

## Towards a Blended Ecology - A Framework for Missional Innovation and Church Planting

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Email to [synodmeeting@nswact.uca.org.au](mailto:synodmeeting@nswact.uca.org.au)

### That the Synod

1. Receive the paper. Towards a Blended Ecology – A Framework for Missional Innovation and Church Planting.
2. Record its appreciation for the significant time and energy invested by the three working groups.
3. Affirm the adoption of a **blended ecology framework** for missional innovation and church planting, noting that this requires a whole of church approach and will take reorganisation, investment and collaboration across all councils of the church.
4. Affirm the place of **Faith Communities** in the blended ecology framework and encourage a whole of church approach to nurturing and growing a diverse range of small missional communities across the breadth of the Synod.
5. Affirm the place of **New Congregations** in the blended ecology framework and the commitment to begin by planting 4 – 5 congregations in new growth areas using a team-based, cohort approach as a catalyst for creating a culture of church planting across the Synod.
6. Affirm the place of **Parish Missions** in the blended ecology framework and encourage collaboration with existing Parish Missions and Uniting to see new Christian communities formed, recognising the opportunities that they create for transformative community engagement and discipleship.
7. Request Uniting Mission and Education to continue to facilitate its consultative work with the councils of the church in order to reorganise and invest in a blended ecology framework for missional innovation and church planting.

## The scope of a proposal

This proposal invites the adoption of a framework to encourage cooperation across the councils of the church in the task of church planting and missional innovation. It raises the importance of developing an aligned and shared approach for establishing a blended ecology of Faith Communities, New Congregations and Parish Missions and outlines some of the key areas for further development to put such a framework in place. It provides a strategic direction for the future but does not provide a comprehensive strategic plan, that is important but future work.

## Rationale

Our *Basis of Union*, drawing upon the apostle Paul's confession that in Christ God was reconciling the world, describes the mission of God as the "reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation."<sup>1</sup>

It is within the context of God's mission of reconciliation and renewal that we can understand the calling of the church. The church's call is to serve the divine mission of reconciliation and renewal, to participate in the mission of God in the world.

God in Christ has given to all people in the Church the Holy Spirit as a pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. *The Church's call is to serve that end.*<sup>2</sup>

Our own Assembly document on mission notes:

The Church is brought into existence by God and is called to serve God's mission. It neither creates itself nor its mission but is to recognize its dependence on God's Spirit for its life and purpose.<sup>3</sup>

As we consider the development of a framework for church planting, we need to ensure that we keep the church 'in its place.' That is, we need to be continually reminded that the church's call is to participate in God's mission of reconciliation and renewal, and that all our planning, proposals and projects serve that end.

All councils of the church need to be working collaboratively, bringing together the unique strengths, perspectives and experience of each. This is true in all aspects of church life, but even more so when it comes to missional innovation and church planting which is an area that the Uniting Church has found challenging over the years. It is vital that we commit to working and learning together how to

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<sup>1</sup> Basis of Union, §3.

<sup>2</sup> *Basis of Union*, §3 (emphasis added).

Church planting as such is not the work of an organisation, it is the work of the Spirit. However, God invites those of us who are called to serve the organisational life of the church, through its various inter-related councils, to prayerfully and proactively join in God's mission to create the organisational culture and practical pathways, systems and resources by which new expressions of the church can be seeded, take root and ultimately flourish.

<sup>3</sup> National Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, *Towards a Theology Relating to Mission* (2010), §18.

nurture new communities of faith that seek to listen deeply to the Spirit and to discern together how to live out their unique expression of worship, witness and service within the context in which they exist.

A Blended Ecology creates a culture where different approaches to ministry and mission are celebrated and mutually supportive. It is a **way** of living into being the church. This is the type of thinking that we need in this complex and ever-changing world, as we look to see new communities of faith formed.

This proposal invites the Synod to affirm three core areas for our collective effort in order to live into a blended ecology approach for missional innovation and church planting: Faith Communities, New Congregations and Parish Missions.

### **Faith Communities**

Small expressions of Christian community are becoming an increasingly important expression of the church in Australia. Fresh Expressions, Micro-churches, House churches, Missional communities, New monastic communities, Simple churches – can literally look like a thousand different things in a thousand different places. It is this creative, missional impulse that we want to encourage as we embrace our call to be a pilgrim people, led by the Spirit and formed into community by Christ.

The original intent of the addition of ‘faith communities’ to our regulations was to encourage experimentation and missional innovation. It is time to re-capture this intent and seriously consider how we can better nurture and support emerging expressions of Christian community.

Key aspects of building a strong and flexible lattice of support include: Investing in lay leadership, developing simple and clear processes, providing practical support that eases the burden of compliance, growing support networks, funding, sharing stories and resources, and encouraging innovation and experimentation in local contexts.

### **New Congregations**

In order to catalyse a significant cultural shift within the Synod around church planting, we are proposing the courageous step of committing to a team-based cohort approach to the establishment of Strategic New Congregations.

By team approach we mean the appointment of a team of leaders to plant the congregation: lay and ordained, paid and unpaid, full-time and part-time. There is scope for a variety of forms of leadership team, freedom that provides opportunities to experiment and learn what works for planting strategic new congregations in contemporary contexts.

By cohort approach we mean the planting of 4-5 strategic new congregations concurrently. The locations for these congregations would be discerned by the councils of the church together. The teams planting the congregations would have opportunities to learn together, support one another, share resources, and build collective wisdom to be passed on as future generations repeat the process. It provides the UCA with an opportunity to develop capacity in an area where it has struggled for some time.

There has been a growing sense that looking to resource a single new congregation each year is simply not going to provide the momentum required to catalyse a culture of Church Planting and revitalisation within the Uniting Church. The working group are convinced that what is required is a cohort of Strategic New Congregations that are clear in their call to become *Resourcing Congregations* for the wider church.

### Parish Missions

When the Uniting Church formed in 1977 provision was made in the Regulations for Parish Missions, to ensure that we did not lose the incredible work that God has done through them.

While existing Parish Missions have done remarkable work since union, a case could be made that since that time we have not cultivated the role of Parish Missions in the life of the Uniting Church, and as a result have not benefited from the particular gifts they offer as we seek to participate in the mission of God in the world.

We believe that the adoption of a blended ecology framework for church planting, in which Parish Mission play an important role, provides an opportunity for us to be more intentional in cultivating the role of Parish Missions in our ministry and mission. In particular, we seek a new season of intentional collaboration and partnership with existing Parish Missions and the wider church to see new communities of Christian disciples formed for the transformation of the world.

**For further details on each element of the blended ecology, please refer to the full paper prepared by the working groups.**

### Proposers

*A proposer and the seconder must be attending the Synod in Session as members. If the proposal is from one of Synod's reporting bodies (committee, board, presbytery, task group), it should be submitted and signed by an authorised officer of that body.*

Name: DAMIAN AND CHRISTINE PALMER  
(ON BEHALF OF THE WORKING GROUPS)  
Email: DAMIANP@NSWACT.UCA.ORG.AU  
Phone: 0438 685 587

Signature



Name: GLEN SPENCER  
Email: GLENS@NSWACT.UCA.ORG.AU  
Phone: 0430 021 484

Signature

