

Presbytery Project

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Summary

This report brings insights into our Presbyteries as a basis for proposing possible models for Presbyteries in NSW & the ACT. We will work towards possible models that will enable us to move from maintenance to mission, arising from a renewed focus on discipleship and mission as the core of growth, based on a sustainable, equitable, transparent and effective resourcing base.

The report has four main sections:

- A. A description of the Presbytery Project.
- B. “A Look in the Mirror” at the reality and diversity of our Presbyteries. This is the largest part of the report.
- C. “A Gaze in the Crystal Ball” to inform possible models of Presbyteries across our Synod. This includes a reflection on a theology of “common wealth”, relevant Regulations, learnings from other Synods, and our own experiences. The report identifies five possible models as the basis of a Year of Discernment in 2024.
- D. A Path Forward: A proposal for a Year of Discernment during 2024 across all of our Presbyteries in order to bring a proposal for a model of Presbyteries to our 2025 Synod meeting.

The body of the report is followed by:

- The proposals
- Questions for discernment
- Appendix “A Theology of Presbyteries.

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Appendix:

Theology of the Presbytery – Rev Dr Peter Walker

A. The Project

A.1. Introducing the Presbytery Project

The Presbytery Project Working Group was formed by Synod Standing Committee as one response to the Synod's fifth Future Direction (2021):

An ongoing commitment to working with presbyteries to organise ourselves to promote growth within and through our congregations.

As a Synod we had already committed ourselves in 2019 to a renewed focus on growth in:

- Discipleship
- Relationship
- Impact
- Number

The Presbytery Project Working Group identified our task as

To co-design and activate one or more new, collaborative models of Presbytery, which will:

- bring greater clarity to the unique role and responsibilities of the Council of Presbytery,
- resolve resourcing challenges, and
- strengthen the whole church, so that together we are more effective in our mission and ministry.

These decisions reflect our foundational Uniting Church understanding of the Presbytery:

... to perform all the acts of oversight necessary to the life and mission of the church in the area for which is it responsible, except for those agencies which are directly responsible to the Synod or Assembly. It will in particular exercise oversight over the congregations within its bounds, encouraging them to strengthen one another's faith, to bear one another's burdens, and exhorting them to fulfil their high calling in Christ Jesus.

Basis of Union – Para 15c

The Presbytery shall have such oversight as is necessary to the life and mission of the Church in the area committed to it; it shall stimulate and encourage the Congregations within its bounds, providing them with opportunities for counsel in the strengthening and assistance of one another and in their participation in the wider work of the Church.

Constitution section 26

From these quotes, we see that the focus of responsibility for Presbyteries as described in the Constitution and Basis of Union is the life and mission of their Congregations. This is part of our Uniting Church vision of interconciliar relationships – Congregation, Presbytery, Synod, Assembly – which Andrew Dutney describes as “an egalitarian network of mutually accountable missionary communities”. (*Where Did the Joy Come From? Revisiting the Basis of Union*, 2001, page 29)

Given that Congregations are the key focus on Presbyteries, it is worth revisiting the Uniting Church's definition of a Congregation:

The Congregation is the embodiment in one place of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ. Its members meet regularly to hear God's Word, to celebrate the sacraments, to build one another up in love, to share in the wider responsibilities of the Church, and to serve the world. The congregation will recognise the need for a diversity of agencies for the better ordering of its life in such matters as education, administration and finance.

Basis of Union 15 (a)

It is quite common in UCA conversations to quote the first and sometimes the second sentence of this clause. The third sentence tells us that Congregations have a need for support from a “diversity of agencies” in areas such as “education, administration and finance”, to which we would add mission. In our current context, such diverse agencies are provided largely by UME and the wider Synod team. Part of our reflection in the Presbytery Project is how might Congregations be supported most effectively by Synod resourcing, in interconciliar collaboration with their Presbyteries.

A.2. The process so far

During 2022 and the first part of 2023 a number of consultations and conversations have been occurring which have helped the Synod to advance towards this Future Direction. These have included:

- Formal and informal conversations with all Presbytery leadership teams, particularly in developing “Presbytery on a Page” summaries around people, projects, property and finance for each Presbytery
- Presentations at five full Presbytery meetings
- The three Stewardship Summits in March, May and July 2023. The Summits resulted in proposals also coming to this Synod meeting, which are separate but related to the Presbytery Project. The Stewardship Summit proposals concern funding, and are thus foundational to the Presbytery Project focus on models of how our Presbyteries relate to one another and Synod, and how they can exercise oversight most effectively
- Consultations with four Presbyteries around the possibility of entering the Regional Partnership in 2023 (in addition to the original Far North Coast Presbytery)
- Monthly “Conversations that Matter” (CTM) with Presbytery and Synod leaders.
- A Presbytery-Synod interface workshop with leaders of teams within Synod services and UME around their work with our Presbyteries in November 2022
- Conversations with Presbytery and Synod leaders in Queensland, South Australia, and Victoria & Tasmania concerning their evolving models of Presbyteries
- A conversation with the Director of the Assembly’s Frontier Services

In this report we will:

- Have a look in the mirror about who we are as Presbyteries on the Synod of NSW & the ACT.
- Have a gaze into the crystal ball about who we might become.
- Reflect on a path from what we see in the mirror to what we hope for in the crystal ball.

B. A Look in the Mirror

B.1. Introducing what we see in the mirror

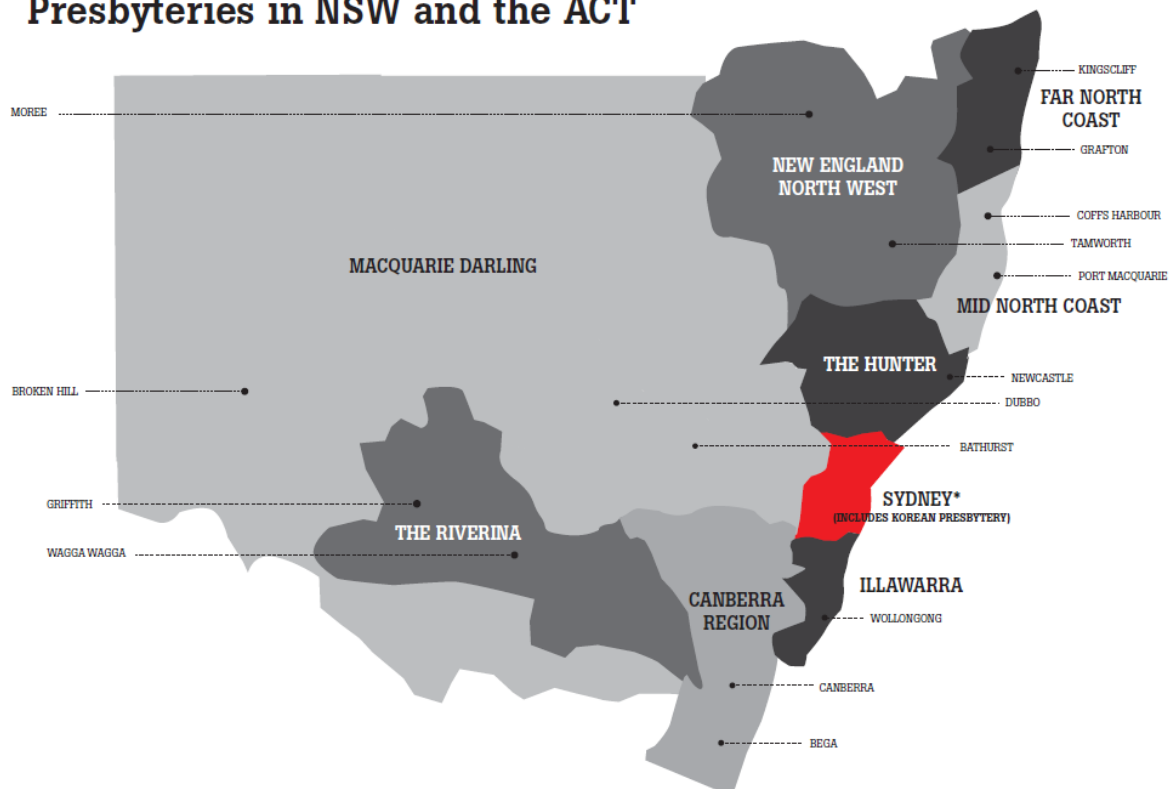
One of the key insights that we have gained is that our Presbyteries are incredibly diverse, reflected in:

- People:
 - Average number of weekly attendees
 - Number of congregations/places of worship
 - Percentage of wider community who attend
 - Number of ministry placements
 - Number of ministry and administrative staff
 - Cultural and Linguistic Diversity
 - Average age
- Geography:
 - Land area within nominal boundaries
 - Population size of community within nominal boundaries
 - Distances between towns/villages/cities/suburbs
 - Connections and ease of travel
- Finance & Property:
 - Cash held directly by the Presbytery as responsible body
 - Value of real estate held directly by the Presbytery as responsible body

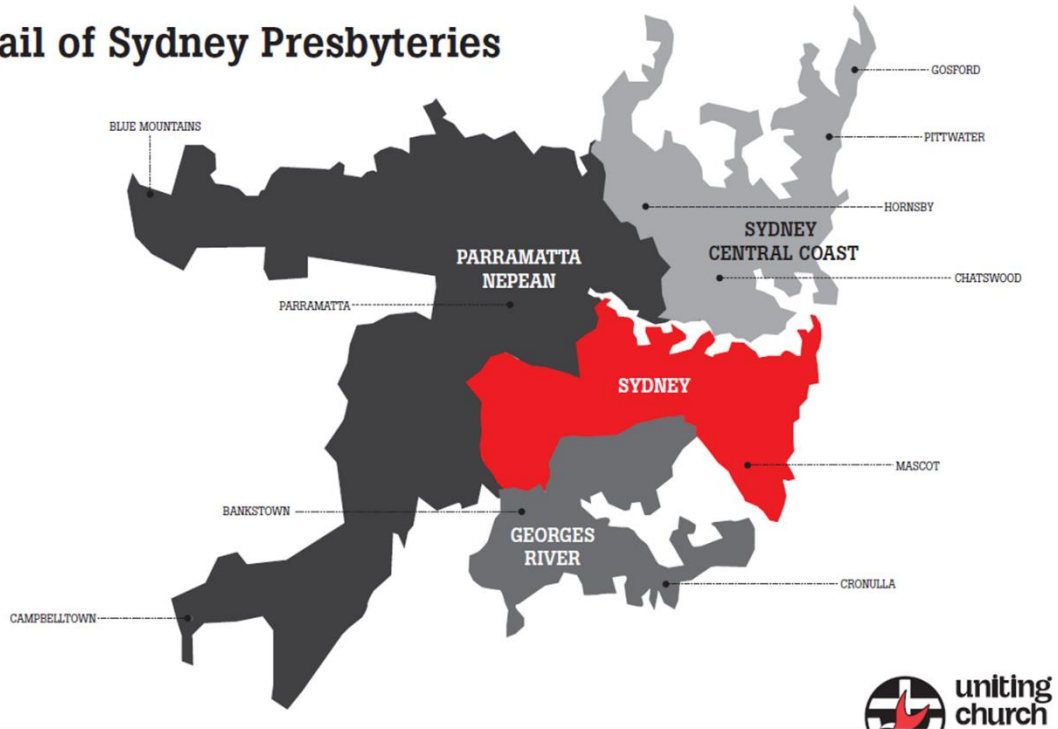
B.2. Geographic Area

The distances spanned by our Presbyteries vary enormously. For instance, the distance from Lithgow to Broken Hill in MDP is the same as from Fiji to Samoa, or from the top of Scotland to the bottom of England, or three times the distance from Seoul to Busan.

Presbyteries in NSW and the ACT



Detail of Sydney Presbyteries



B.3. People

The following graphs and tables illustrate the diversity among our Presbyteries in people.

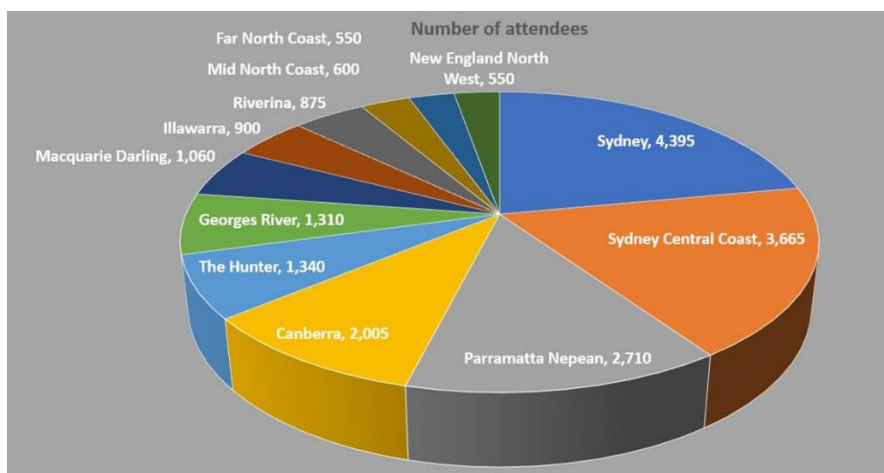
Table 1: People within our Churches by Presbytery

Presb	Number of attendees	Average	% of pop	Places of worship	Attendees per place of worship	Ministers in placements	% speak language other than English
CRP	2,005	71	0.29%	48	42	29	7%
FNC	550	75	0.18%	31	18	7	4%
GRP	1,310	66	0.15%	31	42	20	27%
Illawarra	900	72	0.18%	21	43	19	4%
MD	1,060	72	0.17%	42	25	8	3%
MNC	600	77	0.17%	31	19	7	3%
NENW	550	73	0.28%	20	28	1	3%
PNP	2,710	65	0.12%	68	40	38	28%
Riverina	875	73	0.29%	43	20	4	10%
Sydney	4,395	52	0.44%	56	78	50	57%
Sydney Central Coast	3,665	71	0.33%	59	62	57	10%
The Hunter	1,340	75	0.21%	50	27	16	2%

RANGE	550-4,395 8x	52-77 yrs 50%	0.12%- 0.44% 4x	20-68 3.5x	18-28, 40-42 and 62-78	1-57 60x	2-10% and 27-57%
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[Note: “Ministers in placement” refers to all ministers in placement within a Presbytery, including chaplaincy, Presbytery and Synod roles as well as Congregational placements.]

Figure 1: Average Attendance within our Churches by Presbytery



Our Presbyteries are highly disparate in a wide range of people measures:

- Attendance ranges from 550 to 4,395 – an 8-fold difference.
- Numbers of places of worship range from 20 to 68 – a 3.5-fold difference.
- Numbers of attendees per place of worship ranges from 18 to 78 in three ranges (see below)
- Average attendance as a percentage of the wider population varies from 0.12% to 0.44% - a 4-fold difference in four groupings (see below)
- Percentage of attendees speaking a Language other than English (LOTE) at home varies from 2% to 57% in two distinct groupings (see below).
- Average age ranges from 52 to 77 years-old.
- Numbers of ministers in placement range from 1 to 57 – a 60-fold difference.

There is a fourfold difference between Presbyteries in proportion of **average attendance within the wider population**. Our 12 Presbyteries fall into four clear categories when listed in order from highest to lowest proportion of average attendance in the wider community:

2 x Sydney Basin Dense (0.33-0.44%)

Sydney

$$4,395/1,000,000 = 1/228 = 0.44\%$$

SCCP

$$3,655/1,100,000 = 1/301 = 0.33\%$$

4 x West-of-the-Divide (0.28-0.3%)

MDP

$$1,060/350,000 = 1/330 = 0.30\%$$

Riverina

$$875/300,000 = 1/342 = 0.29\%$$

CRP

$$2,005/700,000 = 1/350 = 0.29\%$$

NENW

550/200,000 = 1/364 = 0.28%

4 x Coastal (0.17-0.21%)

The Hunter

1,340/650,000 = 1/485 = 0.21%

FNC

550/300,000 = 1/545 = 0.18%

Illawarra

900/500,000 = 1/555 = 0.18%

MNC

600/350,000 = 1/583 = 0.17%

2 x Sydney Basin Sparse (0.12-0.15%)

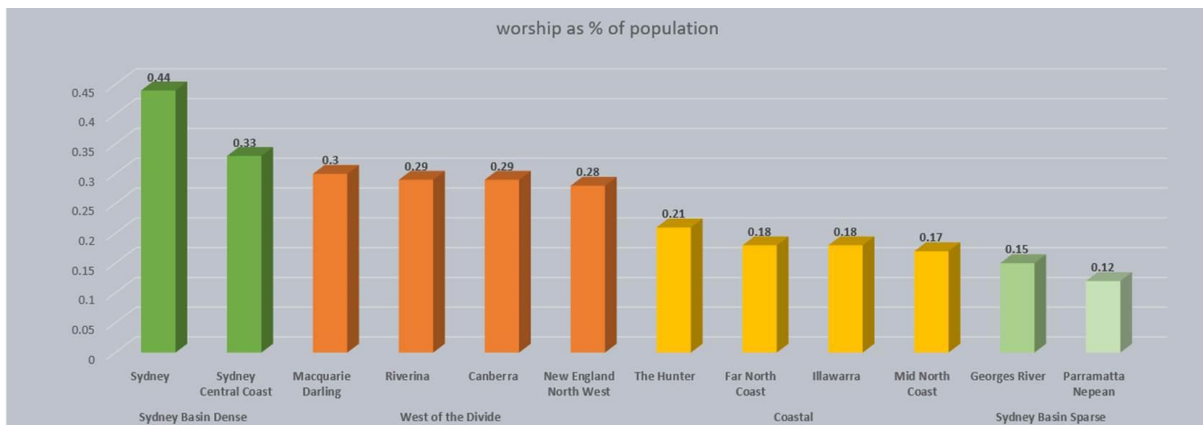
GRP

1,310/900,000 = 1/687 = 0.15%

PNP

2,710/2,200,000 = 1/811 = 0.12%

Figure 2: Average Attendance within our Churches by Presbytery as a percentage of wider population



The **average attendance per place of worship** ranges from 18 to 78. This range has three distinct groupings within it:

- **6 x Low** – 18-28: FNC, MNC, Riverina, MDP, The Hunter, NENW
- **4 x Medium** – 40-42: PNP, CRP, GRP, Illawarra
- **2 x High** – 62-78: SCCP & Sydney

Comparing attendance per place of worship with attendance as a percentage of the population is significant:

- The Presbyteries with the lowest attendance per place of worship are all either West-of-the-Divide or Coastal, which conversely have some of the highest attendance as a percentage of the wider population. In other words, rural and coastal presbyteries may be seen as “inefficient” regarding investment, while simultaneously highly effective in having roots in their wider communities.
- The two Sydney Basin Presbyteries with the highest number of attendees per place of worship also have the highest percentage of the wider population as attendees: Sydney and Sydney Central Coast.

From this great diversity of geography and people, we can see that four Presbyteries can claim to be “the largest”:

Sydney – Average attendance and highest proportion of population
Sydney Central Coast – Ministers in placements
Macquarie Darling – Land area in nominal bounds
Parramatta Nepean Presbytery – Wider population in nominal bounds

There are also significant differences in Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CALD). Nine Presbyteries have 10% or less of members speaking a Language other than English (LOTE). Three Presbyteries have more than 27% of members speaking a LOTE at home, with Sydney as the highest at 57%, followed by PNP 28% and GRP 27%.

Further, Cultural and Linguistic Diversity correlates with average age. Sydney as the most linguistically diverse Presbytery (57%) has the lowest average age (52), followed by two Presbyteries similar to each other: Parramatta Nepean (28% LOYTE and 65 yo) and Georges River (27% LOTE and 66 yo). Presbyteries with 2-3% members who speak a LOTE have average ages of 72-77.

B.4. Resourcing implications of insights into our people

Numerous resourcing implications flow from the people diversity of our Presbyteries. Some of these include:

- There can be no “one-size-fits-all”.
- Every member and Minister is simultaneously a resource and a need. As a resource, members and Ministers provide both formal and informal leadership in mission and discipleship as well as pastoral care and oversight in their Congregations and across their Presbyteries. As a “need”, members and Ministers also all require pastoral care and oversight. To use a commercial analogy: Our members and Ministers are simultaneously “staff” AND “customers”. Saying this, we also must remember that the Church does not exist for itself but for the Mission of God beyond ourselves. As “staff” we do not serve the Church, we serve the world as the Church.
- Large Presbyteries, in terms of numbers of members and ministers, have both higher needs but also greater human resources than smaller Presbyteries.
- Large Presbyteries, in terms of geographic area (rural) and wider population (Sydney Basin), have both higher needs but often fewer human resources than either smaller or Presbyteries larger in members and Ministers.
- Resourcing decisions will need to reflect a balance of:
 - building on strength,
 - growing new opportunities,
 - compensating for contextual challenges, and
 - some assessment of equity or justice.

B.5. Property & Finance

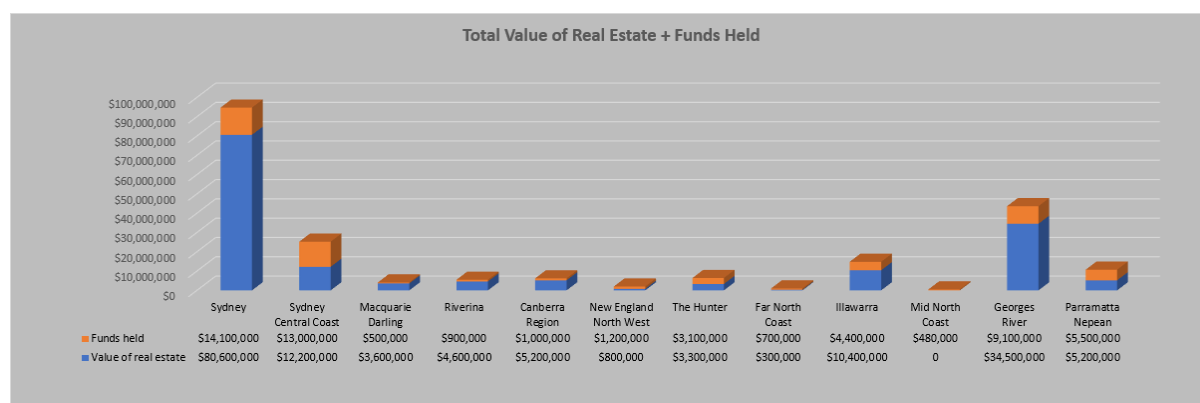
As we have seen, our Presbyteries are highly diverse in people and places. They are even more diverse in property and finance held by the Presbytery as the responsible body. It is important to note that these figures do not represent the total value of all property of the Congregations within each Presbytery, just the assets held directly under the oversight of the Presbytery itself.

The following graphs and tables illustrate the diversity among our Presbyteries in property and finance.

Table 2: Value of Property and Finances where Presbyteries are the Responsible Body

Presbytery	Value of real estate	Funds held
Canberra Region	\$5,200,000	\$1,000,000
Far North Coast	\$300,000	\$700,000
Georges River	\$34,500,000	\$9,100,000
Illawarra	\$10,400,000	\$4,400,000
Macquarie Darling	\$3,600,000	\$500,000
Mid North Coast	Nil	\$480,000
New England Nth W	\$800,000	\$1,200,000
Parramatta Nepean	\$5,200,000	\$5,500,000
Riverina	\$4,600,000	\$900,000
Sydney	\$80,600,000	\$14,100,000
Sydney Cntrl Coast	\$12,200,000	\$13,000,000
The Hunter	\$3,300,000	\$3,100,000
RANGE	\$300k-\$80.6m 270x	\$480k-\$14.1m 29x

Figure 3: Combined real estate and cash held by Presbytery as responsible body



B.6. Additional Considerations

B.6.i. A Historical Note on Resources and Funding

Material resourcing in our Presbyteries has been shaped enormously by the decision to withdraw Synod funding from Presbyteries a decade ago, following the Global Financial Crisis. At the time of Union, Presbyteries were not funded at all, but over time it was recognised in NSW & the ACT that Presbyteries required Synod funding for pastoral, missional and administrative leadership. Accordingly, each Presbytery received funding equivalent to 1.5 FTE stipended positions, with PNP receiving additional funding to recognise both the larger wider population as mission field and also, what was at that time, larger numbers of members, Ministers and Congregations than other Presbyteries.

As a consequence of the withdrawal of Synod funding for Presbyteries, each Presbytery has had to fend for itself. Our Presbyteries have progressively taken into their direct stewardship, as the responsible body, assets that were associated with Congregations as they closed. While the situation is more complicated than this simple analysis, the need for Presbyteries to be self-resourcing has led to the wide range of financial and property resources available to them, with some Presbyteries having

multiple ministry, management and administrative staff, and others having none. This can be described as some Presbyteries having won the historic and geographic “lottery” of real estate assets, especially in the Sydney Basin – Australia’s most valuable real estate. It is important to state that the wealthiest Presbyteries and Congregations have been extremely generous to the Synod and other Presbyteries, supporting both rural-&-regional ministry and growth initiatives within greater Sydney. However, the way these resources are allocated depends on both the capacity of receiving Presbyteries to push their claim, and the judgement of the individual Presbytery providing resources, in isolation from the shared judgment of the whole.

When the Synods of South Australia and Victoria/Tasmania undertook reviews of their Presbytery structures, they had in common a low level of available resources within their Presbyteries. In NSW & the ACT we are beginning from a very high level of available resources, but with resources distributed very unevenly across our Presbyteries.

Further, the system as it currently operates creates a high degree of competition. Applications to the Growth Investment Fund are judged on missional merit, with the unintended consequence that Congregations and Presbyteries compete against each other for funding.

B.6.ii. A Historical Note on our Number and Names of Presbyteries

The twelve Presbyteries in NSW & the ACT are not the same as at the time of Union. Originally there were 14. Two merged to become Macquarie Darling (Central West and The Darling). Later, another two merged to form Sydney Central Coast (Sydney North and Ku-Ring-Gai). Additionally, the non-geographical Korean Presbytery was formed and later dissolved. Our existing Presbyteries have strong senses of identity and commitment, which are in themselves assets.

There have been numerous attempts to rethink the role and structure of presbyteries across NSW & the ACT. Some of these have focused on numbers of Presbyteries, based on what was seen as sustainable numbers of members and ministry placements within a presbytery. Others have focussed on the nature and role of the Presbytery. One important resource from these discussions is the document “*Episkope – A Discussion Paper on the Nature and Function of Presbyteries in the Uniting Church in Australia*”, brought to the 2015 Synod by a previous Presbytery Task Group.

B.6.iii. A Note on the Regulations:

When reflecting on Presbyteries and their oversight role, people often suggest that the UCA Regulations are much of the problem. The Regulations are often described as “one-size-fits-all”. We suggest that in the past there has been a tendency to consider that there is only one way to fulfil the Regulations. That past tendency has been a “one-size-fits-all” *interpretation*. A more helpful approach in our context may be to regard the Regulations as describing the work that has to be done, not how it has to be done.

B.7. People, Property and Finance: Concluding comments

As noted in the current Presbytery Project Working Group’s definition of its task (above), our current focus is on resourcing and strengthening our Presbyteries to fulfill their responsibility of oversight and missional leadership with their congregations. One way to say this is that we are seeking radical resourcing changes rather than radical restructure.

C. A Gaze into the Crystal Ball

A range of factors will shape the shifting images of the future that is forming in our crystal ball. These include our theological understanding, our UCA founding documents and Regulations, learning from other Synods, learning from the Regional Partnership experiment, and our own contextual imperatives.

C.1. Theology of “Common Wealth”

The language of a commonwealth, such as the Commonwealth of Australia, has strong theological and political roots. English political philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704), used the term “common wealth” to describe communities that exist for the common good or welfare rather than the enrichment of some. At that time the word “wealth” was understood more broadly than just money and property, but as well-being: “common weal”.

Part of our roots in the Uniting Church grow from English congregationalism. The Pilgrims who fled religious persecution in England in 1620 on the ship Mayflower to start a new community life were seeking to live out the theology of “common wealth”. The Plymouth Colony that they founded grew into being Massachusetts, often referred to as a state, but officially named the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, as are several other colonies that became founding states of the USA. In their founding document, the Mayflower Compact, the Pilgrims covenanted to order all their community life around “the General Good of the Colony” in contrast with the church and society in C17th England.

As reflected in the Uniting Church’s *Covenant Statement* of 1994, we also recognise absolutely the impact of dispossession on the First Nations that followed from this colonisation, and that much of the “common wealth” of modern churches (particularly church property) is derived from such dispossession. In reflecting on the Pilgrims’ desire to create a community of common wealth in the “New World” of North America we must always remember that what was an exciting prospect for the Pilgrims, was often a disastrous experience for those who were colonised. The Australian experience was no different. Legacies of colonisation, including ongoing dispossession and a significant disparity in socio-economic wellbeing between First Peoples and other Australians, continue to impact First Peoples in Australia. We continue to endeavour to Walk Together with First Peoples, and acknowledge we need to work harder to overcome colonial tendencies of Eurocentrism and unconscious cultural bias. We also note that the communal culture of First Nations has a stronger focus on common wealth than the western cultures which dominate.

Some former Congregational Church entities that came into the Uniting Church still carry the name “Mayflower”, recalling that dream of common wealth. Especially in establishing aged care services, our Congregationalist forebears sought to provide for the good of all.

Of course, our Congregationalist forebears were themselves drawing on Scripture. In the Acts of the Apostles, two key related words are “common” (*koinos*) and “fellowship” (*koinonia*). The believers had “all things in common” (*koinos* Acts 2:44 & 4:32), the basis of being in “fellowship” (*koinonia* Acts 2:42). Fellowship is more than a feeling. These passages are as confronting for us as Congregations, Presbyteries and a Synod as they are for us as individuals in our personal stewardship.

All who believed were together and **had all things in common**; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.
Acts 2:44,45

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but **everything they owned was held in common**.
Acts 4:32

As we live into this rich theological and Biblical heritage, it is time to reflect on what “common wealth” means for the Uniting Church today, especially the Presbyteries of our Synod, as together we embody our calling of oversight.

C.2. Our UCA founding documents and Regulations

In the introduction to the Presbytery Project in this report, we quoted the Basis of Union's definition and description of the Congregation (para 15a) and Presbytery (para 15c), and our Constitution's definition and description of the Presbytery (section 26) – see above. Fundamental to these documents is that neither the Congregation nor the Presbytery exist for themselves. The Congregation exists for worship, witness and service – in other words, it exists for God and the world. The Presbytery exists to encourage and empower the Congregations under its oversight to fulfil their calling. As Rev. Dr Peter Walker concludes his theological reflection on the Presbytery (Appendix 2):

In summary, the role of the Presbytery is to exercise this historically significant and mission-critical episcopal ministry of oversight, doing so for the sake of the faith and unity of the congregations within its bounds, in ways that encourage and strengthen the congregations in their mission.

Peter Walker

Thus, our models of Presbyteries and our allocation of human and material resources need to reflect the purpose of both Congregations and Presbyteries. As was discerned at a gathering in Far North Coast Presbytery earlier this year, members of Presbytery want to be:

- Supported in compliance and administration in order to be free to be:
 - Equipped
 - Encouraged
 - Empowered (understood to mean given permission to experiment)

C.3. Learning from other Synods

Other Synods have undertaken major remodelling of their Presbyteries. They have had a mixture of gains and challenges in strengthening their Presbyteries' capacity for oversight of the life and witness of their Congregations. Some learnings relevant to us include:

C.3.i. Synod of Queensland – Combined Presbytery Mission Pool (CPMP).

- Congregations and Presbyteries discern how much they will contribute to a common pool builds generosity.
- Presbytery leadership deciding collectively on priorities which builds transparency and ownership of the process and outcomes.

C.3.ii. Synod of Western Australia moving to “One Presbytery – One Synod”.

- There has been a lower need for office-bearers and committee-members due to a simpler structure, which is a positive.
- Congregations and Ministers report having had a lower sense of connection to the whole without local bodies.
- It has been difficult to manage confusion of, or separation of, Presbytery and Synod roles in areas of pastoral oversight (eg placements), candidates for ministry, and discipline matters.

C.3.iii. Synod Victoria and Tasmania moving from 14 to 8 Presbyteries.

- Initiated by Presbytery leaders themselves.
- Process over two Synod meeting cycles built ownership and detail.
- Corresponded with increased financial resources from Synod.
- Common Position Descriptions for three roles reflecting Presbytery responsibilities in the Regulations: Presbytery Ministers for Mission, Pastoral, Administration (with Education added

to Mission). Tasmania had one additional staff person reflecting the uniqueness of being an island state within the Synod.

- Advantage of Presbytery Ministers being in teams rather than often working alone as the sole Presbytery staff.
- All Presbyteries contributed some of their material resources to a common pool.
- Identifying the boundaries for 8 Presbyteries involved consideration of numbers of ministers and congregations balanced by geography – some rural Presbyteries are half the numerical size of urban Presbyteries, recognising both the challenges of geography and the need for a minimal common workload per Presbytery regardless of numbers of members and Ministers (eg membership of Synod Placements Committee, regular communication).
- The 8 Presbyteries are 3 Melbourne metro, 4 Victorian rural, and Tasmania.
- Some Presbyteries were formed by simple amalgamation of two others, whereas others had new boundaries.
- While fewer office-bearers were to be needed, loss of identity with previous Presbyteries led to a wholesale retirement with no succession.
- Related to loss of identity with Presbyteries, providing staffing led to a perception of a professionalisation or Presbytery office-bearer roles with consequent diminishing of engagement.
- Huge challenge of finding sufficient numbers of gifted, trained and experienced Presbytery Ministers.
- Embedding the changes took longer than anticipated.
- There continues to be financial uncertainty around support for staffing

C.3.iv. Synod of South Australia moving from 7 Presbyteries to 1, then 1 to 3.

- Questions of adequate resourcing for Presbyteries were raised from the early 1980's.
- There is a higher commitment to non-geographic than geographic networks and Presbyteries, notably where Congregations and Minister in non-geographic Presbyteries are connected by common theology and missiology.
- The "one-presbytery" period led to some confusion of Synod and Presbytery roles (see WA above), although discipline matters were more coordinated and dealt with earlier before escalation to Synod.
- The one-presbytery period led to a lack of development of Presbytery leaders and potential Presbytery Ministers.
- Current three Presbyteries are two geographic and one non-geographic.
- All three Presbyteries receive the same block funding.
- Some Presbytery resourcing roles are part-time in congregations and part-time in Presbytery.
- Embedding the changes is taking longer than anticipated.

C.4. Reflecting on these learnings for NSW/ACT:

Looking across other Synods and their Presbyteries, particular insights for NSW/ACT include:

- There may be scope for a consolidation of Presbyteries, but the loss of identity and relationships is highly significant and would need to be managed well.
- There is little or nothing to recommend a one-presbytery model.
- Adequate and equitable resourcing is critical.
- Resourcing decisions must be made collectively with a high level of Presbytery engagement.
- Change must be of the whole system, not just regarding one, or a few, Presbyteries seen as being in crisis.
- Maintaining a balance of governance through office-bearers and paid staff is critical.
- Supporting transition to a new model takes some years, with adequate resourcing.

C.5. Learning from the Regional Partnership

The Regional Partnership began as a direct response to significant difficulties in the Far North Coast Presbytery (FNC), culminating in their request to be dissolved as a Presbytery. After consultation it was decided that rather than dissolve the Presbytery, the FNC has referred their “powers and responsibilities” to the Synod in accordance with Section 70 of the UCA Constitution:

70. On such terms and conditions as may be agreed by the councils concerned:
(a) a Presbytery may refer any of its powers and responsibilities to the Synod or to another Presbytery with the consent of the Synod or Presbytery concerned;
Constitution, Section 8, Clause 70

More recently, the Riverina Presbytery approached Synod for support, noting that the Presbytery was unable to identify a chairperson and was struggling in other ways to fulfil the oversight responsibilities of a Presbytery. As a result of a consultation process, Riverina voted to join the Regional Partnership as the second Presbytery.

Regional Partnership is this intentional partnership between the people of Presbyteries and Synod. This relationship enables the Presbytery to put the bulk of their energy into local mission and ministry, while the Synod carries responsibility for supporting governance, compliance, property, and finance.

Participating Presbyteries remain a Presbytery under the regulations. They retain their unique identity, ability to make decisions, and real property and financial assets. They operate with far less committee and office bearing responsibility, and far greater support in regard to finance, property, governance and compliance matters.

This enables the regions/Presbyteries and Synod to work together in supporting, encouraging the Congregations in their mission service. The focus and priority are always on what is needed for the Congregations of the Presbytery to flourish and grow.

Thus, Regional Partnership is designed to simplify and streamline the regulatory responsibilities of a Presbytery so that there is more time, energy and focus for local people to invest in growing their local congregations. It can only work through relationships of trust, with the focus on the well-being of the Presbytery.

A critical success factor for Presbyteries within the Regional Partnership is the deployment of Saltbush Regional Ministers to work with the Presbyteries in their work of transition, not maintaining systems that are no longer fit-for-purpose. The Rev Peter Overton serves in the FNC. The Rev Geoff Wellington has recently commenced with the Riverina.

C.6. Our own contextual imperatives

NSW and the ACT have distinct geographic and demographic features compared to other Synods that shape possible models for our Presbyteries in our Synod:

- South Australia and Western Australia are the most centralised on their capital cities compared to NSW & the ACT, partly contributing to the move to one Presbytery for each of those Synods.
- With the exception of Tasmania, the state of Victoria is much smaller than NSW, with subsequently shorter travel distances for formal meetings and informal gatherings than NSW & the ACT.

- Queensland has the same attitude to “the South-East corner” as NSW has to Sydney, with a perception of metro-centrism, but Queensland has more people living around the state than in their capital Brisbane than NSW – notably in large regional and coastal cities. This is unique in Australia. Queensland also has much larger travel distances than NSW & the ACT, especially with Brisbane being in the bottom corner compared to Sydney half-way up the coast. Queensland has had one non-geographic presbytery – Calvary Presbytery for First Nations congregations, but this has been dissolved.
- The Northern Synod has two Presbyteries, both of them covering the entire area within the nominal boundaries of the Synod, the Northern Territory and the north of Western Australia. These Presbyteries are: The Northern Regional Council of Congress (NRCC) having oversight of First Nations congregations, and the Pilgrim Presbytery for all non-First Nations congregations. NRCC could be seen as a non-geographic presbytery, or one could say that both presbyteries are “co-extensive” (extending over the same area).
- Significant opportunities exist for strengthening relationships with other bodies within the UCA.
 - At present, the NSW/ACT UAICC has a presence in three centres in MDP. As the UAICC continues to strengthen, there will be further opportunities for collaboration in both rural and urban contexts.
 - At present, Frontier Services has one Patrol Padre in western NSW. There are possibilities for expansion of this work, with direct beneficial impact on Presbyteries “west-of-the-Divide”.

C.7. Possible Models

There are several possible models arising from the factors influencing the changing shapes in our Gaze in the Crystal Ball. Three underlying factors are critical:

- Relationships, trust and transparency are foundational.
- Change must be of the whole system with all Presbyteries in relationship.
- Resourcing matters must be effective and equitable, reflecting both a commitment to mission and a vision of common wealth.

Possible models are thus:

1. **Status Quo**, where some Presbyteries are able to function well with their own resources, while other areas risk uncontrolled failure of Congregations due to lack of consistent effective oversight, in addition to potential uncontrolled failure of whole Presbyteries.
2. **Reducing the number of Presbyteries across our Synod** to consolidate resources, leading to strengthening oversight and resourcing. This need not directly involve every Presbytery in a change of boundaries. Just as there have been two previous amalgamations in NSW/ACT, other Presbyteries may seek to amalgamate. Any consolidation or amalgamation will need to be with the strong support of the Presbyteries involved. [Regs 3.1.5.(b) and 3.4.7.]
3. **Maintaining the current 12 Presbyteries**, but recognising that there is a need for resourcing Presbyteries differently, Presbytery-by-Presbytery. This allows for responding to contexts, but would involve a large amount of work with uncertain outcomes.
4. **Maintaining the current 12 Presbyteries, but with three categories**, recognising that there is a need for resourcing Presbyteries differently but in a coordinated way. The three categories largely reflect geography and demographics as well as numbers of existing members, Ministers and Congregations:
 - **Sydney Basin (4)**
 - **Coastal (4)**
 - **“West-of-the-Divide” (potentially 4, but recognising that CRP has some features of the Sydney Basin)**

Resourcing across the three categories will involve discerning:

- how much will be funding provided directly to Presbyteries to employ and deploy staff where that capacity exists,
 - how much to dedicate central Synod Services to particular Presbyteries, and
 - how much to deploy UME-related staff (including Saltbush) within Presbyteries.
5. **A blend of geographic and non-geographic Presbyteries**, notably with some rural and coastal Presbyteries entering a formal ongoing relationship such as in the Regional Partnership (currently FNC and Riverina).

D. A Path Forward

As an organizer, I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be. That we accept the world as it is does not in any sense weaken our desire to change it into what we believe it should be - it is necessary to begin where the world is if we are going to change it to what we think it should be. That means working in the system.

Saul Alinsky

D.1. A Year of Discernment in 2024

A path forward to discerning a model for our Presbyteries is to have a Year of Discernment during 2024, resulting in bringing a collective Presbytery proposal to the next meeting of Synod in April 2025 for decision.

The ongoing Presbytery Project Year of Discernment process will include:

- Meetings with whole of all presbyteries.
- A series of gatherings of Presbytery and Synod leaders similar to the three 2023 Stewardship Summits.
- Further meetings of UME and Synod Services team leaders similar to the November 2022 gathering to discern how staff and ministry agents may be employed and deployed across and within our diverse Presbyteries in the most effective way.
- Individual and group inputs.

This consultation process in the Year of Discernment will also take note of, and work collaboratively, multiple other processes underway, including but not limited to:

Most immediately:

- The results of proposals being brought to this Synod meeting from the three Stewardship Summits concerning presbytery resourcing. As noted above, the Stewardship Summit proposals concern funding, and are thus foundational to the Presbytery Project focus on models of how our Presbyteries relate to one another and Synod, and how they can exercise oversight most effectively.
- ACOMP Placements for a Just Church proposals being brought to this Synod meeting.
- Regional Partnership developments and potential expansion.

Additionally:

- Work on other Future Directions, notably rural and regional ministry.
- Resourcing Framework discussions.
- Sustainable Budget discussions.
- Property sales proceeds discussions.
- The Assembly Act2 process.

D.2. Conclusion

The Presbytery Project Year of Discernment in 2024 will create a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reboot our model of Presbyteries in NSW & the ACT to enable us to move from maintenance to mission, arising from a renewed focus discipleship as the core of growth, based on a sustainable, equitable, transparent and effective resourcing base.

It has to start at the table, doesn't it?
For there we remember who and whose we are -
Brothers and sisters bound by brokenness and blood
And a humble, sacrificial servanthood, far more mysterious,
Far more transformational than any rule or regulation.

We're all about this, aren't we?
Whether we call it discipleship,
Or following Christ's example,
Or learning to love as we have been loved,
Or living as salt and light and blessing.

Rev. Yvonne Ghavalas – Reflection after the first Stewardship Summit

Proposals:

1. That the Synod receive the report.
2. That the Synod:
 - a. Commit to a Year of Discernment in 2024 to identify a preferred model for Presbyteries in the Synod of NSW & the ACT that is refocussed on disciple-making and mission, with healthy relationships and processes, on a sustainable base of a "common wealth" of human and material resources, with proposals to be brought for decision to the 2025 Synod meeting.
 - b. Request the Presbytery Project Working Group to prepare a detailed options paper around possible models for Presbyteries in the NSW/ACT Synod as a basis for the Year of Discernment.

Questions for discernment:

1. How do you respond to the "people" section of this report? What strikes you about the diversity and similarities between our Presbyteries?
2. How do you respond to the "finance & property" section of this report? What strikes you about the diversity and similarities between our Presbyteries?
3. Which model(s) would you reject, and why?
4. Which model(s) would you affirm, and why?
5. What suggestions do you have for another model?

Appendix:

Theology of the Presbytery

According to the *Basis of Union* (paragraph 15c), the role of a Presbytery is:

to perform all the acts of oversight necessary to the life and mission of the church in the area for which is it responsible, except for those agencies which are directly responsible to the Synod or Assembly. It will in particular exercise oversight over the congregations within its bounds, encouraging them to strengthen one another's faith, to bear one another's burdens, and exhorting them to fulfil their high calling in Christ Jesus.

The Constitution sets out the following responsibilities for the Presbytery at Section 26:

The Presbytery shall have such oversight as is necessary to the life and mission of the Church in the area committed to it; it shall stimulate and encourage the Congregations within its bounds, providing them with opportunities for counsel in the strengthening and assistance of one another and in their participation in the wider work of the Church.

The key word about the role of a Presbytery in both the *Basis* and Constitution is **oversight**, and its key components are:

- Oversight by Presbytery is exercised for the life and mission of congregations (which are the embodiment in one place of the universal church - paragraph 15a)
- Oversight by Presbytery is about 'encouraging', 'stimulat[ing]', 'bear[ing] one another's burdens', and 'exhorting' congregations to fulfil their high calling.
- Oversight by Presbytery is directed toward strengthening the faith and unity of the Church.

This key word *oversight* is of profound importance to the worldwide church, past and present. That the role of the Presbytery is expressed as oversight is one among the many indicators within the *Basis* of the UCA's heritage within the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The heritage of this ministry of oversight (*episkope*) is as early as the first forms of order in the New Testament church. It has since been exercised individuals, such as bishops, or communally by a council, such as the Presbytery. Either way, the *episcopal* ministry of oversight is always relational.

The Methodist Church of Great Britain describes the episcopal ministry of oversight as 'the function of ensuring that the Church remains true to its calling'. They highlight the critical need for 'theologically informed governance, theologically informed management, and theologically informed leadership' among those who exercise this ministry, whether as individuals or in our case Presbyteries.

In summary, the role of the Presbytery is to exercise this historically significant and mission-critical episcopal ministry of oversight, doing so for the sake of the faith and unity of the congregations within its bounds, in ways that encourage and strengthen the congregations in their mission.