

A UnitingWorld Submission to ACT 2

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Where does our perspective come from?

UnitingWorld is the international aid and partnerships agency of the Uniting Church in Australia. We are a channel for connecting the people of the UCA to God's work in the wider world.

We maintain a network of church-to-church relationships that date back from our pre-union history to those forged on behalf of immigrant communities in more recent decades.

To the extent of funding available to us, we support some of our partners in projects/ministries that fight poverty, injustice, and violence in their communities by providing financial support and investing in strengthening their institutional leadership.

We engage with the people of the UCA to strengthen their understanding of the theological and developmental aspects of partnering with the global church for justice, to inspire them to support the work of our partner churches overseas prayerfully and financially, and to hear and learn from the faith and witness of our partners.

Our own organisational history over the last few decades has seen a gradual decrease in Synod/Assembly funding for our mandate, along with the closure of all the programs that supported members of the UCA to learn and develop spiritually and theologically through direct engagement with our partner churches. Today, UnitingWorld receives no Synod/Assembly funding. Half our funding is from government grants and the rest is raised from the public, specifically to fund partner projects. UnitingWorld strives to maintain strong relationships with partner churches, but our capacity to do so is constrained by lack of un-tied resources.

The Strengths of the UCA as seen through the eyes of our partners

We believe these are core assets of the UCA identity that should receive protection and investment under any new structure of the UCA. All of these enhance UnitingWorld's work on behalf of the UCA.

- **The UCA is known, trusted, and respected for our strong commitment to ecumenism.** Our commitment to being an Australian church that wishes to partner but does not set up institutions or missionize internationally is valued.
- **The presence of many women in senior leadership roles within the UCA** and an established theology of gender equality is recognised and respected.
- **The UCA's commitment to social and environmental justice** as per our 1977 Statement to the Nation, is known and respected.
- **The UCA has a reputation for tackling difficult issues with courage.** For example, despite most of our church partners practicing a more conservative theology, many have attended Triennial Assembly meetings and have remarked on the willingness of the UCA to engage with LGBTQI+ inclusion within the church. While they may not be about to shift their position, they maintain a deep respect for the integrity of our approach and view it as a valuable lesson for their own future.
- **The UCA's partnership-based approach to missional collaboration, and the financial contribution** we make to our partners' ministry through UnitingWorld is deeply valued by our partners, as evidenced by our two-yearly partner feedback survey.

Challenges faced by the UCA as seen through UnitingWorld's eyes

All of these are reflections that we as UnitingWorld have made in the course of our work on behalf of the UCA. Some of the issues have also identified by our partners in our ongoing dialog. We believe it's imperative that these are addressed in any reforms undertaken for ACT 2.

Missional Challenges

1. **Ministers and leaders in the UCA are not trained in a theological framework for engaging in international mission**, particularly about the importance of locally led, sustainable solutions and the importance of restoring power imbalances arising from our colonial history. Much of the paternalistic paradigm of previous centuries has been allowed to linger in the church. Generous, compassionate, and well-meaning congregations are often engaging in 'mission' activities overseas that are ineffective and, at worst, harmful.
2. **We are not inspiring and equipping younger people to consider leadership and ministry in the church as possible vocations**. With the withdrawal of Assembly funding for programs such as About FACE, InSolidarity and Experience, the UCA is no longer investing in the systematic development of young leaders through international ecumenical engagement. Many of the current generation of lay and ordained leaders within the UCA were formed in faith and theology by their encounter with the global church, made possible by the work of UnitingWorld and its predecessors.
3. **We are not inviting people to join us in following Christ**. Our partners do not understand why we work so hard for social justice but refuse to tell people that God loves them and wants to be in relationship with them. Our highly secularised missional work is seen as oddly self-defeating. We keep discussing the ageing membership and decline in the numbers of the UCA. Every single one of the ministries that we care about is in danger because of this. And yet the UCA (except perhaps in the Propel network) has no theology or practice that is invitational or intentional in calling people to Christ and making disciples of them.

Operational Challenges

4. **Governance mechanisms are not fit for purpose**. While we believe this issue is replicated in all parts of the church, we highlight the challenge within the Assembly. Ostensibly, the ASC has delegated governance of UnitingWorld to the Board of UnitingWorld. However, when we are asked to report to the ASC, and to AFARC, the questions we are asked are a subset of those that fall within the purview of the Board. This results in a frustrating situation where we have two bodies who are attempting to duplicate work of what our Board is doing, but with less engagement, information or understanding of our mission. We believe that there is a vital role that high level bodies such as the ASC and AFARC can play that would be far more valuable.
5. **Inter-conciliar silos result in many lost opportunities for collaboration and growth**. We don't have a database of people who participate in the Uniting Church because the different councils of the church do not share their databases, so national ministries of the UCA cannot reach out to the whole church. Commitments made at the national level such as partnership agreements with churches overseas can be dis-honoured by other councils of the church with no consequences (ie a congregational council can refuse to provide hospitality to a partner church diaspora community despite a partnership agreement to the contrary).

Possible Solutions and How UnitingWorld Can Help

1. Theology for international mission

The UCA should establish a mandatory training module for ministry candidates, continuing education and lay leadership that addresses the theology and good practice in working with the global church for international social justice.

UnitingWorld has for many years compiled theological reflections and stories from lived experience on this subject. Further, we have relationships with theologians and practitioners across much of the global south who we can bring together. We are in a strong position, and eager, to support the UCA's theological education bodies to create an intensive/short course on this subject.

We can further augment this training with online connections with our overseas partners to create ongoing dialog and a community of practice. We believe that learners at any theological education institution would benefit from hearing the stories and learning about the work done by our church partners and discover diverse theological perspectives, see practical theology in action, and explore modern mission at work.

2. Leadership Development

The UCA should set aside funds exclusively for the spiritual, theological and experiential formation of young leaders by enabling them to spend time working within the ministries of overseas partner churches.

UnitingWorld has the relationships and experience to facilitate such visits and placements. Until 2016, UnitingWorld was funded by the Assembly to run something similar. A national joint venture, funded by all the Synods could be operated with just 1-2 staff. UnitingWorld could provide oversight and guidance.

3. Evangelism

The UCA needs to invest nationally in programs that equip people to share their own faith story, share the story of Jesus, and support people to take the first steps towards faith.

The UCA needs to articulate a coherent national narrative that integrates Christ's twofold call to a life of personal reconciliation with God and a life of public striving for justice and compassion for all.

We, the UCA, are struggling to come to terms with post-Christendom Australia and trapped in a false dichotomy between talking and walking the gospel of Christ.

As Christianity becomes a minority faith in an increasingly diverse and secular Australia, we have much to learn from our partner churches who come from multifaith contexts, and who fight poverty and injustice with dogged determination without diluting their identity as Christians or being reticent about sharing God's desire to know and love all people. They simply do not see an inconsistency between witnessing to Christ with words and actions, they see them as inseparable.

For example, many of our partners have a specified ministry of Evangelist. They are not charged with the pastoral or administrative care of congregations, their role is explicitly to preach and teach the whole gospel to those outside the Christian faith, recognising and meeting spiritual needs. In contrast the UCA does not even train youth workers, Sunday school teachers or Scripture teachers, which are the only activities within our current configuration where we may regularly encounter those who are open to exploring faith in Christ.

Provided with resources, UnitingWorld has the capacity to facilitate networks, connections and communities of practice. We can bring the prophetic voice of our partners to speak into our challenges.

4. Effective Governance

The UCA governance bodies should distinguish between when they are responsible for governance of an agency or ministry, and when they are responsible for overseeing the effectiveness of another governance body.

For example, ASC and AFARC should distinguish between Assembly entities who have a Board, and those that don't. When overseeing an agency such as UnitingWorld, which has a Board, rather than asking to see reports on the same things that are reviewed by the Board, they could add significant value by doing the following:

Execute the responsibility of appointing the UnitingWorld Board with much greater diligence. This is the single most important thing that ASC does for UnitingWorld Governance.

- Review the skills matrix of the UnitingWorld Board and identify potential Board members.
- Conduct due diligence on anyone UnitingWorld puts up for Board membership and provide an independent report to ASC before their appointment.
- Deploy a member to sit on the nominations committee during the selection process.

Ask questions about the quality of governance such as:

- Is the Board monitoring the performance of the agency in all domains (strategy, compliance, finance, staff wellbeing etc)
- Is the Board ensuring policies and practices to ensure effective governance and accountability to stakeholders? How?
- Does the Board have an appropriate mix of skills and life-experience to do its job?
- Does the Board periodically evaluate its own performance?
- Does the Board promote gender equality and diversity within itself and in the organisation?
- Does the Board set the organisations risk appetite and monitor how risk is assessed and managed?
- Does the Board ensure that complaints and grievances are managed appropriately?
- Does the Board ensure the OHS of staff? How?

Outside the ambit of the Assembly, our general observation of UCA governance bodies is that many end up playing a gate-keeping role while hampered by structural issues such as being too distant to the work to make meaningful contribution, not having enough skin in the game to be timely and impact focussed, or governance responsibilities placed on those chosen on the basis of diverse representation rather than technical skills.

5. Inter-conciliar Cohesion

We don't actually know how to solve this problem....

Create structural connections or integration between different councils of the church to drive collaboration in key strategic areas.

Centralise information and resources wherever possible and make all of it available to all parts of the church.

A key aspect of cohesion is centralised management of information. We are far too small a church to have duplication and redundancy in silos while we struggle with creating a shared identity and movement across the nation.

For example, welcoming and providing a home to Christian immigrant communities from our partner churches overseas is an important ministry. Walking with new communities as they grow roots in Australia and transition their church identity from that of their church of origin to UCA is likely to be a decade long ministry. It requires careful attention from all four councils of the church. Yet this is being done haphazardly all across Australia, with various degrees of success and distress, with little sharing of learning or development of a systematic approach.

The evangelism program mentioned in #3 is another example of a strategic priority that requires structural coordination across all layers of the church's life.

Theological education is another obvious area for consolidation, but we believe that there will be others making submissions on this subject who are better placed. However, UnitingWorld would find it far easier to contribute to theological education in the UCA if we could do it via one central point.