

Uniting Church pyramids

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 the world” (see Paragraph 15 of the Uniting Church’s *Basis of Union*, below). This governance structure is based on the theological conviction that decision-making belongs to faithful groups of people gifted and gathered for discernment: together we better discern the will of God, and together we better enact (or *incarnate*) the good news of Christ in the world. Government in the Uniting Church is both devolved and relational: each council has its particular responsibilities, including to “give heed to the other councils of the Church”.

Triangular pyramids

The inter-related councils of the Uniting Church can be represented by a triangular pyramid (equilateral tetrahedron). All images or models have their limitations, but this shape ensures that no single council is ‘on top’ without the whole thing falling over. The four faces of the pyramid list the roles and responsibilities of each council, and represent the relationship of each council to the other councils. When a decision is to be made by one council, the perspectives and responsibilities of each other council are to be considered too, for no council is an island and all councils serve Christ.



Congregation and its Church Council

The *Basis of Union* lists the Congregation as one of the governance bodies of the Church, but uses slightly different language from the other four structures: the congregation is “*the embodiment in one place*” of the Church, whereas the other structures are named as councils. The congregation does act as a council when it meets to discern and determine matters related to the direction of its life, such as at the annual general meeting of the congregation. However in the day-to-day and weekly patterns the congregation does not commonly meet to discern in such a way: it delegates this responsibility to its recognised leaders, the Elders or Leaders Meeting – now called the Church Council. For this reason the Congregation and its Church Council appear on one face to enact and oversee its recognised responsibilities.

Key points about Uniting Church pyramids

1. Each council has particular responsibilities
2. Each council is related to every other council
3. No council sits at the top of the pyramid (authority is inter-related)
4. Each Congregation and its Church Council share local responsibilities
5. An institution and its Board are analogous to the Congregation and its Church Council
6. Every council has responsibility to discern its part in God’s call to mission

Institutions of the Uniting Church

Community service agencies, schools and colleges, and other institutions of the Uniting Church are not named in the Basis of Union nor represented specifically on the UCA pyramids. Commonly these institutions have their own governance structures, which evolve over time according to the needs of government and community requirements. Sometimes these institutions are of a size that dwarfs the councils of the Uniting Church, both in numbers of people involved and financial resources. However the spiritual foundations, missional purpose and relational oversight of these institutions remains connected to the councils of the Church. The responsibilities of presbytery, synod and Assembly relate to such institutions, including oversight of ministry and mission. While not directly translatable in all respects, the governance structure of institutions can be seen to replace the Church Council and the Congregation (green face), and to stand in relation to the other three councils of the Church.

Worship illustrates inter-relationship

The regular worship of communities of faith provides an example of the inter-relationship of councils. The local congregation and its Church Council is responsible for organising corporate worship, including the time and place, and who will lead worship (and such leaders determine the actual form of a particular service of worship, including hymns and sermon content, for example). No other council determines these aspects of local worship.

However the presbytery is responsible for the commissioning and oversight of recognised worship leaders, and pastoral oversight of congregations including periodic consultations on their life and witness. The synod is responsible for training such leaders for recognition, and the Assembly for setting the training standards for worship leaders. Together the synod and assembly are responsible for community-related regulations in the wider Australian society, such as state-based Working with Children Checks and national Criminal History Records Checks (police checks). The Assembly is also responsible for the theological and doctrinal basis for worship, including the ecumenical and pastoral implications of baptism and Holy Communion, and approved orders of service for general use. Each council thus has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and the world.

Uniting Church Basis of Union, Paragraph 15

The Uniting Church recognises that responsibility for government in the Church belongs to the people of God by virtue of the gifts and tasks which God has laid upon them. The Uniting Church therefore so organises its life that locally, regionally and nationally government will be entrusted to representatives, men and women, bearing the gifts and graces with which God has endowed them for the building up of the Church. The Uniting Church is governed by a series of interrelated councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities in relation both to the Church and the world. The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ alone is supreme in his Church, and that he may speak to it through any of its councils. 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.