



WA Presbytery Meeting – 16 March 2024

Feedback from Group Discussions at the November 2023 Presbytery Meeting.

At the Presbytery of WA meeting in November 2023, members of the Presbytery had two group discussion sessions about the four directions suggested by Act 2 for “Better Shaping of Local Communities of Faith”. 62 written responses were received and these responses have been collated. This is a summary of those responses.

Direction 1- Encourage local communities of discipleship and mission.

A few congregations reported they were not doing much about discipleship, and few others said that discipleship was their primary focus.

A range of ways of nurturing discipleship were mentioned, including Bible study groups, a range of small groups (fellowship, men’s or women’s, craft, prayer, music) and some children’s, youth and family activities. Having a worship service which was simple, participatory, welcoming, reflective, contemporary and focussed on developing discipleship was emphasised. Use of technology to enable participation in worship and small groups was also emphasised.

In terms of mission, the need to build relationships with the wider community was emphasised, and a range of community service activities were mentioned. Many congregations are offering hospitality to the community, especially through shared meals and other activities, and some are developing new activities based outside of church buildings. The need to be welcoming and inclusive was emphasised.

There was an emphasis on the need for training of members in Scripture and theology, understanding of the Uniting Church, worship leadership, pastoral care, faith sharing, governance, leadership and mission. CEDAL needs to take note of these.

When asked who they could collaborate with on discipleship and mission, local schools and community organisations, other UCA congregations and ecumenical partnerships were mentioned. Collaboration with UCA agencies and schools was not seen as a viable alternative for most congregations.

It appears that a lot is already happening around discipleship and mission, though many of the activities are fairly traditional and there are not a lot of innovative approaches.

Direction 2- Align with the vision for congregations in the Basis of Union.

This section was the one most poorly answered. It appeared that most people were not aware of the five marks of a congregation in the Basis of Union and found it difficult to rate

themselves on these. Most did not respond, gave incomprehensible answers or said they were good at everything.

Of those who did respond, the mark they rated themselves most highly on was “Building each other up in love” with “Gathering to Hear God’s Word” as a poor second. This raises the question of whether many of our congregations are most focussed on looking after the existing members of the congregation- have we become social clubs which only exist to look after members? The mark they rated that they needed to most improve on was “Serving the Wider Church”, with “Serving the World” ranking second. This raises the question of whether many of our congregations have lost contact with the wider church and the world around them.

Direction 3- Support fit for purpose governance arrangements.

Most respondents were able to identify things which would relieve the burden on their current Church Council, such as

- More people willing to be involved
- Recruiting younger people into leadership roles
- Fewer concerns about finance
- Less emphasis on compliance and administration
- Less time spent on property issues
- Greater clarity on the role of Church Council
- More delegation of responsibilities
- Providing more administrative support

Several responded that more access to Embargoed Funds would help- this a matter that Thrive Mission Committee and Presbytery Property Committee need to consider.

There was a mixed response to the proposals from Act 2 and Thrive about changes to governance structures to alleviate the issues identified above. Some supported the suggestions, some supported them but with some reservations and others had concerns and questions. A particularly strong concern was expressed about the loss of congregational autonomy if we moved to clusters or Area Councils. It appears that while most Church Councils report they are under stress, there is a reluctance to move to a more collaborative governance model which may relieve these stresses, through fear of loss of congregational autonomy.

When asked how their congregation could change its current governance structures, many did not respond. A few said they were already working with others, but it was also clear that several congregations did not know how to go about building relationships with other congregations. The need was expressed for help with facilitation of conversations between congregations, a better understanding of the framework for conversations, information on how it might work, and suggestions on process. It is clear that congregations will need a lot of help to move towards new collaborative governance structures and that Presbytery will play a key role in providing this.

Direction 4- Recognise there is a time for everything.

Many respondents seemed to have no idea about how the Uniting Church can simplify pathways for new and emerging communities of faith. Those who had given some thought to this possibility suggested having a wider vision, permission giving, better communication, support from the wider church and practical ideas on how to promote new faith communities. This appears to be an area we are weak on.

When asked to identify the signs that indicate that a congregation may be reaching the end of its life, the following were mentioned

- Declining and aging membership
- Difficulty in finding leaders
- Diminishing financial resources
- No longer able to engage effectively in worship, witness and service
- Concerns about property
- Being disconnected from the wider church

It is interesting that the signs that a congregation is reaching the end of its life are very similar to the issues identified under 3 above as currently posing a burden for Church Councils. There is also a connection with the answers under 2 which indicate that many congregations feel disconnected from the wider church. Does this indicate that many of our congregations are in fact reaching the end of their lives?

If this is so, the answers to the question about how we can best support congregation whose life is coming to an end are important. Offering excellent pastoral care, connecting members with another worshipping community and providing individual support for congregations are important. This is a matter that the Presbytery will need to give attention to.

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