

An Estimate of Regular Weekly Attendance in the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania

Research Report

October 19, 2025

Contents

1	Defining the Uniting Church Landscape in Victoria and Tasmania	3
1.1	Organisational Structure and Official Metrics	3
1.2	Deconstructing "Affiliation": The Three Tiers of Engagement	3
1.3	The Data Chasm: The Necessity of Estimation	3
2	The National Context: A Denomination in Transition	4
2.1	A Story of Decline: National Census and Attendance Trends	4
2.2	A Network of Small Churches: The NCLS Congregational Profile	5
3	A Multi-Method Approach to Estimating Regular Attendance	5
3.1	Methodology Overview	5
3.2	Method 1: Proportional Allocation by Congregation	5
3.3	Method 2: Proportional Allocation by Membership	6
3.4	Method 3: Bottom-Up Modelling from Average Congregation Size	6
4	Synthesis and Final Estimated Range	6
4.1	Analysis of Convergence	7
4.2	Final Estimated Range and Confidence Level	7
4.3	Key Assumptions and Limitations	7
5	Strategic Implications and Forward Outlook	7
5.1	The Membership-Attendance Gap: Redefining Engagement	8
5.2	The Challenge of Resource Allocation: A System Mismatch	8
5.3	The "Two Churches" Phenomenon: Brand vs. Reality	8
5.4	Conclusion: A Future for a Network of Small Communities	9

Abstract

This report provides a considered, multi-method estimate of the number of regular weekly attendees across the 405 congregations of the Uniting Church in Australia's Synod of Victoria and Tasmania (the Synod). In the absence of publicly available attendance data, this analysis synthesizes official structural and membership figures with national survey data to produce a robust and defensible estimate for strategic planning purposes.

The core finding of this report is that the number of regular weekly attendees within the Synod is estimated to be in the range of **14,500 to 16,500**. This figure is derived from the convergence of three distinct analytical models: proportional allocation by share of national congregations, proportional allocation by share of national membership, and a bottom-up model based on average congregation size. The strong agreement between these independent methods provides a high degree of confidence in the final estimated range.

This analysis reveals several key strategic realities for the Synod. A significant disparity exists between the Synod's official membership of over 60,000 and the estimated active weekly attendance, indicating that approximately 75% of formal members do not attend services on a typical Sunday. This gap highlights a profound shift in the nature of religious affiliation and presents a critical challenge for congregational engagement.

The estimate is situated within a national context of steep demographic decline for the Uniting Church, which experienced a 23% drop in census affiliation between 2016 and 2021.[1] National data confirms that the Uniting Church is predominantly a network of small congregations, with a median attendance size of fewer than 40 people.[2] This structural reality, combined with evidence of a mismatch between resource deployment and population growth, presents the Synod with significant challenges in aligning its historical footprint with contemporary demographic shifts.

1 Defining the Uniting Church Landscape in Victoria and Tasmania

To establish a reliable estimate of regular attendance, it is first necessary to define the organizational scale and key population metrics of the Uniting Church within Victoria and Tasmania. This section outlines the Synod's structure, clarifies the distinct tiers of religious engagement, and addresses the critical data limitations that necessitate an estimation-based approach.

1.1 Organisational Structure and Official Metrics

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania is a regional council of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA), the nation's third-largest Christian denomination.[3, 4] The Synod's ecclesiastical body is comprised of **405 congregations** organized into eight presbyteries: Gippsland, Loddon Mallee, North East Victoria, Port Phillip East, Port Phillip West, Tasmania, Western Victoria, and Yarra Yarra.[3, 5, 6] The Synod officially reports a membership base of **"more than 60,000 members"**. [3] This figure represents individuals who have formally joined a congregation and serves as a crucial, though distinct, data point against which active attendance can be compared.

It is imperative to distinguish the Synod, as the ecclesiastical body of worshiping congregations, from **Uniting Vic.Tas**, its large and separately incorporated community services organization.[7, 8] While sharing a common heritage and mission "to inspire people, enliven communities and confront injustice" [7], Uniting Vic.Tas operates as one of Australia's largest non-government providers of community services.[3] Its significant operational scale, including 3,701 employees and total revenue of \$294.4 million in the 2019 financial year, is not reflective of the congregational body being analyzed.[9] This report focuses exclusively on the worshiping communities that constitute the Synod.

1.2 Deconstructing "Affiliation": The Three Tiers of Engagement

A nuanced understanding of the Uniting Church's demographic reality requires differentiating between three distinct tiers of population engagement. Each tier represents a different level of connection and commitment, and the relationship between them is central to understanding the church's current position.

1. **Census Affiliates:** This is the broadest and most passive form of connection, comprising all individuals who identified with the Uniting Church in the Australian national census. In 2021, this figure stood at 673,260 nationally.[4, 10] This metric often reflects cultural heritage or historical family connection rather than active participation.
2. **Formal Members:** This group consists of individuals who have formally joined a specific congregation. The Synod's figure of over 60,000 members falls into this category.[3] Membership implies a higher level of commitment than census affiliation but does not guarantee regular attendance at worship services.
3. **Regular Attendees:** This is the target metric of this report. It refers to the average number of people physically or digitally present for worship on a weekly basis. This figure is the most direct measure of active engagement and congregational vitality.

1.3 The Data Chasm: The Necessity of Estimation

The Synod of Victoria and Tasmania actively collects precise attendance and membership data from every one of its congregations on an annual basis. This is accomplished through a comprehensive survey process comprising the "Community Life Return" and the "Financial Return".[11] The Community Life Return, a practice in place since 2016, specifically gathers information on

“membership, worship and activities of congregations,” including the ways worship is undertaken.[11]

Despite this systematic data collection, the aggregated results are not made public. Access to these detailed reports is restricted to “**key leaders in each Presbytery**” in order to “maintain appropriate levels of confidentiality”.[11] This deliberate internal data management strategy creates a “data chasm” for public and external analysis. The decision to invest significant resources in collecting precise data, only to then restrict its dissemination, is not an oversight. It suggests a deliberate cultural or strategic choice within the organization. Such choices are often made in environments facing decline to manage internal morale, avoid negative public narratives, and prevent potentially discouraging comparisons between congregations or presbyteries. This reframes the data gap from a simple lack of information into a feature of the organization’s internal culture, making an objective, external estimation all the more valuable for strategic leadership.

Table 1: Comparison of Key Metrics: National UCA vs. VicTas Synod

Metric	Uniting Church in Australia (National)	Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
Census Affiliation (2021)	673,260	<i>Not Directly Available</i>
Formal Members	243,000 (as of 2018)	>60,000
Number of Congregations	1,628 (NCLS 2021)	405
Regular Weekly Attendees	59,000 (NCLS 2021-24)	To be Estimated

2 The National Context: A Denomination in Transition

To develop an accurate estimate for Victoria and Tasmania, it is crucial to first situate the Synod within the powerful national trends shaping the Uniting Church. The denomination as a whole is undergoing a profound demographic transition, characterized by a rapid decline in affiliation and a structural profile dominated by small congregations.

2.1 A Story of Decline: National Census and Attendance Trends

The number of Australians identifying with the Uniting Church in the national census has fallen precipitously over the past decade. The figure dropped from **1,065,796 in 2011** to **870,183 in 2016**, and then fell again to **673,260 in 2021**.^[4, 14] The decline between 2016 and 2021 represents a **23% drop in affiliation in just five years**. This is one of the fastest rates of decline among major Christian denominations in Australia, second only to The Salvation Army (28%) and exceeding that of Presbyterians (21%) and Anglicans (20%).^[1]

This decline in broad affiliation is mirrored in measures of active participation. The most recent National Church Life Survey (NCLS) “Pulse Check 2021 to 2024” reports a national weekly attendance figure for the UCA of **59,000** people across **1,628 congregations**.^[12, 13]

The differing rates of decline across the three tiers of engagement reveal a critical dynamic. The outermost layer, Census Affiliation, is eroding at the most rapid pace. This suggests that the church is losing its cultural footprint and its broad base of passive sympathizers—the pool from which future members might be drawn—far more quickly than it is losing its core of active attendees. This is not simply a managed decline; it is a “hollowing out” from the outside in. The strategic implication is that growth strategies focused solely on retaining the existing core are insufficient. The church must also address the collapse of its cultural relevance to the wider, unaffiliated community.

2.2 A Network of Small Churches: The NCLS Congregational Profile

While the UCA remains the nation's third-largest denomination by census affiliation, NCLS research characterizes its structural reality as a **"nation of small churches"**.^[2] The 2016 NCLS data, the most recent available at this granular level, found that the **median weekly attendance size for a Uniting Church congregation was less than 40 people**.^[2]

The use of the median, rather than the mean (average), is statistically significant. It indicates that the distribution of congregation sizes is skewed by a small number of very large churches. The median reveals the reality for the "typical" congregation, which is a small, local gathering. This profile of numerous small worshipping communities is a defining feature of the denomination and serves as a key assumption in the bottom-up estimation model developed later in this report.

3 A Multi-Method Approach to Estimating Regular Attendance

This section forms the analytical core of the report. It constructs the attendance estimate through three distinct yet complementary methodologies. Each method is detailed transparently, including its underlying data, assumptions, and calculations, to provide a comprehensive and verifiable basis for the final estimate.

3.1 Methodology Overview

Given the absence of direct, publicly available attendance data from the Synod, relying on a single estimation method would be insufficient and analytically weak. This report therefore employs a triangulation approach. It utilizes three independent models that draw on different aspects of the available data: the number of congregations, the formal membership base, and the average congregation size profile. The convergence of the results from these distinct methods provides a high degree of confidence in the final estimated range.

3.2 Method 1: Proportional Allocation by Congregation

This method provides a top-down estimate based on the Synod's structural share of the national church. It assumes that weekly attendance is distributed across the denomination in rough proportion to the number of congregations in each region. This is a straightforward approach grounded in the most reliable structural data available for both the national church and the Synod.

- **Data Inputs:**

- Total UCA Congregations in Australia: 1,628 [12]
- Total UCA Congregations in VicTas Synod: 405 [3]
- Total UCA Weekly Attendance in Australia: 59,000 [13]

- **Calculation:**

- VicTas Share of Congregations: $405 \div 1,628 \approx 24.88\%$
- Estimated VicTas Attendance: $24.88\% \times 59,000 \approx 14,679$

3.3 Method 2: Proportional Allocation by Membership

This method also provides a top-down estimate but uses a human-centric metric—formal membership—rather than a structural one. It assumes that active attendance is proportional to the formal membership base across different regions of the church. This provides a valuable cross-check on Method 1.

- **Data Inputs:**

- Total UCA Members in Australia: 243,000 (as of 2018) [4]
- Total UCA Members in VicTas Synod: >60,000 (using 60,000 as a conservative base) [3]
- Total UCA Weekly Attendance in Australia: 59,000 [13]

- **Calculation:**

- VicTas Share of Membership: $60,000 \div 243,000 \approx 24.69\%$
- Estimated VicTas Attendance: $24.69\% \times 59,000 \approx 14,567$

This method relies on a 2018 national membership figure, which may be slightly inflated relative to the 2021-24 attendance data. However, the remarkable closeness of this result to the estimate from Method 1 provides strong mutual validation for both approaches.

3.4 Method 3: Bottom-Up Modelling from Average Congregation Size

This method builds the estimate from the ground up, using the known number of congregations within the Synod and applying a plausible range for average weekly attendance. This approach is analytically independent of the top-down methods and is grounded in the NCLS finding that the UCA is a network of small churches with a median attendance of fewer than 40 people.[2] By modeling a range around this median, this method creates a more realistic picture of the Synod's attendance landscape, countering the distorting effect of a few outlier "mega-churches" that might inflate a national average.

- **Data Inputs:**

- Total UCA Congregations in VicTas Synod: 405 [3]
- NCLS Median Weekly Attendance for UCA: <40 [2]

- **Modelling Scenarios:**

- A median of <40 suggests a typical congregation's attendance is likely in the mid-to-high 30s. A range is modeled to account for variability and uncertainty.
- **Low-End Estimate (Average Attendance of 35):** $405 \times 35 = 14,175$
- **Mid-Range Estimate (Average Attendance of 38):** $405 \times 38 = 15,390$
- **High-End Estimate (Average Attendance of 42):** $405 \times 42 = 17,010$

4 Synthesis and Final Estimated Range

This section synthesizes the results from the three analytical models to arrive at a final, defensible estimate for regular weekly attendance. It discusses the confidence in this estimate derived from the convergence of the methodologies and explicitly states the key assumptions underpinning the analysis.

Table 2: Summary of Estimation Method Results

Estimation Method	Calculation	Result
Method 1: Congregation Proportion	$(405 \div 1,628) \times 59,000$	~14,700
Method 2: Membership Proportion	$(60,000 \div 243,000) \times 59,000$	~14,600
Method 3: Bottom-Up Model	$405 \times (\text{Average of } 35 - 42)$	14,200 - 17,000

4.1 Analysis of Convergence

The results from the three distinct methodologies show a remarkable degree of convergence. The two top-down proportional methods, based on congregation count and membership numbers, produce nearly identical results, clustering tightly around **14,600 - 14,700**. The bottom-up model, which is analytically independent of the others, produces a plausible range of **14,200 - 17,000**. This range comfortably brackets the results of the top-down methods. This strong convergence, with different analytical starting points leading to a similar conclusion, provides a high level of confidence that the true figure lies within this clustered range.

4.2 Final Estimated Range and Confidence Level

Based on the synthesis of these converging models, the final considered estimate for the number of regular weekly attendees at a Uniting Church in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania is **between 14,500 and 16,500**.

This range acknowledges the inherent uncertainties of any estimation process while reflecting the strong central tendency of the data. The midpoint of this range is approximately 15,500, which aligns closely with the mid-range scenario of the bottom-up model and the results of the two proportional models.

4.3 Key Assumptions and Limitations

The validity of this estimate rests on several key assumptions and is subject to certain limitations.

- **Assumption 1:** The VicTas Synod is broadly representative of the national Uniting Church in terms of its attendance-to-congregation and attendance-to-member ratios. The close alignment of the results from Method 1 and Method 2 provides strong support for this assumption.
- **Assumption 2:** The NCLS median attendance figure from 2016 (<40) remains a relevant benchmark for modeling average congregation size in the 2021-2024 period. Given the overall national trend of decline, using this as a basis for the estimate is likely a conservative and reasonable approach.
- **Limitation:** This analysis does not account for potential regional variations in decline or vitality within the VicTas Synod itself. The estimate represents a Synod-wide average, and specific presbyteries or local areas may deviate significantly from this baseline.

5 Strategic Implications and Forward Outlook

The final estimate of 14,500-16,500 regular attendees is not merely a statistic; it is a critical data point for strategic planning. This final section moves beyond the numbers to explore their strategic meaning for the Synod's leadership, connecting the findings to the broader organizational context and future challenges.

5.1 The Membership-Attendance Gap: Redefining Engagement

The most stark finding of this analysis is the chasm between the **60,000+ formal members** reported by the Synod and the estimated **~15,500 weekly attendees**.^[3] This implies that for every member who actively participates in weekly worship, approximately three do not. This significant gap raises fundamental questions about the meaning of "membership" in the 21st century. It suggests the existence of a large cohort of individuals who maintain a formal affiliation and likely a degree of loyalty and support for the church, but who are not engaged in its primary weekly gathering.

The strategic challenge is to understand and engage this population. Are they primarily older members who are now aged and infirm? Are they disillusioned with traditional forms of worship but still committed to the church's mission? Are they engaged in other forms of service and community life that they consider their primary expression of faith? Answering these questions is critical for developing new models of engagement that can leverage the support of this committed-but-non-attending group.

5.2 The Challenge of Resource Allocation: A System Mismatch

The profile of a network of small, numerically declining congregations creates an immense challenge for resource allocation. This is powerfully illustrated in a 2022 annual report from the Presbytery of Port Phillip East.^[15] The report highlights the massive population growth in the Casey-Cardinia corridor, where the population grew by 22-25% in the five years to 2021. This is contrasted with the much slower growth in the established area of Monash (8.8%). Despite this demographic reality, the church's resources are inversely allocated: there are more congregations and ministry agents in the slow-growth area (10 congregations, 13 ministry agents) than in the high-growth area (6 congregations, 5 ministry agents).^[15]

This case study is a microcosm of a Synod-wide problem. The church's physical assets (buildings) and human resources (ministry agents) are heavily concentrated where the population *was* historically, not where it *is* today or where it *will be* in the future. This "structural inertia" makes it incredibly difficult to pivot resources toward new mission opportunities in growth areas. The data on small congregations, combined with this resource mismatch, points to a future of managing decline and legacy assets in some areas while struggling to fund new initiatives in others. The key strategic question is not just "how many attend?" but "are they attending in the right places for future growth?"

5.3 The "Two Churches" Phenomenon: Brand vs. Reality

There is a growing divergence between the public-facing identity of the Uniting Church and the internal reality of its worshiping communities. The public brand, primarily expressed through the work of Uniting Vic.Tas, is that of a large, professional, and highly impactful social service provider.^[7, 8, 16] This work in areas like emergency relief, housing, and mental health creates a strong public identity associated with compassion and social justice.^[7, 17]

The internal reality of the Synod, as revealed by this report's estimate and the supporting national data, is that of a network of small, localized, and numerically declining worshiping communities. The strategic opportunity for the Synod lies in bridging this gap. How can the social capital, professional expertise, and public goodwill generated by the "services church" be leveraged to renew and support the "worshiping church"? Conversely, how can the grassroots energy and local presence of the 405 congregations be better mobilized to fuel the mission of the service agencies? Aligning the strategy and identity of these "Two Churches" is a critical task for future sustainability and mission effectiveness.

5.4 Conclusion: A Future for a Network of Small Communities

The final estimate of 14,500 to 16,500 regular weekly attendees provides a clear, data-driven picture of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. It confirms that the Synod is, at its core, a large movement comprised of many small communities. The primary challenge for the Synod's leadership is to embrace this reality, shifting its strategic mindset from one of managing a large institution to one of nurturing a resilient and interconnected network. This will involve making difficult but necessary decisions about legacy assets, intentionally redeploying resources to areas of demographic opportunity, and developing new ways to measure and foster congregational vitality that go beyond simple weekly attendance figures. The future sustainability of the church will depend on its ability to adapt its structures and strategies to the reality of its composition as a network of small, faithful communities.