currently a mechanism under Clause 70 of the Constitution for Congregations and Church Councils to ‘refer powers and responsibilities’ to a Presbytery (or another body).

However, when a Congregation or its Church Council is no longer able to fulfill some responsibilities, there is limited scope for a Presbytery to determine that another body is better able to fulfill those responsibilities. Current arrangements encourage action only in response to a crisis or conflict situation. Often greater flexibility and earlier intervention may avoid the need for more drastic action.

Alongside this there are some communities which have grown to be significantly larger than the typical size of a Congregation. However, the scope of responsibilities and the amount of flexibility and autonomy provided to Local Councils tends to be based on some normative assumptions. There should be an imperative to align ministry arrangements (whether an individual ministry agent or a ministry team) with a Local Council and to avoid a ministry agent being expected to work across multiple Local Councils.

This should not occur through replacing one set of prescriptive regulations with another. Regulations should change to enable this. Greater flexibility on the means of appointing a Local Council to oversee a group of communities of faith should be recognised, while retaining the principle of communities of faith appoint their own leaders. There are a variety of mechanisms available beyond the regulations to support imaginative ways of arranging local governance.

This direction is designed to allow an Area Council, subject to consultation, to vary the responsibilities of a Local Council. This could mean that if a Local Council can demonstrate capability or capacity and a need to have additional responsibilities (e.g., financial, property or personnel matters) an Area Council could provide that flexibility. Conversely if an Area Council determined a Local Council could no longer fulfill one or more of the responsibilities, it could refer those responsibilities to the Area Council or another body either temporarily or on an ongoing basis.

- (c) Provide for the appointment of people from an Area Council to a Local Council

Currently there are certain circumstances in which people from the wider church can be appointed to a Local Council (e.g., during a ministerial vacancy, when designated a Parish Mission). There may be other circumstances in which this is an appropriate mechanism to assist a local community, particularly during a time of crisis or change. Limits ought to be placed on such a mechanism, with careful thought about safeguards and time limits.

Except in exceptional circumstances, such an approach should only be for a season. The goal should be to move towards a situation where local governance arrangements can be managed without the ongoing involvement of members of a Regional Council.

Direction 4: Recognise there is a time for everything

- (a) Simplify the pathways for new and emerging communities of faith to be recognised and participate in the life of the Uniting Church

Currently, people planting new communities or seeking recognition of communities of faith by the Uniting Church describe a lot of challenges in doing so. Creating pathways that allow communities of faith to be welcomed, recognised and invited to participate in our shared life is essential for the season we are in as a Church.

Efforts have already been made to establish mechanisms for property sharing such as for CALD communities. However, these pathways could be simplified so that new and growing communities can retain their focus on ministry and mission. There is a sense often that we are anxious to ensure communities are 'Uniting Church' enough, which has tended to mean 'our' experience of the Uniting Church. This limits both our vision of the diversity of what the Uniting Church already is, and the diversity of what the Uniting Church could become through encouraging new expressions of the Church.

Such simplification would include areas such as recognition of communities and ministry leaders by Area Councils, accessing property and other resourcing and participating in the responsibilities and decisions of the wider life of the Uniting Church.

Imagine...

Imagine a new community forms in a local café, exploring faith together on a Wednesday evening. They are made up of a diverse range of people from a variety of ages, mostly under the age of 50. They are looking for a place to belong and connect to the wider Church. The approach the local Uniting Church that welcomes them and introduces them to the New Communities Minister of their Area Council. Over a period of a few months, they discuss together their community's hopes and dreams with the Area Council. The Area Council recognises them as a community of faith. As the community grows and new children arrive in their midst, the café no longer fits them. A community of faith that is closing welcomes them to use the church building which is more suitable for the growing community. Some in their community have extensive experience in child safe practices so the Area Council welcomes their expertise in overhauling the entire Area Council's policies and practices which becomes a model for other Area Councils. Some other people in the community are capable musicians who write modern, authentic worship songs which become favourites across the Uniting Church through their new website – Sing A New Song.

- (b) Ensure Area Councils are equipped to pastorally and effectively fulfil their responsibilities regarding the dissolution and amalgamation of local communities of faith

No part of the Church has an inherent right to exist in perpetuity. There are times when it is no longer healthy for a community of faith to continue. Some communities will reach this conclusion on their own or with the support of their Area Councils. Others will not wish their community to come to end or to amalgamate with another community. Others will resist any such change.

Ultimately the responsibility for these decisions does rest with the Area Council.

It should be carried out with care and pastoral sensitivity, however it should not be avoided simply because it may be difficult or give rise to conflict. Failure to make these decisions in a timely way rarely leads to them not needing to be made at all. However, Area Councils need to be equipped with sufficient resources to fulfill this responsibility effectively.