

Overture 3

Proposal To Explore Federal Model for the Church

At St Luke's Church, Remuera, Auckland on 26 July 2006, the Executive of the Presbytery of Auckland met, and acting with delegated authority, agreed to forward simpliciter the following overture to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand appointed to meet in Auckland on 28th September 2006.

Whereas the inherited understanding and regulated organisational practice of how different councils of the Presbyterian Church (sessions, presbyteries, Assembly) inter-relate is outdated, resulting in ...

1. Increasing lack of confidence - People at the grass roots of the church are feeling isolated and disenfranchised, and disempowered. This is in spite of significant time and resource spent on consultation and "listening".
2. Increasing costs - The local congregation is facing significant cost increases. With the burden of additional costs of a national church, with little perceived or real value the local congregation is being restricted in its mission.
3. Increasing fragmentation - Significant groups of local, ethnic and theological interest are forming to find their own identity and passion for mission.
4. Structural strangulation - Our methods of doing business are cumbersome, expensive, lack vision and are ill equipped for leadership in a rapidly changing world.
5. Increasing politicisation - Groups are developing positions and organising votes on a range of issues, with accompanying power plays, in the regional and national councils of the Church.

Whereas congregations are exhibiting increasing local autonomy, and less national and regional consistency and collaboration and

Whereas the Church needs to develop a more fitting approach and self-understanding, to serve the mission of Jesus Christ and

Whereas our ecclesiology is driving our missiology and

Whereas a federal model offers a helpful understanding of how complex organisations can be effective, recognising patterns of power and control, combining variety and shared purpose, individuality and partnership, local and global and

Whereas a federal model allows maximum local decision-making with minimal national controls and enables healthy communication about ownership, power, control and responsibility, independence and interdependence and

Whereas federation is, fundamentally, a way of living together and

Whereas an organisation operating with a federal understanding is held together by a covenant with a set of founding principles and

Whereas a federal understanding allows for maximum local autonomy with minimal national controls and

Whereas the Church has endorsed this thinking over a number of years (in the mid 1990s the Council of Assembly used the image of an “inverted triangle” to emphasise how Assembly and presbyteries existed to serve congregations) yet it has lacked the courage to implement it and

Whereas we currently function as a form of federation yet our limits of authority and responsibility are causing great strain in our relationships and

Whereas the major issues facing the Presbyterian Church are not about money, theology, or structure, and rather are about identity:

Who are we when we come together?

What does it mean to be Presbyterian in Aotearoa New Zealand?

What “common good” do we wish to commit to? and

Whereas a federal model provides a possible way forward by firstly acknowledging the independence of the local congregation to discern and direct its mission yet willingly accept that there is a greater common good the “we” can all be part of, expressed in a relationship of partnership. The local church becomes an independent mission community yet via a partnership covenant joins with other mission communities to form an interdependent federation of Presbyterian churches, and

Whereas exploration of the principles of federalism offers an opportunity for the Church to understand more about itself and ways of operating, including in relation to the use of power, to consider more effective self-understandings and ways of working, and to develop a more healthy model by which councils of the Church interrelate and work and

Whereas a possible model might look like:

The Edge (Local Mission Community)

- Led by mission leadership (ordained elders and ministers)
- Responsible for discerning and implementing mission to the local community
- Responsible for compliance to agreed best practice and statement of faith

The Core (National)

An elected body of representatives from the Local Mission Community.

- A common statement of faith
- A common set of best practice for delivering mission (To which the local mission communities hold themselves mutually accountable via peer review)
- Provide centralised services that local mission communities cannot do, or choose not to do for themselves.
- That no service be undertaken at the Core that cannot be done by the local mission community.

Regional centres

Of no judicial authority yet the conduit between the Core and Edge

- Provide peer review of local mission communities
- Provide relational support and resource sharing

Covenant

The covenant accountability process enables local mission communities to join or to leave the Federation. To protect the core and to respect the sovereign rights of the edge it is necessary to have the means of entering into and leaving the Federation. This process would describe ...

- How new mission communities could belong to the Federation
- How existing mission communities make themselves mutually accountable and the consequence of non compliance
- How a local mission community can leave the Federation

Whereas in summary

- A federal model empowers local autonomy yet maintains a clear sense of “interdependent / togetherness”.
- A federal model maintains national standards while places the responsibility of implementation at the local level.
- A federal model limits the power that the Core can take to itself.
- A federal model respects the rights of the local mission community while providing a forum for discovering and articulating what we could hold in common together.

It is hereby overtured that this Assembly ask the Council of Assembly to appoint a Task Group to research, explore and promote discussion of a federal model of interrelating among church councils in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand or that the General Assembly determine otherwise as in its wisdom it shall consider best.

The Presbytery appointed Rev Andrew Norton and ...to support the overture before the Assembly

Extracted from the records of the Presbytery by Trevor Mosley, Clerk.

[Note: The Book of Order and Judicial Reference Group, without wishing to discourage full consideration of the overture, advises that it raises major constitutional issues which go to the heart of the governance of the Church.]

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