

Church Planting, Re-Planting & Revitalisation Background Notes

Ministry and Mission Team – March 2025

renewal



The Uniting Church in Australia
QUEENSLAND SYNOD

"There is no doubt we all want multiplication.
But to get there we need a church culture whose

*primary foundation
is discipleship.*

In a culture like this, once disciples begin to make disciples consistently, then we will not need to wonder too much about church planting. Those disciples who faithfully follow Jesus have a way of sensing that new churches are needed – everywhere."

The Genius in the Kingdom – Colin Stoodley

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1. Background

Over the last two decades, the topic of church planting, replanting and revitalisation has been repeatedly raised in conversations throughout the Synod of Queensland.

As far back as 2005 the Synod adopted and resourced its **Vision for Mission**, outlining a desire for “*the establishment, development and nurture of new ventures in ministry and mission.*”

In 2014, at the 31st Synod, the Moderator convened an open space gathering centred on the question “If the church is on life support, what’s our call now?” Church Planting was named as one priority response, with a self-organised network formed after the Synod meeting, sharing ideas, and encouraging action in the period following.

In 2016, the 32nd Synod discerned its priority directions for 2016-2020 to be Christ-centred, at prayer, and listening, discipleship, leadership, connecting with communities and youth, children and families as the church grows, transitions, and innovates.

In 2017, at the 33rd Synod, a series of future directions were agreed for the church in Queensland. One asked the Synod to develop of resources assisting Presbyteries to identify strategic locations for ongoing and future development and resourcing.

In 2018, the Synod office began extensive consultation across the church under the banner of **Plenty**. In a process that led to the adoption of the Plenty priorities in 2020, a core focus was identified as discipleship. This call was interpreted as refocusing on the challenge of becoming a disciple-making church. The Synod committed to pursuing innovation in church and mission models to suit a constantly changing world, and refreshing discipleship culture across the life of the church.

In 2023, the Synod focussed on the theme of **Renewal**, and began to explore both the opportunities and challenges that renewal can bring, including the key lesson that sometimes renewal is preceded by loss. That focus on renewal continues in 2025 with the 38th Synod.

Over that same extended period, congregations, faith communities, and Presbyteries across the State have identified and acted upon the same sense of call to church planting, replanting and revitalisation based on a commitment to discipleship. Newlife, for example, in partnership with South Moreton and Moreton Rivers Presbyteries have completed five church plants over the last 10 years (Pacific Pines, Burleigh, Brisbane, Coolangatta and Moreton). This experience has led to the maturing of approaches to training, preparation, and planting within Newlife. Elsewhere, new congregations/faith communities have begun in Toowoomba (Highfields Community Church), Caloundra (BELLS), Bargara (Surf Church) and Mareeba, among other locations.

New CALD faith communities have also sprung up – a Fijian community in Biloela for example. New church plant projects are underway in new growth areas such as Ripley and Flagstone, and in urban and suburban areas undergoing cultural shift and infill development (Clayfield, for example).

Other congregations/faith communities have undergone significant revitalisation and renewal (Toowong, St Lucia, Nerang and Townsville Central to name a few).

New missional activities within existing congregations/faith communities (such as Messy Church at Caloundra or Pittsworth) provide other avenues to revitalisation or planting new congregations/faith communities.

Presbyteries and congregations/faith communities have incorporated church planting, replanting and revitalisation into their own planning and activities, recognising that God is calling the Uniting Church within Queensland to a new sense of movement.

Training offered in the past by Presbyteries or congregations/faith communities (at times in partnership with the Synod office) in areas such as pioneering and fresh expressions, has in recent times been joined by training and formation for church planters in the broader sense, particularly through congregations such as Newlife, and Presbytery initiatives such as the Moreton Rivers Presbytery Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

Other Synods, particularly South Australia and NSW/ACT, have also committed to the intentional development of leaders for church planting and revitalisation and are implementing related plans. The national Propel network, a collective of evangelical Uniting Church congregations and leaders, is encouraging and training congregations/faith communities and church planters for church planting and revitalisation.

2. Why Church Planting & Revitalisation for the Uniting Church?

The Uniting Church exists thanks to the missional endeavours of our forebears following the Spirit of God to imagine and plant new congregations/faith communities throughout Australia. It is a missional impulse, a call to faith and to being disciples that lies at the heart of our Church and each one of our existing congregations/faith communities. The church exists because people have found good news and responded to Jesus' instruction in Matthew 28: *"Go into all the world and make disciples"*.

That call still stands for the Church today.

In the Basis of Union, we recognise that Christ is constantly at work, drawing people to faith, leading the Church, and continually reshaping it:

Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; he calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.

(Basis of Union, Paragraph 4)

The Queensland context is one in which there is significant growth and change in communities, culturally, demographically, and geographically. To ensure the Church's presence in both rapidly growing urban areas across the state and changing regional and rural locations, a strong, intentional effort to establish new faith communities in a range of contexts is essential.

Within existing communities, population groups move and shift – including increased density of population, or new cultural groups. For the Church to be present in such changing context, it can be argued that a concentrated, intentional, effort to establish a diversity of new congregations/faith communities is vital. Alongside this, an intentional revitalisation pathway is required, assisting existing congregations/faith communities to adapt and respond effectively to change within their neighbourhoods or communities. There is ample evidence to suggest we have not effectively made these transitions within many of our congregations/faith communities.

Additionally, evidence from within Australia and beyond suggests that new congregations/faith communities are an effective context in which people are brought to faith and formed as disciples of Jesus. If the Uniting Church in Queensland is to be true to our commitment to prioritising discipleship, as articulated through the Plenty initiative, then a concerted, intentional church planting effort is a critical aspect alongside revitalisation and other discipleship initiatives. From all of this can come the renewed flourishing of the church.

Any church planting or revitalisation effort should take this emphasis on discipleship to heart. Planting churches for the sake of planting churches, or numerical growth in congregations/faith communities for the sake of statistics pales next to the call on our Church to be and to make disciples and to witness to and participate in God's mission. This church planting or revitalisation framework or strategy emerges from our understanding that we are called to a broader discipleship focus.

Should the Uniting Church Plant New Churches?

This is an important question to consider and respond to. Some reasons to respond positively to it include:

- At our best, the Uniting Church offers something significant alongside other Christian churches. Some of our commitments are an important part of the call on the broader Christian community in witnessing to and serving both our wider society and each local community. Examples include:
 - a covenantal relationship with First Nations Peoples,
 - being a multi-cultural church,
 - the full participation of women in leadership,
 - openness to grappling with modern social, scientific, and ethical understandings and values.
- We are blessed with extraordinary people, history, relationships, footprint, and connections. We have the capacity, capability, and resources to both plant new churches, and revitalise existing congregations/faith communities, and to unite with others on this task (we may explore ecumenical approaches, for example).
- One of the primary foci of any Christian church is responding to the Great Commission (Matt 28) to make disciples. Planting churches among new groups of people is a natural extension for any church – and the Uniting Church is no different. It might be argued that Jesus' vision was of a church that would plant churches as part of its response to proclaiming the gospel. Historically the Uniting Church has embodied this, and this call simply takes us back to our roots.
- To serve the diverse needs of the entire Australian population, we need many more churches that are thoughtfully adapted to the unique contexts of the communities they are planted in.

Through the discernment of our councils and our leadership communities, and as outlined above, our church has repeatedly heard the Spirit calling us to this task of planting and revitalising, expressing it in our vision: to be active in every Queensland community, bearers of Christ's offer of life in all its fullness. As in the beginning, so we continue to hear the voice of the Spirit to make disciples, and to grow healthy congregations/faith communities.

3. Synod Office Strategy

In early 2024, the Synod office reviewed and renewed its own planning considering this emerging activity across the church, and the 37th Synod's focus on Renewal. Its 2025–2027 strategic plan, **Our Foundations for Renewal and Growth**, identifies the following strategic actions for the Synod office:

- 1.2.1: Co-create Presbytery-specific approaches to support congregational revitalisation
- 1.2.4: Develop a draft church planting strategy, including statewide targets, for the Queensland Synod to be presented to the 38th Synod in May 2025
- 5.2.1: Establish a church renewal specified fund
- 5.2.2: Development of a funding strategy for a mission/church renewal fund

Subsequently, the Synod office has been reorganised to support its delivery of this new strategy. A new Mission Accompanying Team has been established, for example, with the task of supporting leaders, congregations/faith communities and Presbyteries in a range of areas – including church planting and revitalisation.

4. Proposals for 38th Synod

To accomplish this, proposals for a church planting, replanting and revitalisation strategy, and for a funding strategy supporting renewal have been developed for consideration by the 38th Synod. This suite of proposals, together with the commitment of the Synod office in its own strategy and operational planning, represents the most comprehensive and considered response to this task. It creates the best opportunity yet for the Synod to work alongside presbyteries, congregations, and faith communities to develop an ecosystem that nurtures and embeds a culture of planting, replanting and revitalisation.

The Synod has not initiated and is not proposing or leading a new church planting movement. Rather, it is responding to and supporting a growing sense of call that has been steadily crystalising within the Synod and in congregations and presbyteries for more than a decade.

The Synod and Synod office through a focus on renewal is committed to supporting and strengthening Presbyteries and congregations/faith communities that carry this sense of call. The Synod is invited to take up its own responsibilities and commitments alongside these other councils of the church.

5. The Synod's Role Alongside Other Councils

"The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and to the world... It is the task of every council to wait upon God's Word, and to obey God's will in the matters allocated to its oversight. Each council will recognise the limits of its own authority and give heed to other councils of the Church, so that the whole body of believers may be united by mutual submission in the service of the Gospel."

(Basis of Union, Paragraph 15)

Each council of the Uniting Church holds distinct but inter-related responsibilities. With respect to planting, replanting or revitalising congregations/faith communities, or training and equipping leaders for involvement, regulated responsibilities for each council include:

Congregation and Church Council Responsibilities:

- Reg 3.1.1a includes embodiment of church in one place for worship, witness, service.
- Reg 3.1.2a includes leading congregation to fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world.

Presbytery Responsibilities:

- Reg 3.1.3a includes pastoral and administrative oversight of ministers.
- Reg 3.1.3d (1) includes formation of congregations and other pastoral charges within the bounds of the Presbytery.
- Reg 3.1.3l & 3.1.3m includes designation and placement of lay pastors, youth workers, ministers.
- Reg 3.1.3o (i) includes administrative functions related to property.
- Reg 3.4.1 includes recognising the establishment of a new congregation.
- Reg 3.9.2 includes recognition and support of Faith Communities as an alternative local church structure.
- Reg 3.9.3 includes recognition and support of Small Congregations as an alternative local church structure.

Synod Responsibilities:

The Synod itself holds a range of regulated responsibilities either directly or indirectly related to the work of planting, replanting and revitalisation:

- Reg 3.1.5 (a) includes assisting Congregations and Presbyteries in their missionary responsibilities.
- Reg 3.1.5 (i) includes providing for effective supervision of theological and ministerial education.
- Reg 3.1.5 (k) includes providing for effective supervision of property matters.
- Reg 3.1.5 (a) (vi) includes undertaking such other things as, in the opinion of the Synod, will promote and encourage the mission of the Church.
- Reg 4.2.1 includes providing for effective oversight of property matters.

Considering these inter-related responsibilities is therefore vital to develop and enact an effective framework or strategy for encouraging church planting, replanting and revitalisation. Any consideration of the Synod to take its own actions must give heed to the responsibilities and actions of the other councils of the Church, as the Basis of Union invites us to do, uniting in mutual submission.

6. Role of Synod Bodies

Within the Synod there are both regulated and non-regulated bodies that are invested in supporting the new and revitalised congregations/faith communities and those leaders and ministry agents involved. These include the Synod Standing Committee (SSC), Finance, Investment & Property Board (FIP), Board for Christian Formation (BCF), Advisory Committee on Ministerial Placements (Placements), Presbytery/Synod Interface (PSI) and the Mission Consultation & Collaboration Committee (MC3) and the Multi-Cross Cultural Reference Group (MCCRG).

The Synod, through its office, has already appointed or called staff or ministry agents to support this work including the Mission Accompanying Team (MAT), the Presbytery Support Unit (PSU), Trinity College Queensland, a Covenanting Executive Officer, and the Finance, Property and Enterprises Team.

This proposed strategy calls for each body within the Synod to consider church planting, re-planting, and revitalisation in the course of undertaking its work, adopting a collaborative approach to working with congregations/faith communities, presbyteries and other bodies.

The Synod's relationship with Muth arrak is also important in supporting work to plant, replant and revitalise congregations in First Nations communities.

7: Definitions

This document, together with the proposed strategy uses key terms as follows:

Church planting: A term used broadly to mean the process of beginning new congregations/faith communities within the context of the Uniting Church. They may take many different forms and shapes but aim to bear the marks of the Church as worship, witness and service as expressed in the Basis of Union. The process of 'planting' itself may also take many different forms and shapes.

Re-planting: A term used broadly to mean the process of beginning new congregations/faith communities either in place of, or alongside existing Uniting Church congregations. This may involve closing an existing congregation and developing and enacting a new vision and leadership team within the context. New and contextual approaches to worship, witness and service are vital.

Revitalisation: A term used broadly to mean the process of helping an existing congregations/faith community find new life and energy in its worship, witness, and service. This may encompass new generations, new cultures, new commitment to faith sharing, fresh approaches to worship, new missional endeavours. There is a focus on forming and growing disciples, particularly people who do not currently belong to any community of faith.

Congregation: A congregation/faith community able to meet all the requirements of a congregation as articulated in the Uniting Church's Basis of Union, Constitution, Regulations and By-laws. Where the term congregation is used in this paper, it is used with this specific definition in mind.

Church planters: An inclusive term used broadly to describe individual leaders and teams of leaders involved in preparing and leading the establishment of new congregations/faith communities. Such people may be lay or ordained, paid, or unpaid as appointed by the relevant body.

Leaders: An inclusive term used broadly to describe people, both lay and ordained, paid, and unpaid, Church council and ministry team, who offer significant leadership within the life of the Uniting Church.

Discipleship: the lifelong journey of learning, knowing, and living Jesus' way, in community for the restoration of all things.

8. Availability of Expertise

There is a growing body of expertise and experience to support this work, both within the Uniting Church in Queensland, and within other bodies.

Presbyteries including South Moreton, Moreton Rivers and Bremer Brisbane have developed and begun implementing plans related to church planting, replanting and revitalisation. There is developing collaboration between these and other presbyteries with respect to training, models, and implementation. That expertise is available to other presbyteries, including through bodies such as the Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

Newlife has matured in its approaches to planting and replanting through experience over more than a decade. It has an intentional and well-established approach to training church planters, and to pursuing opportunities to plant and/or replant. Newlife has collaborated effectively with multiple presbyteries and congregations to plant and replant.

Other congregations and faith communities, and their leadership teams, within the Synod – such as Highfields, BELLS, Toowong, and St Lucia – have developed and matured approaches through experience which is readily available to other groups.

The Synod office has established its Mission Accompanying Team, a group that includes experienced practitioners across a range of planting, replanting and revitalisation models and approaches. The team exists to accompany presbyteries and congregations/faith communities with coaching, planning, and research.

More broadly, the Propel network, as noted earlier, has sought to gather expertise and experience in church planting, evangelism, and discipleship, and make it available across the Uniting Church.

There are a range of external or independent church planting and discipleship networks that we can partner with for training, support and development of leaders and teams. Examples include Exponential Australia, M4 Australia, ConneXa and V3.

9. Goals and Targets

Many church planting and revitalisation strategies around Australia and beyond include goals or targets. A decade ago, the London Anglican Diocese committed to plant 100 new churches (of many models) by 2020, reaching 87 by the end of its strategy period. It has since re-set its strategy and now aims at 400 new churches by 2030. The Baptist Union of NSW in its Gen1K initiative set an astonishing goal of becoming a network of 1000 healthy churches by 2050 (a tripling in the number of churches in the network).

Within the Uniting Church, the South Australia Synod/Presbyteries have a goal of planting 10 churches and regenerating 15 congregations over a five-year period. The NSW/ACT Synod has committed to five new church plants as part of a mixed ecology approach. Bremer Brisbane Presbytery has set a goal of three new church plants within five years, and Moreton Rivers Presbytery 40 by 2040. Downs Presbytery aims to ensure it supports four healthy “pillar” congregations in the Toowoomba region, to support the wider Presbytery.

Goals or targets can help motivate an entire system and provide a metric by which to assess progress. They can also provide a long-term target within which shorter-term plans can be implemented. Within its long-term Gen1K strategy for example, the Baptist Union of NSW currently has a three-year plan identifying short-term work contributing to the longer-term goals.

On the other hand, identifying and committing to firm targets such as these can be challenging for an inter-conciliar church like the Uniting Church. Which of our councils can commit to such targets on behalf of others, for example? Can the Synod rightly commit to a certain number of church plants or revitalisations across the whole state, when so much of the activity of church planting and revitalisation lies with congregations/faith communities and Presbyteries? Can we meaningfully agree state-wide targets when Presbyteries are at such distinct stages in their own consideration of church planting and revitalisation? Do we want to delay progress while we consult and negotiate to establish state-wide targets?

With all of this in mind, the proposed strategy includes two goals for the Uniting Church Synod of Queensland, set across a ten-year timeline.

- First that the **total number of congregations/faith communities will increase, rather than decrease** – and that this increase will include consideration of the whole state. Such a goal, if agreed by the Synod, is ambitious, no doubt. There are existing congregations and faith communities whose future is far from assured. We will likely find ourselves going backwards (numerically) for some time yet before we are able to move forward. Nonetheless, this goal is offered out of the conviction that if we are to be active in every Queensland community, then that activity necessarily includes the gathering of disciples in congregations/faith communities, and more of them than we do presently. Reflecting the nature of Queensland, some of these new congregations/faith communities should be in First Nations contexts, developed in partnership with Muth arrak, and others in culturally diverse contexts.
- The second goal included in the proposal relates to **congregations/faith communities actively developing a discipleship culture** that relates to the cultural, geographic, and demographic context in which it lives and serves. This goal both follows on from and is consistent with Plenty and responds to evidence that suggests discipleship is the key driver for church planting, re-planting, and revitalisation.

There remains before us the challenge of Synod adopting goals for which it is not solely responsible. Adopting such goals calls the Synod to a deep posture of humble collaboration with presbyteries, congregations, faith communities and other entities – a posture that is, in any case, essential for any meaningful progress toward renewal.