
Proposal 6: Inclusion of Plain English text in reports & proposals

That the Synod of WA requires reports and proposals to be accompanied by a plain English statement.

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Rationale:

The Uniting Church has valued inclusion of all people since its founding. The Basis of Union reminds us we are committed to “a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries” (para 1).¹ The language of reports and proposals can be difficult to read and this has effectively excluded from the decision-making processes of the wider church people whose English literacy is not at the same standard.

An analysis of the literacy requirements to comprehend and respond to many of our Synod papers in relation to the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF),² a national standard for assessing and teaching literacy, shows full engagement in these wider-church bodies requires level 5 of a possible 5 levels in reading skills. This effectively excludes many people who have not undertaken a study in a higher education context.

Seeking a plain English version of all reports and proposals is not only for the benefit of CALD congregations, but will also benefit people who have had restricted educational opportunities and disability.

The Statement *We are a multicultural Church* reminds us:

It is essential therefore to provide for full participation of Aboriginal and ethnic³ people, women and men, in decision making in the councils of the Church; to ensure that these groups have equitable rights in the use of Uniting Church properties and access to its resources; and to include their concerns and perspectives in the agendas of the councils of the Church (para 5).⁴

The Uniting Church says it values being inclusive. The language we have in reports and proposals excludes some people from full participation in Synod.

This proposal will help:

- Migrant congregations;
- People with disabilities; and
- People with limited education.

We know we need the full version, but the intent of the document needs to be in the plain English version.

¹ Basis of Union. <https://assembly.uca.org.au/images/stories/HistDocs/basisofunion1992.pdf>

² Australian Core Skills Framework. <https://www.employment.gov.au/download-acsf>

³ Note from original text: Since 1985 the phrase “Culturally and Linguistically Diverse” (CALD) is increasingly used across the broader community and is a better and more appropriate descriptor than ethnic for congregations of people from cultures other than Aboriginal or mostly English-speaking descent. Most helpful are the definitions of First Peoples and Second Peoples as used to differentiate between Indigenous peoples and all those who have come later. They remind the whole Church of the diversity of all migrant peoples and of our need for reconciliation and understanding of the unique place and spirituality of First Peoples.

⁴ <https://assembly.uca.org.au/mcm/resources/assembly-resolutions-and-statements/item/1688-we-are-a-multicultural-church>

Full participation is not able to happen when people are excluded from the decision-making process because of the literacy requirements of involvement.

The consensus decision-making process means that to be fully involved people need to be able to read and critically comprehend the meeting documents placed before them. If we are serious about consensus decision-making processes *and* about being an inclusive church, then we need to ensure the language in which reports and proposals are presented do not form a barrier to this engagement.

In addition to the benefits outlined above for people with limited literacy, there are benefits for all members of Synod. Where the text of the document is complex, those without expertise in the field can use the plain English version to supplement their understanding. Anecdotal evidence suggests there is a wide range of people already attending meetings who would use a plain English version to scaffold their understanding of more complex documents and/or documents that are outside of their expertise. Such scaffolding improves understanding of a written text and therefore the critical engagement with that text.

For those who are writing reports and proposals, having to include a plain English copy is a useful tool to help people focus on and communicate clearly the intent of their text.

Use of a plain English version will also assist people from CALD or low-literacy backgrounds to articulate their intent clearly and to hear their voices even when they subsequently have assistance in writing the report or proposal.

A guide to writing in plain English and report/proposal template can be made available for those who need this support.

Many people find the reports and proposals hard to understand. A plain English copy helps this understanding.

Writing in plain English also helps the author clarify what needs to be written.

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