

Review of the General Assembly Meeting

Terms of Reference

The Council of Assembly established a Task Group to review and make recommendations for improving the Assembly meeting.

Scope of Review

- Period, time and locations of meeting;
- Integration of different aspects of Assembly – business, education, inspiration;
- Proportion of women/men participants, and spectrum of age;
- Cost and resource efficiency
- Participation by children, youth and minority ethnic groups;
- Participation by guests of overseas churches: who gets invited, how this relates to our prioritising of relationships with churches overseas, their participation in Assembly, a clear understanding about the coverage of costs;
- Decision-making modes including more use of consensus style;
- Expectations and processes of reporting to Assembly including implications for reporting bodies.
- Standing Orders review (e.g. whether we need the present four decision-making methods)
- Expectations of preparations for participants
- Implications for other decision-making processes within the Presbyterian Church by Assembly bodies and presbyteries/union district councils, and sessions/parish councils.

Process

The Task Group prepared a questionnaire based on the scope of the review which was distributed widely through the church. There were 342 respondents, including 146 ministers and 164 elders. This report and recommendations are based largely on the responses received. The Task Group also learnt from organisations which run large decision-making meetings and from the Uniting Church in Australia which has a more thorough consensus process. A report from the Task Group went out to parishes, presbyteries and union district councils, Te Aka Puaho, the Pacific Islanders' Synod and the Council of Asian Congregations for feedback in the lead up to the writing of the final report for General Assembly.

Recommendations

1. That General Assembly meets across a weekend located and by rotation in _____
Wellington/Christchurch/Auckland with _____
an occasional meeting in Dunedin as _____
determined by the Assembly Business _____

Work Group, recognising that meetings may be held elsewhere in exceptional circumstances as determined by the Work Group.

2. That the purpose of Assembly be as follows:

General Assembly meets to honour God by:

- Inspiring & equipping people
- Fostering national connectedness and belonging
- Governing the Church

3. That the number of commissioners attending General Assembly be:

- 200 representatives being ministers and elders elected by presbyteries and Te Aka Puaho selected as set out in this report.
- The president and secretary of the Association of Presbyterian Woman, or their nominees.
- Additional members being youth representatives up to 30 members selected by presbyteries, Te Aka Puaho, the Pacific Islanders' Synod and the Council of Asian Congregations, the formula to be developed by the Council of Assembly in consultation with presbyteries, Te Aka Puaho, the Pacific Islanders' Synod and the Council of Asian Congregations.

[associate and observer members are not affected by this recommendation]

4. That the numbers of ministers and elders be divided between presbyteries based on worshipping numbers as at 30 June of the year prior to General Assembly.

5. That each presbytery shall decide on how commissioners are chosen and paid for from that presbytery taking regard for:

- The need for there to be a rotation of ministers within the presbytery
 - The need for a balance amongst elders of those with prior experience of General Assembly and new commissioners.
 - The need for each parish to be connected to someone who is a commissioner at General Assembly. This may be achieved through clustering parishes.
 - The need for a spread of age, gender and culture
6. That the Assembly Business Work Group assess the trial of consensus decision-making being undertaken at the 2006 Assembly and, if it deems appropriate, bring recommendations regarding consensus to the 2008 Assembly.
7. That the Council of Assembly be encouraged to maintain and continue to enhance dialogue with the wider church on issues, reports and recommendations that are likely to be discussed at the General Assembly.
8. That Assembly ask the Facilitation Group and the Assembly Business Work Group to facilitate prior to Assembly, as far as possible, agreement or consensus among groups, including presbyteries, bringing related recommendations to General Assembly.
9. That regulation 414 be amended to allow overtures to be transmitted to Assembly only if adopted by a presbytery and that the provision for presbyteries to transmit to Assembly an overture simpliciter be repealed.
10. That other than in exceptional circumstances the Assembly Business Work Group limit verbal presentations to Assembly to:
- The Council of Assembly

- Groups which are bringing policy or regulatory recommendations or otherwise require decisions or _____
 - Where the report furthers the Assembly's educational purpose _____
11. That from this Assembly reference groups, work groups, task groups and other similar groups report to the Council of Assembly, the Council to ensure the neutral advisory role of reference groups are maintained, and ensure that reports from these groups to Assembly be where there are changes to policy and regulation. _____
12. That the Book of Order and Judicial Reference Group draft amendments to the Book of Order to give effect to the Assembly decisions which arise from this report, and recommend these to the 2008 General Assembly. _____

Executive Summary

This Task Group was set up in response to feedback from the last Assembly and the Focus on the Future conversations. The Task Group surveyed a wide representation of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand on the issues identified in the scope of the review. This report recommends a shorter, smaller, more effective and more focused General Assembly meeting with more streamlined business procedures that require significantly more work to be done between Assemblies. Many of the recommendations have been acted on for the 2006 Assembly.

Report

1 Period, Time and Locations of Meeting

- 1.1 A shortened meeting across a weekend makes the Assembly more accessible from a cost perspective and also to those in fulltime work outside the church.
- 1.2 There was strong support in the survey of the Church for the continuation of a biennial pattern.
- 1.3 Wellington/Christchurch/Auckland should be the locations for General Assembly on a rotational basis as the regular pattern, with an occasional move further south. This acknowledges the population base around Auckland and allows for the historic roots of the church to be acknowledged when appropriate.
- 1.4 Venue should be wherever suitable and cost effective.

2 Integration of Different Aspects of Assembly – Business, Education, Inspiration

2.1 The survey conducted by the Task Group found strong support for three main functions of the General Assembly; inspiration, national connectedness and governance. Each Assembly should aim to:

- Inspire and equip people
- Foster national connectedness & belonging
- Effectively govern the church.

2.2 Each Assembly should be reviewed in terms of how well it inspired and equipped people, fostered national connectedness and belonging and effectively governed the church.

3 Representation at Assembly

3.1 The report of the Task Group that went out to the church advocates reducing the number of commissioners at Assembly and giving presbyteries oversight of the selection of commissioners. This section of the report drew the largest number of comments in the feedback received.

3.2 There are good reasons for reducing the number of commissioners:

- The membership of the church has significantly reduced over the last 40 years, and the number of parishes has not significantly reduced
- Cost savings to the Church
- Efficiency in the conducting of business given the shorter meeting timeframe.

3.3 There are also good reasons for representation at Assembly to be based on actual worshipping numbers within a presbytery:

- The active participants in the Presbyterian Church would be more fairly represented
- The present rules do not take sufficient account of the number of situations in which there are local ministry teams without ministers
- Increasing parts of the Church where there is a small number of ministers
- The requirement to have each parish represented is too much of a straightjacket when greater flexibility is needed to ensure balance, coverage, communication, and representation across a presbytery.

3.4 Presbyteries should be best equipped to ensure representation at Assembly that achieves a good balance of age, gender, ethnic groups and ordained/lay.

4 Cost and Resource Efficiency

4.1 There are a number of savings possible through:

- Shorter meeting time
- Adding Auckland as a regular venue saves on travel because of the increased number of commissioners who can drive
- Smaller number of commissioners
- Children for the children's programme to come from the local region.
- Care with technology costs and costs of hosting overseas guests

4.2 The National church can no longer afford to subsidise General Assembly. The registration fee will have to cover all costs including travel but excluding accommodation.

5 Participation of Ethnic Groups

5.1 The participation of the different ethnic groups in the Presbyterian Church is a vital aspect of connectedness and belonging. There are a number of ways that this can be enhanced and the Task Group has made recommendations that have been actioned in this area.

6 Participation of Guests from Overseas Churches

6.1 The focus should be on churches the Presbyterian Church has a strategic priority relationship with.

6.2 The Presbyterian Church needs to be careful regarding costs of hosting guests of overseas churches and in communicating clearly to these guests what will be paid for.

6.3 In the new shortened version of General Assembly there is limited space in the plenary sessions for overseas guests to make presentations. However, there should be opportunity for them to be profiled in an elective hosted by Global Mission.

6.4 Real care needs to be taken to ensure hosting is warm and personal.

7 Decision-making Process

7.1 The decision-making processes at Assembly need clarifying and should be in terms of a process, not modes. We support the proposals of the Assembly Business Work Group, as set out in the proposed standing orders, that there be four stages of the process (not all may apply to all recommendations):

- Presentation (report or overture or notice of motion) – time allowed minimal but dependant on the amount of material. This is an opportunity for clarification – time for genuine questions (need for the moderator to be strict with those using questions to make a point). Attempt to have as much of this done prior to Assembly (i.e. early release of initial reports and opportunity for feedback before Assembly). It would be good for some of these to be dealt with by presbyteries.
- Dialogue groups and discussion
- Facilitation

- Debate
- Decision

7.2 If General Assembly is to be over a shorter time frame and smaller in terms of the number of commissioners, the work done between Assemblies becomes important in terms of both the smooth transaction of business and representation of the voice of the whole Church. There are good models for significant work being done before national meeting in the public sector and other churches. Presbyteries need to be more involved in issues coming to General Assembly before the Assembly meets. Reports and recommendations need to be the subject of widespread consultation and debate before the General Assembly.

7.3 Increased use of consensus was cautiously affirmed in the survey. A paradigm shift is required. The use of consensus decision-making needs to be signalled and it needs to be modelled.

7.4 In line with the finding of the questionnaire, it is recommended that lying on the table if between the percentages of 40-60% be abolished.

8 Expectations and Processes of Reporting to Assembly

8.1 Given the shorter time frame of General Assembly more limits need to be placed on the groups that report verbally to the whole Assembly. The task group is suggesting that nothing goes to the floor of Assembly unless decision-making is required or it fits with the educational goals of that Assembly.

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Convener

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