

Pathways Project

PROPOSALS

Something We Can All Do Now

That the Synod:

1. receive the report;
2. affirm the need for all members of the Uniting Church to tell God's story in a way that connects meaningfully and respectfully with the communities we serve;
3. commit all the people of/within the Synod of the NSW/ACT to work together to develop its skills and confidence in telling the good news of Jesus Christ with their neighbours;
4. provide resources to assist the two pilot Presbyteries (Parramatta Nepean and New England North West) to develop particular initiatives in response to the findings over the next 6 months;

Process to continue

That the Synod:

1. support the positive engagement with congregations and Presbyteries through the Pathways engagement process;
2. assert the key role of the Presbytery Chairpersons in encouraging and supporting engagement by their Presbyteries in the Pathways process;
3. commit resources:
 - a. to enable the process to continue with the pilot Presbyteries to allow consideration of findings and to begin to develop pathways for action; and
 - b. to extend the scope of the project to progressively engage with all Presbyteries and the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress and to communicate to the Synod 2019 the outcomes and achievements of the process;
4. refer the funding of the Pathways project to the Budget Steering Committee for resolution, noting the significant commitment of \$300,000 per year already made by Uniting.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The **Pathways Project** is a grass roots planning project that seeks to explore how the mission of God is lived out in Congregations and Presbyteries, and to discover how we can empower, resource and support this mission. *Pathways* is developing processes that will enable us to listen, value each other and bring to light the exciting possibilities for sharing Christ's story of love in the world. This will then be mapped out in a long term plan.



Telling Our Story

SYNOD 2017

WHAT WE HEARD

There is a strong understanding and ownership of who we are as the people of God called to share the love of Jesus through word and action in our local communities. We strongly identify with a commitment to social justice, inclusion and diversity of thought.

There is a strong sense that we all are challenged to find ways to speak faithfully and respectfully to our neighbours about the love of God in Christ. We are almost instinctive in the way we act in our communities to serve those around us who are most vulnerable, but we struggle to articulate what that means in terms of our discipleship and faith. *We love our neighbours and seek to serve them in practical ways, but we don't know how to tell them that God loves them too!*

There are significant challenges concerning distance and leadership in rural areas.

PROCESS

The process has been warmly received and there has been good engagement across the pilot Presbyteries. The process has evolved to consist of 3 workshops each of about 2 hours' duration occurring 4-6 weeks apart. The first workshop invites participants to share something of how they see themselves and the church they are a part of. The second workshop feeds back what has been shared alongside what others in their Presbytery have shared. After the second session, information about the congregation and its local community is collected and collated. The third session takes all the information gathered and prompts conversation and planning for the "what next?"



Introduction

The ***Pathways Project*** is a grass roots planning project that seeks to explore how the mission of God is lived out in Congregations and Presbyteries, and to understand how we can empower, resource and support this mission. *Pathways* is developing processes that will enable us to listen, value each other and bring to light the exciting possibilities for how we envision sharing Christ's story of love in the world. This will then be mapped out in a long term plan.

The project commenced across two diverse pilot presbyteries: New England North West (NENW), a rural Presbytery, and Parramatta Nepean Presbytery (PNP), an urban Presbytery. We have created and tested a process that can be extended across the whole Church, and in doing so show what it means to be a fellowship and ministry of reconciliation.

The *Pathways* Project is an opportunity to celebrate and build on our strengths, and to contribute to shaping the Uniting Church for the next 40 years. The process has been designed to take seriously the inter-conciliar nature of the Uniting Church and to hear the voice of people in congregations and Presbyteries in the wider life of the Synod.

In developing the *Pathways* model, we have developed tailored grass roots Congregation and Presbytery) processes enabling the emergence of local missional opportunities. It is from what we hear in these processes that we will develop alternative options for how best to utilise the Church's gifts, skills and resources, in order to build one another up in love and to serve the world. This will then enable the creation of a framework and a map (operational plan) for how the whole of Synod will work together to empower and encourage the mission of God in its Congregations, Presbyteries and Services.

Background

In 2016, Uniting offered funding to the Synod Standing Committee to assist the Synod to engage in a process that had already been successfully used by Uniting. A small group then reviewed the Uniting 10-year plan development process and determined that a similar process could be developed and undertaken with the Synod and its Presbyteries.

The Synod then appointed a project team to develop and pilot the process in two Presbyteries. The project team consists of Rev Kath Merrifield (seconded from UME to the Secretariat), Ms Melanie Dicks (Uniting) and Ms Katie Fisher (Uniting). The project team has sought to work alongside and maintain regular contact with the Mission and Property Project (Secretariat) and the Uniting Church Engagement Team.

Process

The pilot project has been developed in four overlapping stages:

- *Stage 1 – data collection and analysis*
This stage has progressed simultaneously with stages 2 and 3. It involved gathering data from a range of sources including the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Census 2016 data), the National Church Life Survey (NCLS) 2016, congregation financial returns, and a range of data already held by the Synod and Presbytery.

The high-level findings from this data are below (see *Findings*).

Work is continuing on the development of a congregation profile that brings together congregation and community data that can assist congregations to develop strategies for engaging in their local communities in meaningful and relevant ways, and that can assist the Presbytery and Synod to understand what support congregations might then need.

- *Stage 2 – question framework*

The question framework was developed to focus attention on our calling as the Uniting Church to be a “fellowship of reconciliation through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself” (*Basis of Union*, paragraph 3).

The same questions were asked of each group. This has usually taken the form of a 2-hour workshop where people can engage with each other around table groups of 4-8 people. We have tried to encourage these groups to mix up people from different congregations to enable broad discussion. The responses are then collated, analysed and then fed back at a later session.

Why do we do what we do?

Who are we?

What inspires you about the UCA?

What qualities and commitments best express who we are as the UCA?

Who are we called to be?

What is a “fellowship of reconciliation”?

What does a “healthy” congregation/Presbytery look like?

Then we turn our attention to current congregational/Presbytery plans and vision:

If the plan / vision is implemented, what do you hope to see? What does it look like?

What are the challenges?

What help might you need?

- *Stage 3 – Presbytery engagement*

Initial contact was made with each of the pilot Presbyteries through the Presbytery Chairperson. The team sought advice on how best to approach congregations in each of the Presbyteries, with strong encouragement that engagement be in groups or clusters of congregations rather than with individual congregations on their own. This was to ensure that, from the outset, this was a collaborative process between all parts of the church including neighbouring congregations and faith communities. In NENW, it was agreed that the team would engage with congregations in geographic clusters, and in PNP through the already established zones.

The project team engaged with Presbyteries at one of their regular Presbytery meetings. In PNP, the team was also given an opportunity to present the first workshop to the zone leaders to enable them to understand the process and so to encourage people in their zones.

The project team then arranged workshops with each of the clusters or zones. In NENW, this was arranged as a “road trip” meeting with a cluster of congregations each night for 4 nights. In PNP, this was spread over 2-3 weeks. Generally, the workshops were conducted in the evenings to allow as many people to participate as possible. In PNP, we are grateful for the assistance of Rev Danielle Hemsworth-Smith who was made available to us to assist in liaising with zone leaders and organising dates and times.

The first of the workshops focused on the question framework. These workshops were well received and generally generated energetic conversation. Over 250 people participated in the first workshops.

The second workshop was conducted about 4 weeks after the first workshop. This allowed time to collate and analyse the responses and for the project team to reflect on what could be achieved realistically in the time frame. The team agreed that the second workshop would be a feedback session to generate conversation and further exploration but that the planning would be best left to a third workshop when people had had time to digest and reflect on the information they had received.

The second workshop then focussed on feeding back what we had heard in the responses and checking our interpretation of the data. It enabled time for reflection on those things that we have in common with other congregations and Presbyteries, and those things that might be unique in our own particular region or zone. While attendance at the second workshop was generally less than at the first, (around 150 people in total), the conversations were again energetic.

This workshop also introduced the congregation profile, a document that attempts to draw together a range of information about the congregation and its local community. This document is also intended to help us gain visibility of current:

- missional activities – including size, reach, context and diversity;
- collaborative and community partnerships;
- innovative practices and growth practices already underway;
- leadership and people resources;
- governance arrangements; and
- financial and physical resources.

The project team prepare the bulk of this document and then ask congregations to check the information included and to add information that is within their local knowledge. This document is still being tested and is not yet in a form that congregations are able to respond to confidently and in a timely fashion. The project team is working with the Uniting Church Engagement Team to improve it.

There was only one cluster in NENW that did not participate in the process. In PNP, there was a small number of individual congregations who have not participated in their zone workshops.

The project team has committed to each of the clusters/zones in the pilot Presbyteries to return at least one more time to feed back the Synod's decision.

Ideally, the third workshop would begin to equip congregations to develop a plan for action in their local communities, or to review any existing plans, in response to the information they have received. This step needs also to include a realistic assessment of capacity and capability and how we can leverage the strengths that exist across Presbyteries and the Synod. This will then enable both the Presbyteries and Synod to consider how support and oversight is offered in ways that meet the needs of local missional activity.

The project team is aware that there is also a need to review Presbytery plans alongside these findings.

- *Stage 4 – Developing a planning framework*

The information gleaned from all these discussions and conversations will be put alongside the quantitative data – financials, demographics, results from NCLS – to develop an overall picture that can be interrogated locally (congregation), regionally (Presbytery) and synod-wide (NSW/ACT). This picture will give us a starting point from which pathways can be built to enable, support and encourage the missional objectives of the church in all its parts.

This area of work is still to be completed. It requires, at least, further input from the Stepping Stones Project and the completion of the engagement process with the pilot Presbyteries.

Other connections and sharing

At various points, the progress of the project has been shared with the Synod Senior Executive Team (through the Acting General Secretary) and with the Presbytery Chairs (through the Acting Associate Secretary).

An attempt to meet with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress to explain the project in more detail was unsuccessful.

Monitoring and Evaluation

A steering group met weekly for the first 6 weeks of the pilot project and then fortnightly thereafter. This group included Rev Jane Fry, Acting General Secretary, Chris Grover (CFO, Uniting), Rev John Thornton (Acting Associate Secretary). This group gave regular input on the progress of the project as well as regular monitoring of risks as required.

A reference group met monthly for the duration of the pilot project. This group included the members of the steering group along with:

- a) Rev Simon Hansford, Moderator-Elect (and NENW representative until June 2017)
- b) David Cornford, Project Lead / Rev Suzanne Stanton, Presbytery Relations Manager (Mission and Property Project)
- c) Rev Rick Morrell (Director of Mission, Uniting)
- d) Rev Geoff Stevenson, Chairperson, Parramatta Nepean Presbytery
- e) Rev Will Pearson, Chairperson, New England North West Presbytery (from June 2017)

The project team has reported to the Synod Standing Committee at each of its meetings since April 2017.

Findings

What we heard from the pilot workshops

Consistently, through the workshops and conversations, we have heard a song of hope. While some congregations know that they struggle with capacity to do all they would like to do, we did not encounter anyone who has given up.

We have heard stories of Presbyteries and congregations wrestling with the changing world they are called to serve and finding creative ways to engage with those challenges.

We heard a strong commitment to working together to find ways to be the different kind of community God calls us to be: a community that is courageous, inclusive, standing up for those who are isolated; a community that loves no matter what.

We have also heard stories of disappointment when different groups have felt let down by others and the consequent disconnection or disassociation between councils of the church. This is particularly heard between Presbytery and the Synod, and between congregations and both the Presbytery and Synod.

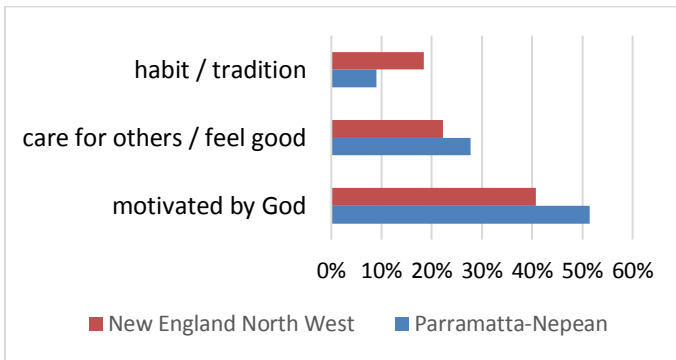
We recognise that for some regions, the population is expanding rapidly and the church is struggling to keep up and know how to engage in new housing estates, new cultural groups and whole new suburbs, while in other parts of the Synod, communities are contracting in size and the population that is left is ageing and feeling abandoned.

Why do we do what we do?

Fundamentally, the people we met with have a strong understanding of who they are as the people of God and that they are called to be Christ's presence in the world. We do what we do because we are motivated by our knowledge and love of God and Christ's call to care for others.

“Called by the Spirit of God to be a blessing to the world”

“Compassion, moved by seeing need”



- Smaller percentage of responses included:
- fear of change,
 - resourcing,
 - compliance.

There was also a significant response that we do what we do out of habit or tradition. This was seen variously as both positive and negative. *“It’s what we’ve always done”*

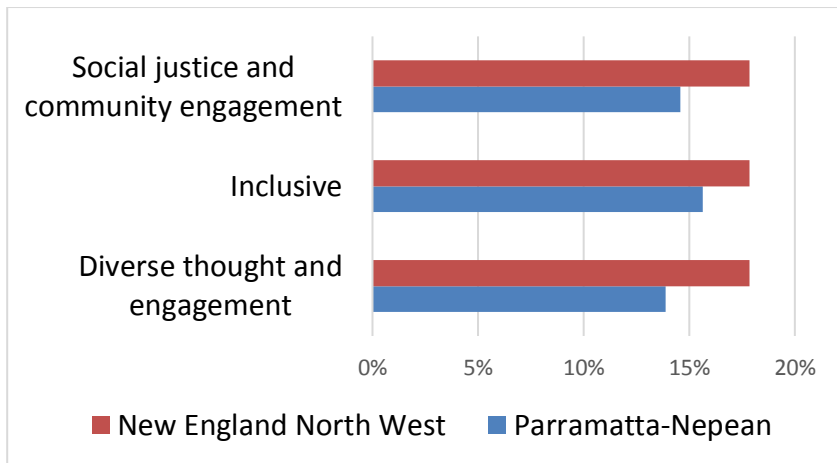
Who are we?

While the responses to this question are much more diverse, there are also some strong shared understandings of what inspires us about the Uniting Church. We are most inspired by the UCA’s commitment to social justice, inclusiveness and diversity of thought. It is also clear that the definition of these terms would warrant further discussion.

“We stand for social justice and with the marginalised.”

“Freedom to wrestle with our faith, question, disagree, doubt.”

“Regardless of who we are and where we come from.”



- Smaller percentage of responses included:
- ecumenical/inter-faith,
 - uniting as ongoing, practical,
 - sexuality,
 - environment,
 - women in leadership,
 - lay/ordained,
 - equality,
 - created by God,
 - commitment to indigenous peoples,
 - multicultural

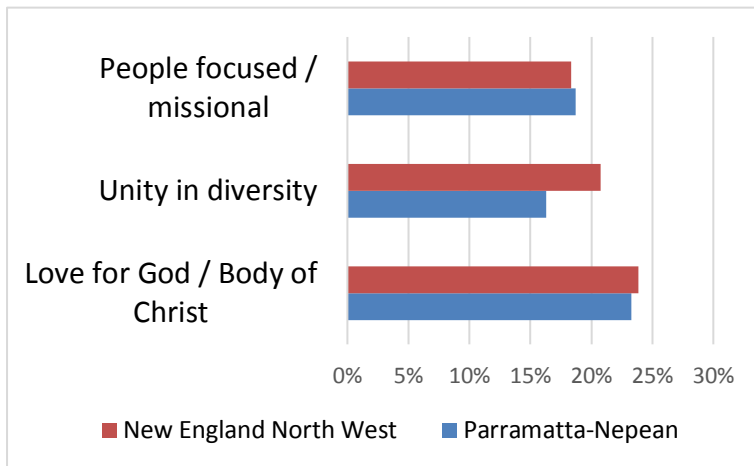
Who are we called to be?

When we asked questions about what it might look like to be a “fellowship of reconciliation” and what does a healthy congregation look like?, we received strong responses in relation to being Christ’s hands and feet in the world and being a community that holds together differences and is people-focused and outward-looking.

“To try and show Christ to others through our actions”

“Bringing together in an inclusive community”

“Mission minded – driven by the love for the other not self-preservation”



Smaller percentage of responses included:

- Spirit-led,
- individual faith development,
- values,
- open to change/risk-taking,
- accepting difference

Hopes and dreams

There is also remarkable similarity in the hopes and dreams we have for God's church. We have asked this question in two different ways across the two workshops and have found very similar responses. The top three priorities in terms of our hopes and dreams are:

1. To grow as a gathered community reflecting unity in diversity

"Sustain and prosper (not as one congregation) but together as the Body of Christ."

2. Growing, sharing, nurturing faith together

"Congregations will all come to a stronger faith in Christ - growing in maturity in Christ."

3. To connect to community

"The community knows that God cares."

In PNP, there has also been a strong response around developing a culture where it is acceptable ("OK") to risk or fail or change.

Challenges

When we asked about challenges, there were two that stood out as being shared across the groups and across the Presbyteries:

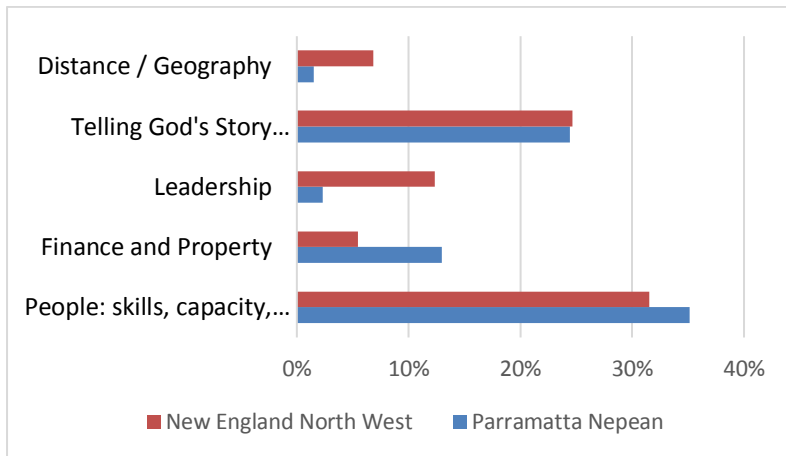
1. our ability to tell God's story in our communities in a way that is relevant and meaningful, and

"Speaking in a language meaningful to people beyond the Church and other cultures"

2. the capacity of our people in terms of skills, knowledge and culture.

"Enough energetic people and enthusiasm"

And there were three that showed a large difference between the two pilot Presbyteries. Challenges of distance and availability of appropriate leadership were two that featured strongly in NENW but were very much less strong in PNP. Challenges of finance and property seemed to be significant issues in PNP but not so strong in NENW.



- Smaller percentage of responses include:
- resistance to change,
 - structure/admin,
 - cooperation and collaboration

Summary

Our theological foundations are strong. We know who we are and who we are called to be. We know how to serve people in our community in practical ways. We love God and we love our communities deeply. Our biggest challenge is that we either lack confidence or do not know how to share the story of God in our communities. There is a sense in many places that the Good News of Jesus Christ has been made irrelevant, and we are struggling to tell an alternative story to that which is heard in the media or assumed through cultural persuasion. We are also deeply conscious of the limited capacity of our people.

What we find in the data

Our communities

The population of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory continues to increase. However, the population increase is not uniform across the State and Territory.

In the pilot Presbyteries, there has been enormous growth in the PNP across most of the region and the speed of this is projected to continue. PNP now has a population of just over 2million people and will be well on the way to 3million by 2036 (a projected growth rate of over 50%). The main areas of growth are in the north-west around the new rail corridor (due to open in 2019) and the south-west sector around the new airport to be built at Badgerys Creek.

The total population of the NENW region is approximately 180,000 and is projected to only grow by about 4% by 2036. The bulk of growth will be in the cities of Tamworth and Armidale while other towns are projected to experience either very small population growth or even decline.

The ABS Census (2016) also heralded the decline of people in the Australian community who identify with Christianity and the rapid growth of those who do not identify with any religion.

The ABS also notes the largest changes in spoken languages were an increase in Mandarin, Arabic, Nepali, and Hindi.

UCA Congregations

The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) data shows that across the Synod of NSW/ACT, there are 615 locations/congregations, down by 25% since 1990. The average size of our congregations is 51 attenders and 97% of us attend church at least once every month. The average age of adult congregation members is 66 years of age.

A census of UCA congregation conducted by NCLS on behalf of the Assembly in 2013 revealed that there are 707 ordained ministers (Ministers of the Word and Deacons) in NSW/ACT, 69% of whom are over 60. About 445 of these are “active” and 261 are retired.

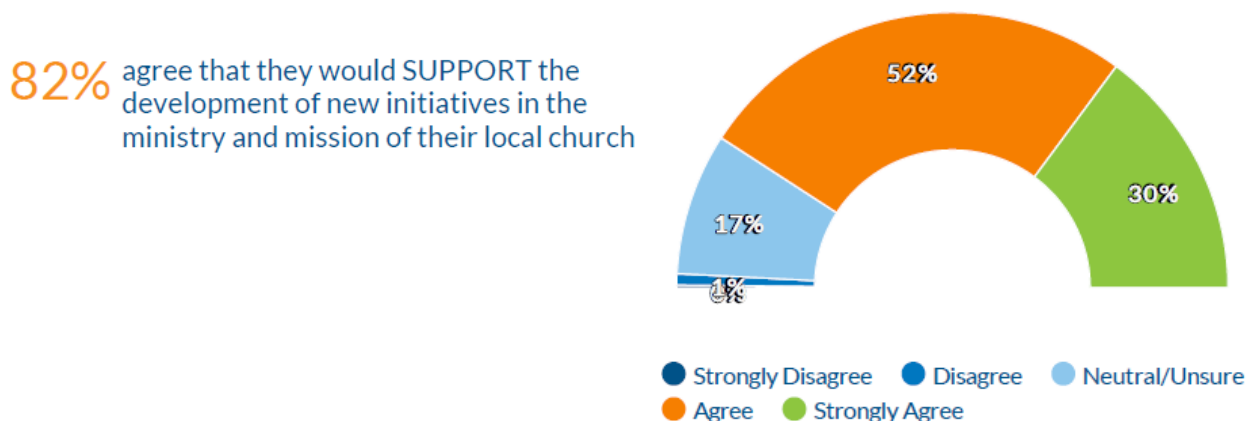
In PNP, there are approximately 75 congregations. There are 74 ministry placements made up of about 31 congregational placements, 11 chaplains and about 20 Assembly and Synod placements located within the Presbytery). Uniting operated approximately 48 facilities/services in the Presbytery.

In 2011, the NCLS Presbytery profile is very positive noting increases in all but two of the core qualities (leadership and faith-sharing).

NENW Presbytery is made up of 30 congregations. There are 6 ministry placements including a rural chaplain and a Uniting chaplain, 3 of which are filled. Uniting operates 3 facilities/services in the Presbytery.

In 2011, NCLS Presbytery profile is also very positive noting increases in all but two of the core qualities (belonging and faith-sharing).

In 2016, the NSW/ACT Synod profile indicates that 82% of us would support something new in our congregations:



Two-thirds of us spend time in prayer, meditation and reading the bible at least 3 times per week. 43% of us spend time daily.

In relation to the findings of the workshop discussions, the NCLS data reinforces the challenges we face in sharing the Gospel with more than 50% of respondents to the NCLS saying that they would like to share their faith with their friends, children and grandchildren.

Project Evaluation

General feedback during the workshops indicates that congregations have appreciated the consultation process. Several groups were particularly appreciative that the information given in the first workshop was offered back to them in a way that invited their input and provoked conversation. In checking in with the various groups, people indicated that they felt heard and understood.

In beginning the project, several groups made it clear to the project team that they wanted to see the talking turn into action. There was some sense of uncertainty that the process would simply fall over somewhere along the way and nothing would come of yet another “talkfest”. While the process is yet to be completed, the return of the project team with the data collected and comparisons to the other Presbytery has increased confidence in the process, and in several groups there is a genuine interest in the next steps.

A written evaluation process has yet to be undertaken with the groups we have engaged with. This will be part of the third workshop.

There is a need to pay attention, in particular to the way people from non-English speaking backgrounds participate in the process. In our early interactions with people for whom English is not their first language, we have had mixed responses. Some have coped well and engaged enthusiastically in the discussions, while others have found it very difficult. There is a need to consider the special needs of these groups and to consider resourcing intentional engagement with these communities, perhaps using language groups as a gathering point rather than the geographic / zone approach used to date.

When the project was established, the Synod Standing Committee agreed to some expected outcomes. These are listed in the following table with comment as to their progress/achievement:

Expected Outcomes	Progress
Assessment and analysis of current state of Synod and pilot presbyteries planning process	Underway
A clearer understanding of who we are as church today and our purpose (who are we called to be)	Pilot workshops conducted and responses analysed and fed back. Conversation continues
Positive engagement with two pilot Presbyteries	Achieved
Development of collaborative practices and processes to engage across the Synod	Underway – congregations willing to participate in process and genuinely interested in their own responses and the responses of others
A framework for the development of a plan to enable the Synod operations and agencies to effectively and efficiently “promote and encourage the mission of the church” (UCA Regs 3.1.5) and to “assist Congregations and Presbyteries in their missionary responsibility” (UCA Regs 3.1.5(a))	Not yet begun
Articulate a greater understanding of what it is to be an inter-conciliar church	Underway – developing good conversations between congregations and within pilot Presbyteries
Demonstrate a hope for the church beyond present constraints that reflects the local culture and context	Congregations have self-described their hopes and challenges
A greater spirit of cooperation and trust across the Synod	Growing

Next Steps

The project team recommends that the Synod agree to the completion of the pilot project and then for the project scope to be extended to all Presbyteries (including the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress). The team envisages that the meeting of the Presbytery Chairpersons would play a role in helping Presbyteries to engage positively with the project. Ideally, this work would be completed in time for the next Synod meeting to consider the findings and proposed pathways to take us into God's tomorrow.

The project timeline assumes an engagement process of 3 x 2-hour workshops spaced 4-6 weeks apart with each cluster of congregations. This is preceded by a presentation to the Presbytery meeting. Each workshop is facilitated by two people. The project also requires support with logistics and information gathering / data collection. Findings are reported back to congregation clusters and to the Presbytery as a whole.

If approved by the Synod, a project plan for the roll-out will be developed and submitted to the Synod Standing Committee for approval. The project team will report regularly to the Synod Standing Committee.

A draft project timeline has been attached showing that conducting one set of workshops per week will not be enough to complete the task, on the current resourcing, before Synod 2019. To complete the task in the timeframe, the capacity of the project team needs to be increased so that it can be working with more than one Presbytery at any one time. We also need to note that the project team will need particular assistance in engaging with the Korean Presbytery and UAICC.

Report prepared by:
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Ms Melanie Dicks,
Ms Katie Fisher
Date: 29 August 2017

