



The Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of South Australia
Mission Resourcing



Summary of the Review of Missional Needs and Opportunities in the Uniting Church in South Australia 2023

Research by AngelWings Ltd

Steve Taylor
Kayli Taylor
Lynne Taylor

Commissioned by the Mission and
Leadership Development Board,
Synod of South Australia.

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under the auspices of the MLDB.

Why a Summary?

On 31 July 2023, AngelWings presented to the Mission & Leadership Development Board the Review of the Missional Needs and Opportunities in the Synod of South Australia. In fulfilling the terms of reference, the review is 38 pages, written specifically for the MLDB to inform their decisions on how to best fulfill their mandate over the next 5-10 years. It therefore contains information and recommendations pertaining to specific roles, programs, and personnel. As a document that may have implications for people's positions, it is not intended to be a public document. The MLD-B engaged the report significantly over the several months as they look to the future. The Standing Committee also engaged with the Review. The fruit of this, the future structure and strategy of the MLD, will be released in due course.

There is, however, much in the Review that is beneficial for the whole Synod, especially having engaged so thoroughly with the process. The MLDB therefore prepared this summary which it is hoped is beneficial and insightful in assisting all parts of the church be more deeply informed as we each seek to enter more fully into God's mission.

Background to the Review

Aware of significant changes in society and the church, the Mission and Leadership Development Board (MLD-B) instigated this review of missional needs and opportunities. Like other Christian churches in Australia, the UCA SA is undergoing a period of change. Across Australia, identification with Christianity is declining. The Covid19 pandemic has redrawn contemporary life. In South Australia, the Uniting Church's shift from one to three Presbyteries and the renewal of Uniting College for Leadership and Theology (UCLT) have also presented new challenges and opportunities. This review gives the UCA SA the opportunity to look backward and to look forward, to consider how best to equip itself for the future.

This report is written by researchers from AngelWings Ltd, which generates high-quality research and bespoke educational resources to serve the common good. Formed in 2004, it has developed a track record of research excellence in church and community demographics. This project drew on the unique skills of three researchers: Steve Taylor, Kayli Taylor, and Lynne Taylor.¹

This review is structured by three questions:

Q1: What are the missional priorities for the Synod in light of new and changing contexts?

Q2: What are creative options for how the MLD might resource these priorities?

Q3: What are some threats to the fulfilment of these missional priorities?

The review analyses missional priorities, resourcing options and threats, and offers recommendations. Many of these recommendations relate directly to the work of MLD-B, though others fall outside the remit of the MLD-B.

The review was not of individuals, nor of current personnel roles, but for a Board setting priorities for the next three to five years. The reviewers expressed gratitude for the insights gained from every individual interview and interaction, all of which contributed to this report.

This summary seeks to retain the structure and content of the review, while shortening the text. The recommendations are also included in a summarized form. This is to allow the content and recommendations to be discerned together. Where there are specific people, titles or percentages named, these are omitted.

¹ To ensure widespread engagement, the researchers developed seven customised research approaches. Two online surveys were completed by 138 participants. In addition, 8 Focus groups with 47 people, and 16 individual interviews, first within the UCA SA, then interstate, engaged 63 people. Various Synod engagement activities involved another 109 participants. They received written submissions from eight individuals. Hence in total, 318 people provided input in various ways into the Review process.

Reviewing recent publications including National Church Life Survey data, reports from Ministry Centres, and Synod-wide reports (such as the Property reports) provided a wider sense of needs and opportunities. Analysis of newsletters from eight congregations illuminated current congregational approaches to resourcing.

Priority 1

First Family relationships: Walking with First Peoples and Caring for Country

The review highlights the deep spirituality of Indigenous people associated with the UCA SA, emphasizing their connection to Country and the insight that God was in this place long before 1788. It underscores the importance of walking with First Peoples and caring for the land as a core missional priority. The Uniting Church, rooted in unity and reconciliation, acknowledges its First Family, the UAICC, and respects Elders past and present. Truth-telling about the impacts of colonization is essential, including mission history.

Mission history is perceived differently by those with diverse ancestral experiences, whether as missionaries or the missionized. Indigenous churches are encouraged to embrace principles of self-governance, self-support, self-propagation, and self-theologizing. The UAICC's Regional Council demonstrates self-governance, and the Theologian in Residence program exemplifies self-theologizing.

However, there is a need to work on self-support and self-propagation. The review identifies missional priorities, including the development of "Walking on Country" initiatives and cultural competency programs for both church and the public. The Revised Preamble helps contextualize these conversations by acknowledging the economic challenges resulting from colonization while celebrating Indigenous wisdom and reconciliation commitments.

The review proposes certain actions to maintain and enhance the reconciling capacity within the Synod. It noted the church-wide affirmation of the importance of Covenanting as a priority for the Synod. These include designating who will have responsibility for justice matters flowing from the Voice referendum (noting the report was submitted prior to the referendum) and establishing an Indigenous Reference Group to guide the development of UCLT and MR educative initiatives. It recommends working with UAICC to apply for Uniting Foundation funding to conduct a business plan for establishing public-facing cultural competency training and Walking on Country as a social innovation enterprise, financially benefitting UAICC. Both cultural competency training and Walking on Country could be offered beyond the UCA SA, extending UAICC's funding streams and sharing this rich Indigenous wisdom wider afield. In addition, it recommends a project to research how Indigenous churches in other settler-colonial countries such as Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand enhance Indigenous voice within the councils of the church, with a view to bringing recommendations regarding appointment processes for General Secretaries and the business of Presbytery and Synod.

Priority 2

Celebrating Identity Strengths

The review highlights the idea that experience is continually gathered as a pilgrim community journeys together, emphasizing the lifelong nature of this journey and the constant accumulation of fresh experiences. It discusses the shift in the UCA SA from one to three Presbyteries, acknowledging the challenges and opportunities this transition presents.

The reviewers conducted multiple focus groups, including within the presbyteries to better understand their unique missional needs and opportunities. Different perspectives on mission were identified, resulting in diverse resourcing needs and challenges for the Synod in responding to these variations. New structures create fresh opportunities, such as innovative ways to relate, especially in collaboration with agencies, which necessitate ongoing discussions.

The review also addresses the presence of pain and frustration, emphasizing the importance of truth-telling and building trust in pastoral, caring ways. Concerns about equitable resourcing were explored across multiple interviews, recognizing that the diverse nature of Presbyteries leads to varying resourcing needs. Efforts are made by MR and UCLT staff to serve the entire church, but enhancing connection and communication in diverse contexts is a priority.

Drawing from other research, the report references Nathan Mladin's report on the United Reformed Church (URC) (2023), highlighting the strength of embracing diversity. The UCA-SA's capacity to work with diversity is seen as a potential missional strength.

The review recommends certain actions to enhance the emergence of Presbyteries as fresh expressions of the UCA SA. These are to allocate time for all MR and UCLT staff to serve as presence at Presbytery meetings. Secondly, that MLD-B offers processes that invite individual Presbyteries into an annual evaluation of unique training needs and opportunities. And finally, that the EO ensures professional resourcing workshops with MR and UCLT staff to build capacity in working with and across Presbyteries.

Priority 3

Mission as fuller expressions of reconciliation

The review emphasizes that the Basis of Union's understanding of mission is centred on reconciliation. The Revised Preamble calls for the church to work together for a fuller expression of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. It argues that discerning missional needs and opportunities should not restrict the holistic movements of God's Spirit. The Church as a Spirit-empowered body responds to these missional needs and opportunities and is empowered for diverse activities and roles.

Defining Mission

The review suggests redefining mission based on the Uniting Church's context. In light of Priority 1, it offers an inverted interpretation of the five marks of mission,² aligning them with the language of the Basis of Union which can furnish the church with a comprehensive expression of the UCA SA's reconciling mission.

- Care for Country that walks with First Peoples and treasures land and water
- Transforming social structures, including the church as an organisation
- Tending in acts of mercy
- Maturing faith formation
- Sharing faith in culturally appropriate ways.

The review notes that respondents in a Synod-wide questionnaire used different sources to define mission, with variations across Presbyteries. Some emphasized the nature of Jesus, the gospel, and New Testament scriptures. While differences exist, commonalities include viewing mission as self-giving, valuing the context, and recognizing the importance of cultural awareness and all placed strong emphasis on the nature of Jesus. There is also a consensus that the goal of mission should not solely be increasing church attendance and a concern about mission approaches that may not be suitable in contemporary contexts.

These themes and commonalities could serve as starting points for Mission Resourcing, providing frameworks for addressing priorities like *lightening the load* and *uniting together* across Presbyteries and the Synod in our postmodern and late modern context.

The review recommended cultivating ongoing conversations with Synod, Presbyteries, congregations and any interested parties about a fuller expression of reconciliation defined by inverting the five marks of mission. It also recommended asking the Church Planting Taskforce to review its name and terms of reference to ensure the planting of "fuller expressions of reconciliation".

Resourcing fuller expressions of reconciliation

Mission is clearly happening. When asked about existing missional activities, respondents to the Synod-wide questionnaire provided a sustained and diverse range of responses. The range of responses suggests that the task of Mission Resourcing is not to inspire into mission, but to create and enhance learning around existing initiatives. In a context of rapid change, the diverse

² The Anglican Church in the UK defined these as: Tell (proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom); Teach (teach, baptise and nurture new believers); Tend (respond to human need by loving service); Transform (unjust structures of society, challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation); and Treasure (strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth). See Andrew F. Wall and Cathy Ross, *Mission in the Twenty-First Century. Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Orbis, 2008).

understandings of mission held by different Presbyteries might actually be a gift, inviting a learning with and from others who are exploring different expressions of reconciliation. The task of Mission Resourcing and UCLT becomes to create learning contexts that are safe enough for there to be self-critical reflection on existing missional activities in light of the phrase “fuller expressions of reconciliation.”

The reviewers considered the work of the two groups in the MLD Mission Resourcing and UCLT, but noted that the Synod also has *UnitingCare SA*. They commented that our structural alignment perpetuates some unhelpful divisions between word and deed. In some conversations during Synod, the implications from this existing framing seemed to be that mission is what congregations do. In contrast, care is not mission is what agencies do. Given the call for fuller expressions of reconciliation in the Revised Preamble, the reviewers suggest such separations are unhelpful.

The review recommended asking the General Secretary to consider initiating conversations with UnitingCare SA about the understandings of mission being cultivated by the separation of Mission Resourcing and UnitingCare SA and explore structural and organisational implications for renaming or realigning.

Resourcing local and neighbourly care

The review discusses the importance of resourcing local and neighbourly care – the ‘informal care’ – offered by local congregations. Formal care is offered by agencies, NGOs and government, but the role of informal care is where individuals within congregations offer assistance, such as making a cup of tea, engaging in conversation, and offering to pray. The goal is to provide care that is both hospitable and safe, shifting from dependency to empowerment.

It also suggests aligning Uniting Care educative resources with Mission Resourcing to enhance informal care efforts. It aims to break down divisions between congregations and agencies, promoting partnership and community development within congregational thinking.

The church-wide survey results indicate that the top priorities for mission-related efforts are local engagement in mission and creating communities of belonging. The need to resource the local, especially in the context of decline, is highlighted, including affirming God’s work in local neighbourhoods, helping congregations explore reconciliation and mission, offering resources on place-making, partnering, and community development, cultivating conversations related to justice and advocacy, and collaborating with various organizations and groups to provide educative resources in neighbourly care.

The review proposes an emphasis on local neighbourhood mission to support congregations in their mission efforts and to enhance local care efforts and aligning resources. This would involve affirming God’s work in local neighbourhoods, helping congregations explore reconciliation and mission, offering resources on place-making, partnering, and community development, and collaborating with various organizations and groups to provide educative resources in

neighbourly care. Additionally, it will prompt curated conversations related to justice and advocacy, working with the Church Planting Taskforce to redefine church planting in the context of reconciliation.

It also recommends establishing a three-year faith Neighbours in Mission project, drawing on MR and Faculty resources to respond to the request for local engagement in mission.

Priority 4

Faith formation in communities of Jesus people

There is widespread concern about the vital need to nurture faith in Christian communities. Nurturing faith encompasses various aspects like discipleship, spiritual formation, mentoring, maturity, well-being, wisdom, and discernment. Social relationships are key to fostering faith and can develop in various settings such as small groups, faith communities, or congregations.

Nurturing faith requires maturity and wisdom across the church councils. There are limited opportunities for younger leaders, concern about an aging clergy profile, and a desire for diverse pathways that include lay and co-vocational ones. Furthermore, there is disappointment with POD processes that do not effectively engage Indigenous people, younger individuals, and second-generation migrants in nurturing faith.

The review recommended considering a team approach to Moderator appointments as a way of encouraging emerging leader pathways.

Prioritise Faith Formation

There is concern that current educative resources at UCLT are overly focused on ordination pathways which are linked with degree standards. One of the people interviewed outside SA noted that a substantial barrier to collaboration is the way that theological institutions are tied to universities. That sets requirements that mean faculty don't have time, scope or ability to do collaborations that might be good for the life of the church more generally. The structural tie to higher education institutions comes with a whole lot of requirements, meaning they don't have the capacity to do the creative and collaborative initiatives.

The review is not suggesting cutting the ties, but asking if the educative resourcing currently embedded in UCLT could be used differently to address missional needs and priorities, especially in nurture, well-being, local mission, spiritual formation. The reviewers asked, "what would five or six skilled and passionate educators do to address nurturing of faith in communities of Christians?" Probably the priority would not be teaching only degree topics. Standards and assessment and costs can limit education for the whole people of God. Further, focusing educative resources on models of solo leadership located in ministers runs the risk of perpetuating trickle-down approaches to leadership and formation. Nevertheless, they affirmed the work done by UCLT to establish the Assembly 14 standards into Leadership Formation Days, and suggested investigating options to ensure candidates can demonstrate competency in the UCA's 14 standards, for example through an assessable portfolio.

Mladin's *Church at the Crossroad* (2023) argued that churches need a locally based catalyst leader to inspire congregations to push beyond the comfort zone, educative resourcing needs to be accompanied by training for both lay and ordained that was accessible, oriented in a missional direction and offering skills to nurture leadership within local congregations. A widespread focus on faith formation is affirmed, especially linking leadership and mission with discipleship and an understanding of intergenerational formation as a lifelong work of the whole people of God.

The review recommended establishing a three-year Faith Formation project, drawing on MR and Faculty resources. It proposed realigning faculty resources in the following ways: first, unfilled current Faculty positions could become a search for Faculty to enhance Faith Formation and Neighbours in Mission projects. Second, UCLT Principal and Faculty could workshop ways to shift a proportion of existing Faculty teaching and research time from degree provision to informal educative resourcing, to rebuild College's congregational connections, and to share in the Faith Formation and Neighbours in Mission projects.

Diversity of vocations

The review highlighted the missional importance of training individuals for diverse vocations and pathways. There's enthusiasm regarding the potential of a joint program offering a Bachelor of Ministry and a Master of Social Work by UCLT. This aligns with the missional priority, especially considering the 34 chaplains serving in UCA SA affiliated roles. This qualification may also open doors for community development and place-making initiatives, extending beyond conventional worship services in church planting efforts.

In addition to formal qualifications at UCLT, various providers also offer short-term and online courses in areas like spiritual care and meaningful aging. These courses offer informal training opportunities for volunteers, but there's room for a more systematic approach to this kind of resourcing, providing instruction in key mission and ministry areas, along with opportunities for networking, can enhance mission and ministry beyond the local congregation. This would be particularly effective if it's a collaborative effort involving different parts of the Synod. This approach is crucial for connecting chaplains' missional roles with the church's role as welcoming and safe places for seekers to explore their spirituality.

The review recommends exploring the provision of shared resourcing days through a conversation between UCLT, Chaplaincy manager and UnitingCare EO.

Priority 5

Lightening the load

Travelling light load is a missional priority. Theologically, a pilgrim people on the way need to keep shedding stuff. Jesus said come to me all you who are weary, yet the reviewers heard people experiencing current patterns of church as tiring. A missional priority is lightening the load.

The load of being a congregation

Conversations have highlighted the potential of faith communities as a means to reduce the burden within the Uniting Church. While there's a sense that the standard congregational model is heavy and unwieldy, faith communities are seen as a lighter structural alternative that can enhance missional capacity.

However, there's a concern that faith communities might be viewed solely as a response to decline, whereas, in reality, they can serve as experimental spaces for mission and free up resources for broader community engagement. To shift this perception, there's a need to champion faith communities and prioritize their establishment over traditional church plants.

Additionally, it's suggested that there should be advocates who work to eliminate barriers, navigate regulations, and facilitate communication with different parts of the church. These advocates would focus on helping Presbyteries think more flexibly and adaptably, emphasizing opportunities within existing regulations for greater flexibility and cooperation.

The load of being a sole-charge minister

The reviewers heard of the load of being a sole-charge minister with a wide range of responsibilities. One way this can be mitigated is through the use of ministry pools: collectives of people with different skills (e.g. chaplain, pastor, lay people, social workers, mission co-ordinator) who work across multiple churches, sharing the load of preaching, pastoral care, administration, and coordination. Ministry pools present an opportunity for the gifts and expertise of multiple people to service the needs of churches across a geographic area. Further exploration of these models are strongly affirmed.

The review recommended that the joint Presbyteries' Yorke Peninsula Ministry Pool model be written up as a case study model for future ministry and communicated to the Synod as a potential model for subregional areas to adopt. A cohort could be formed comprising 2-3 subregions who are supported by MR into Ministry Pools.

The load of leading a service weekly

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new opportunities for connection. Some congregations have been offering online church services, which can be particularly valuable for smaller congregations in rural or remote areas. Encouraging and supporting this online engagement while addressing ongoing pastoral needs could involve appointing "streaming ambassadors" to facilitate connections among online participants. Second, providing digital resources like larger TVs and sound equipment for smaller groups to gather and engage in worship would be possible, fostering shared meals and relationships. Third is the idea of organizing a roadshow team to periodically visit rural and isolated congregations that are participating online, enhancing their connections with the broader church. And finally, the review suggested establishing a network of congregations that share a "Uniting online" minister or ministers who can offer pastoral care, conduct funerals, and make visits. This concept extends the idea of ministry pools, alleviating the burden on individual congregations to provide weekly services and fostering stronger connections between congregations.

The load of maintaining a building

The property reports highlight a surplus of buildings within the UCA SA, with many facing significant maintenance issues. These properties are held by over 250 congregations across South Australia, many of which are experiencing declines in attendance and building quality. The reports emphasize the risks posed in terms of health and safety, finances, and the church's mission and ministry focus due to this situation.

Although these insights are not new, there has been a reluctance to make necessary changes, understandable given the emotional attachment and the sacred and social significance of these buildings. Practical theologian Henk De Roest's insights underscore the importance of recognizing the attachment to these buildings and the anticipatory grief associated with their potential loss.

The review emphasizes the various meanings and roles that church buildings hold, including being places of sacred memory, common attentiveness, welcoming fellowship, creative atmosphere, participatory worship, and shelter. When considering ways to lighten the load on maintaining a building, these dimensions should be taken into account. Encouragement is given toward helping churches to remember well and to carefully consider a legacy mission plan that invites exploration of options.

The review recommends a focus on the importance of Legacy work aimed at helping churches to both remember well and to develop legacy mission plans for their assets. It also recommends asking the relevant bodies to investigate establishing a Missional property priority process, so that groups with a missional vision for using existing property can apply for "priority use."

Priority 6

Uniting in change

The church wide survey asked participants to rank what they thought should be the mission related priorities, first for their Presbytery and second for the Synod. The reviewers noted with caution that recognise that priorities are a matter of discernment, not a popularity contest or reflection of current activity.

Synod

The participants considered the top seven highest priorities for the Synod to be:

- Partnering with other groups, churches, activities (21)
- Multi-cultural, cross-cultural, intercultural mission (19)
- Justice and advocacy (19)
- Covenanting (18)
- Creation care (17)
- Faith vitality, discipling and renewal (17)
- Intergenerational and/or age specific ministry (15).

Several other areas of mission-related activities traditionally located in Synod are worth noting:

- International mission (14 responses for Synod, 3 for Presbytery)
- Events such as KCO, SAYCO, NCYC (13 responses for Synod, 7 for Presbytery)
- Uniting Church Fellowship and Mission support (13 responses for Synod, 7 for Presbytery).

Presbytery

Participants considered the top seven highest priorities for their Presbytery to be:

- Local engagement in mission (27)
- Creating communities of belonging (26)
- Faith vitality, discipling and renewal (24)
- Pastoral care (23)
- Multi-cultural, cross-cultural, intercultural mission (21)
- Partnering with other groups, churches, activities (20 responses for Presbytery, and as already mentioned, top priority for Synod)
- Creation care (17)

These results suggest different councils of the Uniting Church have different mission tasks.

The mission plan of a Presbytery would be well to consider prioritising:

- Local engagement in mission (27)
- Creating communities of belonging (26)
- Faith vitality, discipling and renewal (24)
- Pastoral care (23)
- Multi-cultural, cross-cultural, intercultural mission (21)

The mission plan of Synod would be well to consider prioritising:

- Partnering with other groups, churches, activities (21)
- Multi-cultural, cross-cultural, intercultural mission (19)
- Justice and advocacy (19)
- Covenanting (18)
- International mission (14 responses for Synod, 3 for Presbytery)
- Events such as KCO, SAYCO, NCYC (13 responses for Synod, 7 for Presbytery)
- Uniting Church Fellowship and Mission support (13 responses for Synod, 7 for Presbytery)

Several areas require strong collaboration between Presbytery and Synod, particularly:

- Creation care (17 responses for Synod, 20 responses for Presbytery)
- Faith vitality, discipling and renewal (17 responses for Synod, 24 responses for Presbytery)
- Intergenerational and/or age specific ministry (15 responses for Synod, 17 responses for Presbytery)

- Partnering with other groups, churches, activities (21 responses for Synod and 20 responses for Presbytery).

What are creative options for how the MLD-B might resource these priorities?

The review explored resourcing at local congregations, how ministry agents are resourcing themselves and how contemporary life and how changes in society might be redrawing the nature of resourcing.

Newsletters

The reviewers examined a range of newsletters from across the Presbyteries to gain insight into what is happening at the grassroots in congregations. These showed that congregations use newsletters to align with mission priorities around social justice, covenanting and international horizons. The main resourcing priorities being advertised in the newsletters related to social justice priorities.³ However, congregations are not using their newsletters to align with mission priorities around maturing faith formation and sharing of faith in culturally appropriate and creative ways.

The reviewers observed that:

- None of the sampled churches had their newsletters online
- Updates to congregation's websites were infrequent
- There was no information on specific upcoming services.

Ministers' Resourcing Survey

153 current Ministers in a range of placement contexts were engaged in a survey to discover how ministers are currently resourcing themselves. 53 people responded to the questionnaire. Of the 44 who fully completed all questions, 73% indicated they were from congregational settings, 18% indicated they were chaplains or in agencies, and 9% indicated they were located in Synod or Presbytery roles. Responses were spread evenly across the three Presbyteries.

The most significant resourcing need identified was in **faith vitality, discipling, and renewal**, followed by various needs related to local engagement in mission, evangelism, outreach, and fostering inclusive communities across cultures. These areas are recommended as priorities for MLDB in the next three to five years.

³ The top four were Indigenous (12), community (11), women's fellowship (7), and climate/environment (5). Ageing and LGBTQ+ were mentioned 4 times each; asylum seekers/refugees, parents/parenting, youth were each mentioned 3 times; men's fellowship and international issues were each mentioned twice; while end of life care, chaplaincy, pastoral care, and disability were each mentioned once.

Resourcing needs⁴

Respondents were asked if there were particular areas of mission and ministry that they have sought and/or would appreciate resourcing on. 51 people responded. Participants could tick as many categories as they wished, and 208 areas of resourcing were named: an average of four per participant. The top five areas of resourcing were as follows:

1. Faith vitality, discipling and renewal (55%; n=28).
2. Local engagement in mission (41%; n=21)
3. Evangelism or outreach (37%; n=19)
4. Creating communities of belonging (37%; n=19)
5. Intercultural ministry (35%; n=18) These areas represent significant and active missional needs and opportunities that can shape the strategic plans, staff alignment, research priorities, and course offerings of Mission Resourcing and UCLT

Companions together

Ministers draw on a range of people to discuss mission and/or ministry ideas and resources. These include colleagues (42), mentors and supervisors (39), friends (35) and Synod, Presbytery, UCLT, or MR staff (24). It was intriguing that none of the participants named social media groups: these would be a very useful way of resourcing particularly for those serving in rural contexts.

Event and activity resourcing

Most resourcing (70%) comes from events and activities inside the Uniting Church.⁵ Resourcing from outside the Uniting Church amounts to 30%.⁶ It is likely that the survey was completed by people who are more engaged in Uniting Church resources. Nevertheless, this shows the significance of resourcing that is Uniting Church in character. Hence, presence and participation in Synod and Presbytery events is an obvious strategic resourcing priority for MR and UCLT.⁷

Resourcing action

The Resourcing Survey aimed to gain insight into contemporary ministry practices by inviting participants to reflect on their actions related to missional needs and opportunities. Three

⁴ A total of 51 respondents were asked about specific areas of mission and ministry they have sought or would appreciate resourcing on. Participants could select multiple categories, and a total of 208 areas of resourcing were mentioned, averaging about four per participant.

⁵ This is based on grouping together events or activities run by Presbytery (22%, n=34), Synod (18%, n=29), Assembly (4%, n=6), my congregation, and other UCA congregations (13%, n=21; 12%, n=19; total 25%, n=40), totalling 109, out of 158.

⁶ This is based on grouping together events and activities by nondenominational agencies (18%, n=28), other local churches (7%, n=11) and other denominations (6%, n=9), totalling 48 of the 158 responses.

⁷ The Connect100 mission partnerships with Uniting Church QLD congregations have emerged from prioritising staff presence at Presbytery events, not to present, but to serve. Survey research indicates the forms of communication most valued in these contexts are conversational in nature.

scenarios were presented, and participants provided examples related to sermons, small group teachings, and community engagement.

For sermons, people typically draw on existing resources, including Scripture, online sources, books, and personal life experiences. They employ contemporary mission practices, such as discerning God's work in communities and encouraging hospitality, cultural exegesis, taking risks, faith sharing, and discipling. To enhance these processes, a potential resourcing option is a weekly podcast or video resource discussing missional aspects of upcoming lectionary texts.

However, when responding to missional needs and opportunities, individuals often find themselves in uncharted territory. Their approaches include ecumenism, being a loving presence, cultivating spiritual practices, and addressing challenges related to church buildings. Local engagement in mission, including networking, cross-cultural encounters, and community service, was a dominant theme.

People primarily rely on external resource people, prayer, life experience, local wisdom, community research, past training, mentoring, and books. They engage in conversations with others to workshop solutions, indicating the importance of companionship in local mission endeavours. This data underscores the need for collaboration with congregations and ministers seeking support in local mission experiments.

Resourcing in changing times

Significant changes in society and the church remind us that the way people are resourcing and being resourced is changing. Inherited approaches that worked in the past are not necessarily worth investing in as times change.

Learning in a culture of explorers not experts

One of the interviewees highlighted the need for resourcing exploration in a rapidly changing world and culture. They emphasized the lack of experts in the field due to the evolving nature of technology and its impact on human interactions. They suggested creating spaces, like hothouses, for discussions, writing, and learning. Podcasting and blogging provide flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances, unlike traditional ink-printed books. They called for collaborative efforts, especially among those on the cutting edge, to explore how to make disciples and be Christ-like in the community.

To address this need, the reviewers recommend experimenting with various forms of learning, such as sharing days and communities of practice, while ensuring processes for safety. The World Cafe Method is suggested as an approach to encourage exploration and sharing of insights.⁸ These initiatives build on the collegial values observed in the resourcing survey and require less investment than large events, helping to develop local resources that are more relevant to the Australian context than those based in the USA. Inviting people to work together on resources that capture tentative learnings is affirmed, approaches that may not suit everyone but do build on the collegial values that were evident in the resourcing survey.

⁸ <https://theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/>

The three existing Ministry Centres

The project initially did not include interviews with representatives from the three Ministry Centres. However, a lunchtime conversation was held at the Synod, and printed reports and publications from each Centre were reviewed.

Ministry Centres account for about 3% of the shared staff spend across Mission Resourcing (MR) and Uniting Care SA (UCLT). They originated during a period of financial abundance and are still connected to the Mission and Leadership Development Board (MLD-B), despite the current financial constraints. Each Centre has followed its unique path with passionate support from volunteers, but there are concerns about the sustainability of the model due to a lack of financial resources.

There are overlaps in the activities and interests of the Centres, suggesting potential synergies through collaboration, especially in areas like spirituality, Covenanting, and the experiential and embodied. Each Centre is attuned to societal missional needs and opportunities, functioning as antennas that respond rapidly to spiritual shifts.

While each Centre focuses on broader societal needs and opportunities, they have become closely tied to specific congregations over time. This connection provides grounding but may impact access and perception. It is unclear how individuals who engage with a Ministry Centre progress in their spiritual journey beyond their involvement with the Centre. Clarity is needed on whether the Centres themselves serve as communities of nurture or create pathways toward existing faith communities and congregations.

The Ministry Centres feel somewhat isolated from the work of Mission Resourcing and the Synod. The value of interpersonal connections and shared meals was acknowledged which would enhance support, synergies, and discussions on spiritual shifts and exploration.

The shift from physical to online presence presents a missional opportunity. A shared online communication portal hosted by MR could be beneficial. However, there's concern that the distinctive offerings of each Centre might be lost amid other resources from MR and UCLT.

The review recommended requesting MR to facilitate a regular (suggest three monthly) gathering of Ministry Centres to share life, reflect on learnings, and discern trends, and also inviting each Centre to reflect on the usefulness to them of a shared resource portal administered through MR.

What are some threats to the fulfilment of these missional priorities?

This review aimed to identify threats to the fulfillment of missional priorities, which can be both internal and external. These threats need to be acknowledged and, where possible, mitigated.

Internal threats

Morale

This is a really difficult time to be part of the church. Many congregations are hanging on for dear life and, despite this, are very reluctant to change. Yet we know continuing with the status quo won't work and that the current reality is deeply challenging.

Suggested mitigation: Support ministers to stay sane in all this complexity. Enjoy being with each other as humans. Remind each other that it's okay if you and your congregation are struggling. These are difficult times.

Presbytery formation

The process of Presbytery formation from one to three Presbyteries emerged repeatedly over the course of our Review. The process was – and is – experienced differently by different people across the UCA SA. There is grief for some, and opportunity for others.

Suggested mitigation: The research shows that there are areas of agreement in priorities and understandings of mission. Value these areas of common life.

Desire for sameness and removal of difference

For those who find themselves in unfamiliar cultures, there is a comfort in being home.

Suggested mitigation: Continue to draw on the history of the Uniting Church as dynamic and reforming approach to ecclesiology and value the current diversity as a resource.

Poor change processes around building closures

Over the course of the Review, we heard stories of pain and discomfort with the change process around congregational closures. This includes a sense that Synod is “80%” focussed on property and finance. This has generated mistrust between congregations and Presbyteries and Synod: with negatives impacts on individual and church-wide wellbeing. Frustration is also evident in the Synods reports on properties.

Suggested mitigation: Offer intentional, yet pastoral resources around congregational closures and building consolidation.

Inability of groups to do the work needed

Change is hard. In one focus group, a younger person shed tears, frustrated at the ways that Synod meetings seem reluctant to face the challenge of buildings and the impact that work avoidance will have on the morale of younger leaders.

Suggested mitigation: Draw on the widespread desire for change and unease with the status quo. Make necessary changes.

Racism and ethnocentrism

Racism and ethnocentrism diminish the life of the church and have negative impacts on the people who experience it. More work must be done to ensure the UCA SA is a safe and inclusive place for people of different ethnicities and backgrounds.

Suggested mitigation: The UCA SA needs to continue to engage in truth-telling: about past wrongs and future opportunities with people of minority ethnicities – especially Indigenous peoples.

Shallow understandings of gospel and culture dynamics

Faith is so caught up in culture. This can be easier to see in churches from different cultures than ours, however every Anglo-community is an expression of a particular culture. Much of the wrestling over the future of the church is inhibited by shallow understandings of gospel and culture dynamics.

Suggested mitigation: Value the missiological insights and wisdom present at UCLT and find ways to make available those insights to engage local congregations. Weave the learnings from the current Intercultural Neighbourhood Congregation Pilot into UCLT training and Synod life more generally.

Ageism

In our listening, we heard stories from both young people/emerging leaders and older people about experiences of ageism.

Suggested mitigation: Focus on developing intergenerational ways of being across the whole people of God.

Declining “servant” force

As noted in missional priorities, we heard widespread concern about the numbers of ministers approaching retirement.

Suggested mitigation: Encourage faith formation amongst the whole people of God. Take some risks in giving younger people significant roles. Detach ordination processes from degree requirements. Encourage faith communities as places to experiment and experience ministry and mission.

External threats

Secularisation

The frameworks by which the gospel makes sense have been eroding for hundreds of years. Numerical decline and loss of influence are rooted in centuries of change.

Suggested mitigation: Learn from those serving Christ in marginal and pluralist contexts.

Perceptions of church in wider society

Christianity can be seen as toxic and damaging.

Suggested mitigation: Enhance safe church practices in formal and informal areas of life.

Siloing

Echo chambers encourage conflict avoidance and offer illusions of uniformity.

Suggested mitigation: As above, draw on the history of the Uniting Church as a dynamic and reforming approach to ecclesiology and value the current diversity as a resource.

In the Kurna language, “wanti naa?” means “where are all of you going?” It is a question addressed to a community. Jack Buckskin suggests several possible answers. ‘Madlaitirra’, which in Kurna means nowhere in particular. ‘Ngadlu pidnanthi’, which means all of us are waiting.

Through the review, we heard neither response. Rather, across the hundreds of responses to surveys and in interviews, conversations and workshops, we heard desire for change, a passion for mission, and an appreciation of resourcing that was broad, supportive, relational and thoughtfully aligned.