



GOVERNING WITH UNITING IN MIND

**Growing Leaders of Courage, Curiosity and Compassion
through Exceptional School Directorship**



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA



equipping Leadership for Mission

Contents

Introduction	2
Listening and collaborative decision-making	4
Spiritual Development and Well-being	6
Engaging with First Peoples	9
Celebrating the equality and value of all people	12
Embracing Diversity of Faiths, Cultures, and Languages	15
Entering into Justice for All Peoples and the Environment	18
Courageously Elevating Difficult Subjects and Evolving Responses	21

Introduction

Overview & orientation

Why this resource?

Governance in schools isn't just about oversight or ticking boxes—and perhaps it never really was. In Uniting Church-associated schools, the role of a board often sits in a curious overlap: faith, trust, strategic oversight, and the slow memory of community. This resource emerged from living in that overlap—from the moments where things didn't quite fit the template, but still held weight.

Here's the invitation: What if we explored what makes governance exceptional by looking at it through the seven shared characteristics that have come to shape the culture of Uniting Church-associated schools? This series doesn't offer a clean model or a tidy set of answers. Instead, it offers tension, reflection, and just enough provocation to stir honest conversation.

How it works

There are eight short resources in this series. This one gives you the framework. The other seven each take a Uniting Church characteristic and invite you to view 10 core governance facets through that particular lens. It's not a formula. It's a reframing—not radical, but enough to shift the centre of gravity.

Each two-pager is designed for occasional use—maybe four or five times a year.

You might try one:

- as a 20–40 minute warm-up or wind-down at a board or council meeting
- during a strategy off-site or visioning session
- or even when something weighty is being asked of your leadership, and the usual conversation tools feel thin

The ten facets of exceptional governance

These 10 facets are ideas about exceptional governance that have surfaced across time—from long listening, messy discernment, and the accumulated wisdom of school boards navigating complex terrain. Especially within the independent and Uniting Church school space, certain patterns just kept reappearing—signposts of what helps governance thrive, and what tends to erode it.

- **Role clarity** – Knowing what is governing and what is managing (and if we've blurred the lines between them).
- **Strategic vision** – Seeing beyond the horizon, while remembering what grounds us.
- **Board composition** – Who shows up to the table—and what they bring beyond their resume.
- **Financial stewardship** – Letting resources serve purpose, not dictate it.
- **Risk management** – Paying attention to what's truly at stake—not just what's insurable.
- **Succession and leadership** – Planning with enough foresight to evolve, not replicate.
- **Transparency and accountability** – Practising openness in a way that builds, not just reports, trust.
- **Stakeholder engagement** – Staying open to how the community sees us—even when it makes us uncomfortable, or when the feedback touches something tender or unresolved.
- **Community partnership** – Holding relationships that are mutual—not just useful to us, but meaningful to those we're in relationship with.
- **Board effectiveness** – Checking in on how we're functioning while there's still room to adapt—before patterns get stuck or consequences become irreversible.

The seven UCA characteristics

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| • Engaging with First Peoples | • Justice for All Peoples and the Environment |
| • Spiritual development and well-being | • Addressing difficult topics with courage |
| • Listening and collaborative decision-making | • Celebrating equality and the value of all people |
| • Embracing diversity of faiths, cultures, and languages | |

There's a *Governing with Uniting in Mind* resource for each of these characteristics. Start where your board or council feels most curious—or maybe just where the conversation feels stuck. Sometimes, that's where the best reflection begins.

Listening and collaborative decision-making

Governance through a discernment lens

Metaphor to hold in mind:

What if a board meeting wasn't a courtroom or a theatre—but a circle?

In the movement that is the Uniting Church, there's an attempt to elevate decision-making beyond "out-arguing" or "out-voting." Instead decision making is primarily about discernment—a slower, sometimes messier process where truth emerges through attention, humility, and care. Not just in what is said, but in who is heard, when, and in what spirit.

If we governed more like discerners and less like deciders, what would we notice first? And what might we hear that we've missed?

The 10 facets reframed through a listening lens

Facet	What might we hear differently?
Role clarity	Are we genuinely drawing on staff wisdom—or drifting into micromanagement masked as consultation?
Strategic vision	Who had a hand in shaping this vision? Who didn't? What might those absent voices have named?
Board composition	Are we favouring confident talkers, or creating space for those who shift conversations through depth, not volume?
Financial stewardship	What do our budgets inadvertently assume about what (and who) we value?
Risk management	Are we aware of moral and relational risk—or mostly tracking liability?
Succession	Who are we noticing as future leaders? And who, by habit or bias, are we not seeing at all?
Transparency	Is our communication a closed loop—or are we creating space for honest response?
Stakeholder engagement	Are we asking questions out of real curiosity—or just confirming what we already believe?
Community partnership	Have we stopped to ask our partners what's changed for them—or are we relying on assumptions from years past?
Board effectiveness	How well do we listen—especially when we disagree, or when something personal is at stake?

Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. Think of a decision we've made recently. Would deeper listening have shifted it? How?
2. How do we shape our meeting structures—to move efficiently through tasks, or to make room for genuine attention?
3. Which parts of our school community do we hear from most easily? Which ones take effort, or creativity, to tune into?
4. What familiar habits, personalities, or power dynamics might be dampening dissent—or accidentally flattening difference?

Practice: The silent spiral

A 15-minute spiritual governance activity

1. Choose a current issue or strategic question.
2. Each person privately writes down their initial thoughts (2 mins)—what feels important, unresolved, surprising, or emotionally charged about the issue at hand.
3. Rather than going around the circle in sequence—which can turn listening into waiting for your turn—invite participants to share their written thoughts only when they feel ready. Create pauses between speakers. Encourage genuine listening, not rehearsing.
4. Pause for 90 seconds of silence.
5. Open 7–10 minutes of conversation. Notice what builds, what deepens, what changes.
6. End with this: What surfaced here that wouldn't have shown up in a regular discussion?

A final question to take into your next meeting

What does it mean to be a listening board—not just an informed one?



Spiritual Development and Well-being

Governance through a human lens

A Metaphor to hold in mind

What if a school is more than a system to be optimised but a place where people learn what it means to be human?

Schools shape inner life whether they intend to or not. Long before any program or policy is named, assumptions about meaning, worth, pressure, success, failure, and care are already at work. Boards rarely set out to form these assumptions directly. Yet through their tone, pace, priorities, and what is treated as important, governance does participate in that formation.

This characteristic invites boards to notice what they may already be teaching the wider school community about life, purpose, and resilience not through words, but through decisions.

Governance through a spiritual and human lens

Spiritual development, in this context, does not mean religious instruction or shared belief. It points instead to meaning, belonging, moral agency, and the question of what sustains people when performance alone is not enough. Schools can function efficiently while neglecting these dimensions. When that happens, people often cope well for a time. Over longer stretches, however, something challenging tends to emerge: purpose may become procedural, care may become managerial, and exhaustion may be normalised.

Boards do not generate spirituality. But they do shape whether inner life is taken seriously, treated as optional, or crowded out by urgency and growth.





The 10 facets reframed through a spiritual lens

Facet	What might this facet assume about people?
Role clarity	Do we understand governance narrowly as control and oversight, or broadly enough to notice how decisions affect the human texture of the school?
Strategic vision	Does our vision speak only to outcomes and growth, or does it also name what kind of people this community hopes to form?
Board composition	Do we value reflective capacity, moral judgement, and attentiveness alongside technical expertise, or do those qualities remain invisible?
Financial stewardship	What do our budgets subtly prioritise? How do time, money, and attention suggest that inner life and wellbeing matter or don't?
Risk management	Are we attentive only to legal and reputational risk, or also to slower-burning risks such as exhaustion, loss of meaning, and moral drift?
Succession	When leaders leave, do they leave well? Do we notice strain early, or only once it becomes disruptive?
Transparency	Do our reporting practices make room for complexity and strain, or only for reassurance and success?
Stakeholder engagement	How do we listen when people speak from experience rather than evidence? Do we know how to hold stories, not just data?
Community partnership	Are our partnerships shaped only by function, or also by shared purpose and care for the wider human good?
Board effectiveness	Do we ever pause to ask not just what we decided, but how we were with one another while deciding?



Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. What do we assume people draw on when things become difficult here?
2. Where, if anywhere, does this board make room for reflection, silence, or meaning making?
3. How do our decisions shape the pace and pressure experienced by staff and students?
4. If someone observed our governance closely, what might they conclude we believe about the human person?

Practice: a brief interruption

A simple discipline before a significant decision

Pause the discussion for two minutes. No papers. No phones. Invite each person to consider privately: What is this decision asking of people, not just systems or structures? Resume the conversation without attempting to summarise what emerged. Notice whether the tone or direction of the discussion shifts.

A final question to take into your next meeting

What kind of inner life does our way of governing make possible, or make harder, in this school?

Engaging with First Peoples

Governance through a lens of place and deep time

A Metaphor to hold in mind

The ground beneath the board table holds a story far older than the institution itself.

Every school sits somewhere; not just geographically, but historically and relationally. Long before the first building was constructed, before enrolments were taken and governance structures were put in place, the land on which the school now stands was known, named, and cared for.

That reality does not disappear when an institution is established. It continues alongside it.

In many cases, the school's work proceeds without that deeper story being given much attention. Teaching, governance, and community life develop in ways that appear complete in themselves. Yet the ground remains what it is: uncanceled, storied, and held within a much longer frame of time and belonging.

Engaging with First Peoples begins, at least in part, with recognising that the institution does not define the place. It participates in it. This characteristic invites boards to consider how that recognition might shape governance: not as an additional responsibility, but as a shift in how authority, time, and relationship are understood.

Governance through a lens of place

For many boards and indeed for many second peoples, this area of understanding can feel very uncertain. There is often goodwill but also sometimes hesitation and equally a concern about getting things wrong. Those responses are understandable.

At the same time, governance always operates with underlying assumptions about place, authority, and history. When those assumptions remain unexamined, they tend to reflect the perspective of the institution itself. This means a concentration on its timelines, its priorities, its definitions of relevance.

Engaging with First Peoples introduces a different starting point. It suggests that the school exists within a context it did not create, and that governance may need to take account of voices, relationships, and histories that sit outside the usual frame of reference.

This does not necessarily require boards to resolve complex historical questions. It does, however, invite a different kind of attentiveness to place, to relationship, and to the ways decisions are made in a context that is not neutral.



The 10 facets of exceptional governance reframed through a place-based lens:

Facet	What might this facet require us to notice?
Role clarity	How does the board understand its authority in relation to the place on which the school stands? What is the bigger story of our connection to the land we occupy?
Strategic vision	Does our vision acknowledge the history and ongoing presence of First Peoples connected to this place?
Board composition	Are there voices or relationships missing from the table that could reshape how we understand the school's context?
Financial stewardship	Do our resources reflect any commitment to relationship, learning, or partnership with First Peoples?
Risk management	Are there cultural or relational risks that remain outside the board's usual frame of attention?
Succession	How might leadership development include a deeper understanding of place and its significance?
Transparency	How does the school speak about its location and history to its community?
Stakeholder engagement	What relationships exist, or could exist, between the school and local First Peoples?
Community partnership	Are partnerships shaped by mutual respect and listening, or primarily by institutional priorities?
Board effectiveness	Does the board create space to learn about its role in stewarding place, or is this left to other parts of the school?

Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. What does it mean for this school to exist on this particular piece of land?
2. How often does place, in its deeper sense, enter board conversations?
3. Are there assumptions about authority or ownership that the board has not adequately questioned?
4. What would it look like to take this characteristic seriously over time, rather than as a single initiative?

Practice: beginning with place

A brief discipline for deepening awareness of Country:

At the start of a meeting, set aside a few minutes to move beyond acknowledgement into reflection.

After naming the Country on which the meeting takes place, invite board members to consider, silently:

- What might this place have held before the school existed here?
- What kinds of life, movement, or relationship to land may have shaped this ground over time?
- What does it mean to make decisions for an institution that sits within that longer story?

Allow a short pause before continuing. If appropriate, a simple invitation can follow:

- Does anything in that reflection shift how we approach the matters before us today?

This practice does not require detailed historical knowledge. It asks the board to begin from an awareness that the school is part of a story it did not initiate.

A final question to take into your next meeting

How might our governance change if we took seriously the fact that this school stands on land whose story the school did not begin?



Celebrating the equality and value of all people

Governance through a lens of weight and voice

A metaphor to hold in mind

A board table can appear level, while some voices still carry more weight than others.

The lack of a level contribution may not show up all at once. Over a number of meetings, a pattern may develop. Certain contributions tend to set direction more quickly. Others are heard, sometimes carefully, but don't seem to carry the same influence when a decision begins to become apparent.

No one designs it that way. Most boards would recognise the importance of hearing each person around the table. Even so, experience, confidence, professional standing, and the habits a group has formed over time all seem to play their part in how weight gathers.

What makes this harder to notice is that the meeting itself still looks balanced; everyone is present and the usual process is followed. Yet when the conversation reaches its critical point, the outcome often reflects a narrower set of influences than the table itself might suggest.

This characteristic invites boards to pay attention to that difference, not at the level of principle (thought), but in the way decisions actually take shape (action).

Governance through a lens of weight

It is not difficult to affirm that all people have equal value. Most boards would do that without hesitation. The question is less about agreement and more about translation. How does that conviction find its way into the ordinary work of governance, particularly when decisions are complex or time is limited?

In those moments, differences in weight tend to become more visible. Some perspectives carry further into the decision while others are acknowledged but do not alter the direction taken. Occasionally, a voice that might have changed the conversation in a highly important way is not present at all.

This is not simply about personalities. It is also shaped by structure: things like how expertise is recognised, how information is framed, which forms of evidence are trusted, and how discussion is paced. Over time, these elements combine to form a pattern that is usually felt before it is named.

Engaging this characteristic does not mean removing difference or flattening experience. It does, however, ask whether the way weight is distributed across the board's work reflects what the school claims about the equal value of people.



The 10 facets reframed through a lens of equality

Facet	Where might weight be settling in ways we have not fully noticed?
Role clarity	When questions cross into complex territory, whose judgement tends to carry authority, and whose is treated as advisory?
Strategic vision	When the future of the school is discussed, whose lives and experiences are most clearly in view?
Board composition	Who shapes the early direction of conversation, and who tends to enter once a theme has already formed?
Financial stewardship	Which parts of the school are resourced with confidence, and which are expected to adjust to constraint?
Risk management	When trade-offs are required, whose risk is most readily recognised and acted upon?
Succession	Who is seen as a natural future leader, and what assumptions sit behind that recognition?
Transparency	When matters are explained to the community, whose concerns receive careful attention, and whose are addressed more briefly?
Stakeholder engagement	Which voices lead to a shift in direction, and which are noted but leave the decision unchanged?
Community partnership	In relationships beyond the school, who is setting the terms of engagement?
Board effectiveness	When decisions are forming, how evenly is influence actually distributed across the table?

Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. When a decision becomes difficult, whose perspective tends to carry through to the outcome?
2. Are there groups within the school community whose experience is regularly present in reports, but less present in decisions?
3. Where might we be assuming equality rather than noticing how it is working in practice?
4. If someone observed a series of our meetings, what might they conclude about how influence moves in this room?

Practice: beginning with place

A short reflection on a recent board outcome

Choose a decision made in the past term.

Begin with a few minutes of silence and invite each member to consider:

- Which voices most shaped the direction of this decision?
- Which perspectives were present but had less influence on the outcome?
- Who was not in the room, whose presence might have changed the discussion?

After the pause, open the conversation.

Rather than focusing on individuals, attend to the pattern that becomes visible.

- What does this suggest about how weight operates in our governance?
- Does this align with how we understand the equal value of people in this school?

A final question to take into your next meeting

Where in our governance is equality something we state, and where is it something that can be observed?



Embracing Diversity of Faiths, Cultures, and Languages

Governance through a lens of translation and understanding

Metaphor to hold in mind

Some things are not lost in translation because language failed, but because we assumed words meant the same thing to everyone listening.

Schools often rely on shared language. Terms such as belonging, respect, faith, inclusion, wellbeing, or community appear regularly in strategic plans, policies, and conversations around the board table. Yet within culturally and religiously diverse communities, those words may carry quite different histories, expectations, and emotional weight.

Most boards become aware of this gradually. A policy that seemed straightforward produces unexpectedly different responses. A celebration welcomed warmly by one group creates uncertainty in another. A phrase intended to signal openness is experienced elsewhere as unfamiliar or excluding.

The issue is rarely communication alone. More often, it is the assumption that understanding is already shared.

This characteristic invites boards to consider what governance requires when a school community includes multiple faith traditions, cultural experiences, languages, and ways of interpreting the world.

Governance through a lens of translation

Schools do not become diverse simply because different groups are present within them. Diversity begins to shape governance when boards recognise that people may not automatically experience the institution in the same way, even when they appear to share common goals.

That can be difficult to notice from within established governance cultures. Board processes, meeting styles, communication patterns, and assumptions about participation often feel neutral to those already familiar with them. For others, they may feel unfamiliar, overly coded, or shaped by expectations that have never been made explicit.

Faith adds another layer again. In many school communities, religious language carries very different meanings depending on people's histories and experiences. Some families hear openness and invitation. Others hear uncertainty about whether they truly belong. Occasionally, people remain silent not because they disagree, but because they are still trying to interpret the terms of the conversation itself.

Engaging this characteristic does not require boards to remove difference or avoid conviction. It asks something more demanding than that. It invites curiosity about how meaning is formed, how institutional language is heard, and whether governance practices allow genuine encounter across cultural and spiritual difference.

The 10 facets reframed through a lens of translation

Facet	What assumptions might we be making about shared meaning?
Role clarity	Are governance expectations and responsibilities equally understandable across different cultural and professional backgrounds?
Strategic vision	Does the language of the school's vision carry the same meaning across the diversity of the community?
Board composition	Are there perspectives missing from the board because pathways into governance feel unfamiliar or inaccessible?
Financial stewardship	Do resource decisions reflect awareness of the differing needs and experiences within the community?
Risk management	Are there cultural or faith related risks that may not be recognised within the board's usual frame of reference?
Succession	How might future leadership pathways become more accessible across cultures, languages, and faith traditions?
Transparency	Is information communicated in ways that are genuinely understandable across the diversity of the school community?
Stakeholder engagement	Which groups are most comfortable participating in consultation processes, and which may remain less visible?
Community partnership	Are partnerships shaped around genuine exchange, or primarily around institutional expectations?
Board effectiveness	How confident is the board in recognising when misunderstanding may be cultural, linguistic, or faith related rather than simply disagreement?



Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. Which words or phrases does this school use regularly that may not mean the same thing to everyone listening?
2. Are there groups within the community who understand the culture and expectations of governance more easily than others?
3. When misunderstanding occurs, do we tend to interpret it as disagreement, disengagement, or something else?
4. What would it mean for this board to become more skilled at translation, not just communication?

Practice: listening beneath familiar words

A brief reflection on institutional language

Choose a word commonly used within the school. For example:

- belonging
- excellence
- wellbeing
- faith
- community
- inclusion

Invite board members to reflect silently for a moment:

- Would this word carry the same meaning in every family represented in this school?
- What histories, assumptions, or experiences might different people hear within it?
- Are there ways the school uses this language that may unintentionally narrow who feels addressed by it?

After a short pause, open discussion.

The aim is not to arrive at a single agreed definition, but to notice how governance changes when difference in interpretation is taken seriously.

A final question to take into your next meeting

What assumptions about shared understanding sit beneath the way this board governs?



Entering into Justice for All Peoples and the Environment

Governance through a lens of presence and absence

A Metaphor to hold in mind

Every important decision is made in the “presence” of people who are not in the room.

Board members spend much of their time trying to understand the needs of the school and make wise decisions on its behalf. They read reports, hear recommendations, test assumptions, and weigh competing priorities. Even in the best governed institutions, however, there is an unavoidable limitation. Because many of those who will be most affected by a significant decision are absent when it is being discussed.

Sometimes those absent voices belong to people who are easy to identify. We can think of a future student who has not yet enrolled; a family whose circumstances mean they rarely engage with school processes, staff members whose experience of a decision differs significantly from those making it. At other times the absence is less obvious. The local community beyond the school gates may carry consequences that were not anticipated. The natural environment may bear costs that appear nowhere in the budget papers. Future generations inherit decisions long after the board that made them has completed its term.

The invitation for this resource is not to feel guilty about those absences, nor to imagine that every competing interest can be represented perfectly. Rather, it is to recognise that justice often begins when we ask who is missing from the conversation and whether there are assumptions, systems, or habits that make some interests easier to hear than others.

Governance through a lens of presence and absence

Most boards would describe themselves as fair-minded. Presumably that is the case in many circumstances. Yet governance inevitably operates through structures that privilege certain forms of participation. People with confidence, access, education, resources, authority, or long familiarity with institutions often find it easier to have their concerns recognised and acted upon. Others may be affected just as deeply by a decision while remaining largely invisible to those making it.

Justice invites boards to widen their field of attention. It asks not only whether a decision is lawful, affordable, or strategically sound, but also whether its consequences are being carried equitably. It encourages reflection on who benefits from existing arrangements, who may be disadvantaged by them, and whether the board has become accustomed to patterns that deserve closer examination.

This does not require a board to become an overtly activist body or to solve every social problem that comes within view. It does require a willingness to notice that institutions, including schools, can unintentionally reproduce inequalities that already exist within the wider community. Governance shaped by justice remains attentive to those realities and is prepared to ask whether a different course might be possible.

The 10 facets reframed through a lens of presence and absence

Facet	Who might be represented by the empty chair?
Role clarity	Are there people affected by our decisions whose experience rarely enters governance discussions because we assume their concerns belong elsewhere?
Strategic vision	Who is included in the future we are imagining for this school, and who may be unintentionally absent from that picture?
Board composition	Which experiences, communities, or perspectives are not represented around the table, and what might we be missing as a result?
Financial stewardship	Who benefits most from the way resources are currently distributed, and who may be carrying costs that remain largely unseen?
Risk management	Are we paying sufficient attention to risks borne by future generations, vulnerable communities, or the natural environment, as well as those faced by the institution itself?
Succession	What kinds of leadership are we encouraging, and whose interests are likely to shape governance in the future?
Transparency	Who finds it easiest to understand, access, and engage with the board's decisions, and who may be left at a distance from them?
Stakeholder engagement	Which groups participate readily in consultation processes, and which are affected by decisions despite rarely having a voice in them?
Community partnership	Are our partnerships helping us hear from people beyond our usual networks, or are they largely reinforcing perspectives we already know well?
Board effectiveness	How regularly does the board consider people, communities, future generations, and environmental impacts that are not directly represented in the room?

Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. Who occupies the empty chair in our current governance conversations?
2. When significant decisions are being made, whose interests are easiest to identify and account for, and whose require more deliberate effort to notice?
3. Are there groups within the school community, or beyond it, who are affected by our decisions but have little opportunity to shape them?
4. What assumptions about fairness, participation, access, or responsibility might the board benefit from examining more closely?

Practice: noticing the empty chair

A reflection before a significant decision

Choose a current issue before the board.

Before discussion begins, invite members to spend several minutes reflecting silently on the following questions:

- Who is most affected by this decision who is not represented in this discussion?
- What might they hope we would notice about the situation before us?
- Which consequences of this decision are likely to emerge after current board members have completed their service?
- Is there an environmental impact, whether immediate or long-term, that deserves greater attention than it is currently receiving?

After the period of reflection, invite conversation to begin.

Rather than trying to advocate for every absent interest, focus on what becomes visible when the issue is viewed from beyond the board table itself. The purpose of the exercise is to expand the board's awareness before decisions are made.

A final question to take into your next meeting

If at least some of the communities, future generations, and parts of the natural world affected by this decision had a seat at the table, what might we hear that we are not hearing now?



Courageously Elevating Difficult Subjects and Evolving Responses

Governance through a lens of discernment and adaptation

A Metaphor to hold in mind

A navigator cannot set a course once and then hold the wheel still.

Setting a destination is only the beginning of a voyage. Anyone responsible for navigating a vessel soon discovers that the work is far less about holding a steady course than it is about reading changing conditions with care. There are wind shifts, currents that strengthen or weaken, other weather that develops in unexpected ways and hazards that sometimes appear where yesterday's charts suggested clear water. The destination may remain unchanged throughout the journey, but reaching it depends on a willingness to keep noticing what is unfolding and making thoughtful adjustments along the way.

School governance can have something of that same character. Every board inherits a purpose that provides continuity, yet each generation finds itself responding to circumstances its predecessors could scarcely have anticipated. Questions surrounding artificial intelligence, digital technologies, student wellbeing, environmental responsibility, changing family structures, or the relationship between faith and an increasingly diverse society have all emerged or changed markedly within the lifetime of today's directors. It seems likely that the next decade will bring another set of questions that are equally difficult to foresee.

One responsibility of governance is to recognise when these emerging issues deserve the board's attention before circumstances force hurried responses. Another is to help create the conditions in which the school community can explore them thoughtfully, allowing understanding to deepen as experience, knowledge, and context continue to develop.

Governance through a lens of discernment and adaptation

There is a natural temptation in governance to think of difficult subjects as problems waiting for solutions. Some certainly are, but others behave rather differently. They continue to evolve because the society around the school is evolving, new evidence emerges, technologies develop, and communities themselves become more diverse in their expectations and experience.

Boards occupy an unusual position within this landscape. They are rarely the first to encounter emerging issues, nor are they expected to resolve every question placed before them. Their distinctive contribution lies in recognising which conversations are likely to shape the future of the school and ensuring those conversations begin while there is still time to approach them with curiosity rather than urgency.

That calls for discernment, but it also asks something of the board's leadership. Schools watch what their boards choose to discuss. Equally, they notice what rarely appears on the agenda. In that sense, governance helps shape not only institutional decisions but also the culture of inquiry within the school itself.

As understanding grows, responses will sometimes grow with it. That need not be interpreted as inconsistency. More often it reflects a board that has remained attentive to its purpose while continuing to learn from the changing context in which that purpose is lived.

The 10 facets reframed through a lens of discernment and adaptation

Facet	Where might this facet invite the board to elevate an emerging conversation?
Role clarity	Does the board see part of its role as identifying the conversations the school needs to begin, even before there is an expectation that decisions will be made?
Strategic vision	Which social, educational, technological, environmental, or spiritual questions are likely to shape the school's future but have not yet become part of strategic discussion?
Board composition	Does the board bring together people who are willing to engage thoughtfully with unfamiliar questions, even when there is no obvious consensus?
Financial stewardship	Are resources being set aside to help the school explore emerging opportunities and challenges before they become immediate pressures?
Risk management	Which "developing issues" deserve attention now, not simply because they present risk, but because they are likely to influence the school's future direction?
Succession	How are future leaders being prepared to navigate questions that do not yet have settled institutional responses?
Transparency	Does the board explain why certain emerging issues have become priorities for discussion, even when conclusions have not yet been reached?
Stakeholder engagement	How might the school community be invited into significant conversations early enough for genuine learning to occur?
Community partnership	Which partnerships might broaden the school's understanding of emerging issues rather than simply affirm existing perspectives?
Board effectiveness	Does the board make deliberate space for conversations that are important, even when they are not yet urgent?

Prompted inquiry: for your board conversation

1. Looking ahead five years, what questions are likely to shape the life of this school that are only beginning to emerge today?
2. Which of those conversations would benefit from being opened now, while there is still time to listen, learn, and explore together?
3. When has this board helped the school engage thoughtfully with an emerging issue before circumstances demanded an immediate response?
4. What signals, whether from students, staff, families, or the wider community, might suggest that an important conversation is waiting to begin?

Practice: looking beyond the horizon

A board exercise in anticipating important conversations

Invite each board member to spend a few minutes writing down one issue they believe the board will need to engage seriously within the next five years but which has not yet received sustained attention.

Collect the responses anonymously and group similar themes together.

Rather than discussing possible solutions, spend time exploring why these issues have emerged. What changes in society, education, technology, community life, or the environment are bringing them into view? Which of these conversations would benefit from being introduced gradually into the life of the school, allowing students, staff, families, and governors to learn together as understanding develops?

The purpose of the exercise is not to predict the future accurately. It is to cultivate the habit of recognising important questions while there is still time to approach them with thoughtfulness rather than urgency.

A final question to take into your next meeting

What conversation does this school need us to begin now, so that those who come after us inherit not only our decisions but also our willingness to keep learning?





Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA, SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

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More resources for UCA-associated schools available at:

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