

General Proposal 2

Act2 Realignment

That the Synod

Requests that the UCA Assembly reprioritise the work of Act2 to focus firstly on engaging the church in exploring and renewing our understanding of the faith and purpose of the church, before continuing conversation pertaining to structure and governance.

Scope

The report *Act 2: In Response to God's Call*, is a commendable move by the Assembly to bring forth a new season in the life of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). In response to the Act2 report, this rationale calls for the Assembly to reprioritise the exploration and articulation of the church's faith in the ongoing work of Act 2.

The first half of the Act2 report does a good job in showing where the church is at and some of the symptoms of decline and stagnation that we are experiencing. We believe however that the report does not adequately address the core reason for this problem, which we believe lies in a lack of understanding and commitment to the faith and purpose of the church as outlined in the Basis of Union. Any discussion which goes to structure and governance as solutions without first addressing the root cause is premature and may exacerbate the current issues that the church is facing.

Structural and organisational enhancement can facilitate partial growth and renewal in the church. There is already sufficient flexibility and provision in the current UCA Regulations to allow for adaptive expressions of councils to better suit emerging expressions of church and their required resourcing, leadership, and oversight. However, the governance and regulatory life of the church will always be a secondary concern.

Rationale

The Act2 initiative is to be commended for the intent of seeking collective discernment amongst the church for the shape of the UCA's next season. Much of the "Act 2: In Response to God's Call" report is concerned with an inward reflection on the UCA's identity, governance systems and resourcing structures. This is reflected in the current prioritised workstreams that focus on themes such as fit for purpose governance arrangements, new structures and practices that empower different expressions of gathered communities of faith and a range of options for a renewed interconciliar life involving a local, area, regional and national council. These organizational considerations are important. However, the primary focus on structural considerations tilts the emphasis of the Act2 report toward an institutional approach to change.

The institutional bias seems contradictory given that the report declares:

"As the people of the way of Jesus, disciples of the risen crucified One we need not change simply to avoid death. Were the Uniting Church to die as an institution, God would do a new thing. Our calling and opportunity is to do a new thing now which lies before us; to enter more fully into the vision to which God has called us as a Uniting Church in Australia."¹

A significant gap within the report is an obvious lack of articulation regarding the vision to which God has called the UCA. This is particularly evident in "Section 3: Theological Reflection" which conveys an inward, self-facing approach to how the church seeks to understand itself within the Act2 project. This is exemplified by the theological reflection which sparingly draws on the Basis of Union in order to offer three images of the Church. In doing so it narrows the scope of the theological reflection to an ecclesial endeavour and misses the mark in offering God's vision for the UCA.

This paper calls on the Assembly to refocus the work of Act2 in order to provide the UCA with a clear articulation of God's vision for the church. Exploring God's vision for the UCA requires a return to act 1, the work of church union.

The work of the Joint Commission on Church Union (JCCU) has certain resonances with the Assembly approach to a second act in that both are concerned with discerning God's leading for the church. However, the JCCU refused to start church union with a focus on ecclesiastical structure. The work of the JCCU in producing its first report "The Nature of the Church" became focused on God's vision, not the inward organisation of the church. The development of this first report had three guiding questions/principles:

- **What is the Church's faith?**
- **Where is it to be found?**
- **How can we as individuals, and the Churches from which we come, strengthen our grasp of the faith by which we are held?**

¹ Act 2: In Response to God's Call 2023 p. 35

renewal

The significance of these three questions is seen in the shape they gave to the Basis of Union. For instance, paragraph 3 of the Basis answers the question concerning what the Church's faith is while paragraphs 5 – 11 direct the UCA as to where this faith is found. In addressing these fundamental questions, the Basis of Union identifies the mission at the heart church union, namely a participation in the reconciling work of God through Christ in the world.

The current Act2 report pays no heed to these fundamental questions in the life of the UCA.

This paper is a call for the second act of the UCA to be built on the foundational question of what the church's faith and purpose is. It is the enduring truth of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ that unites the church in the midst of diversity and decline. This provides a basis for other councils of the church, to explore responses as to how individuals and gathered communities of faith can strengthen their grasp of the faith by which they are held.

Structural and organisational enhancement can facilitate partial growth and renewal in the church. There is already sufficient flexibility and provision in the current UCA Regulations to allow for adaptive expressions of councils to better suit emerging expressions of church and their required resourcing, leadership and oversight. However, the governance and regulatory life of the church will always be a secondary concern.

The primary concern of the UCA must be the reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ who rules and renews the Church. The ongoing work of Act2 should give priority to this primary concern.

Proposers

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