

## Executive Summary

This report is the third report of the Act2 Project, following on from [Considering Afresh Our Life Together](#) (October 2021) and [Act2: On The Way](#) (May 2022). It is the first report since the decisions of the [16th Assembly](#) and the creation of the Act2 Project Unit and Steering Committee.

This report includes:

- A summary of the activities and findings of the Exploration Phase (November 2022 to May 2023).
- A theological reflection on Exploration Phase.
- An introduction to Collection Discernment Phase (June 2023 to November 2023).
- A set of directions for Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship.
- A set of four different options for Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing.

Work continues on all four workstreams. Further opportunities to engage in *Workstream 2: National Identity* and *Workstream 4: Theological Culture and Education* will be forthcoming throughout 2023.

### Summary of Activities

Our engagement across the Church has included:

- Direct communication with 1,672 local communities of faith, 187 Church Council Conversation responses received and 10 focus groups held.
- Direct engagement with all 33 Presbyteries including online meetings or face-to-face visits with 22 Presbyteries.
- Engagement with Synods, agencies and theological college leaders through visits to every Synod including over 45 meetings with over 100 people.
- Observing and sharing with the National Conference of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (Congress).
- 46 written submissions from individuals, agencies and councils.
- Data consolidated from across the Uniting Church, other churches and the wider society.

Altogether we have directly engaged over 400 people in conversations about Act2 and received feedback from an estimated 1,500 people across the Church.

### Summary of Findings

Find more detail in [Section 2](#) of the Report.

#### Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith

- We have approximately 1,672 local communities with a typical weekly attendance of 28 people and an average age of 68.
- Worship and pastoral care remain at the heart of local communities of faith. People believe their communities provide a strong sense of belonging and are inclusive
- Communities of faith are also committed to connecting with their local community.
- Discipleship is both a source of life and a place for further work. There is a deep heart to be a Church that is more able to invite people into life-giving communities of faith and grow them in the way of Jesus.

- Capacity and capability have declined while ethical, legal and social obligations have increased.
- The wider Church is generally seen as a source of support; Presbyteries in the context of general pastoral support particularly in times of transition and Synods in the area of administration.
- Local communities of faith expression frustration and confusion at times about the support they receive from the wider Church.
- Local communities see that their primary contributions to the wider Church are financial giving and appointing people to councils and committees.
- Property is now both a significant source of revenue and a burden to maintain for most communities.
- There is an appetite for church planting, fresh expressions and experimentation. Beyond some notable exceptions, this has tended to be relatively small communities. They are neither seeking nor should be expected to replace existing communities.
- Clustering of communities for shared ministry is widespread.
- Closure or amalgamation of communities of faith and property sale has and will continue to be core part of the work of most presbyteries and synods.

### **Workstream 2: National Identity**

*Note that the insights on the role of the National Council have fed into the options in Workstream 3.*

- There is deep love for the Uniting Church and what it represents.
- The Basis of Union continues to have value as a foundational document for our life.
- Our commitments to the Covenant, being a multicultural church and seeking justice are also foundational.
- However, in general there is a disjointed view of the public face of the Uniting Church through our physical and digital presence.
- People also appreciate that the Uniting Church is an inclusive church, that despite its difference does seek to hold together a very broad range of beliefs and practices.
- People appreciate the principles that shape how we make decisions - in community with all people, lay and ordained, regardless of gender, gathering to seek consensus.
- There is also an instinctive commitment to the wider community. This is reflected in an ongoing pride in the Uniting Church's extensive network of community services.
- Some lament the decisions of the National Assembly meetings and the impact that has had on local communities of faith.
- Some lament the decline in the capacity of the National Assembly as an institution to undertake activities such as advocacy and international partnerships.

### **Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing**

- People generally consider the underlying principles which shape our governance are sound.
- There is a widespread view that the system is no longer working as designed.
- The reliance on a high number of participants in unpaid roles (office bearers, council members, board members, committee members) is no longer viable.
- The assumption of a high level of collaboration between councils is leading to confusion of responsibilities, inefficiency and slow decision making.
- The intersection of concepts such as oversight, corporate governance, conciliar decision making and individual decision making are causing widespread frustration.
- There is a mismatch between the scope of council responsibilities and the resourcing available.
- Property is a critical issue as an asset rich, cash poor Church where there is significant contest within the Church about the merits of property sales and the distribution of sales proceeds.
- There are significant pastoral, theological and ethical issues at stake in our use of our property resources.

#### **Workstream 4: Theological Culture and Education**

*Note this workstream is proceeding at a different pace to the other workstreams.*

- There is broad agreement about the need to focus on our theological culture.
- The diversity of theological perspectives needs to shape our discussions of theological culture and theological education.
- Theological education shapes our theological culture and needs to support the diverse ministry, mission and discipleship contexts of our life.

#### **Core Commitments**

The Church has affirmed that the three core commitments – our Covenant with Congress, being a multicultural Church and fulfilling our legal, ethical and social obligations – are essential and need to be attended to in all of the workstreams.

#### **Next steps**

We have now entered Phase 2: Collective Discernment. Between June and November 2023 we are inviting the Church into an intentional period of discernment. To begin this time the whole Church has been invited into a time of intentional prayer – [Uniting in Prayer](#). In this phase we are looking intentionally at specific ideas to address our challenges and take up opportunities.

In particular, we are inviting the councils of the Church to participate in intentional discernment about the directions and options, including by setting aside time within their meetings for this discernment.

Outlined in [Section 4](#) as part of *Workstream 1: Local Communities of Faith and Discipleship* is an integrated set of directions designed create a more flexible toolkit to support the effective governance and oversight of local communities of faith to enable them to better fulfill their calling to discipleship and mission.

Outlined in [Section 5](#) as part of *Workstream 3: Governance and Resourcing* are four different options for discernment about the best way forward in governance and resourcing to support healthy, sustainable and effective councils of the Church.

Opportunity to share discernment and feedback about the directions will be available from the conclusion of Uniting in Prayer on 22 June 2023. Please provide your submissions and feedback to the Act2 Project as soon as you can and no later than 30 November 2023.

This next phase is an opportunity to invite everyone who calls the Uniting Church home into an intentional period of prayer and deliberation to consider afresh the ordering of our life so we can live out the vision to which God is call us.

In Phase 3: Recommendations for Action we will be looking to develop an integrated set of recommendations across all workstreams for the 17th Assembly in July 2024.

Not everything in this report is easy reading. It is offered in a spirit of deep love for our Church, hope for our future and faith that in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews his Church.