

The Presbyteries Task Group: The reform of presbyteries

Recommendations

1. That the Assembly approves the amalgamation of the Presbyteries of the Bay of Plenty and Waikato to form the Kaimai Presbytery, and that the boundaries of the new presbytery be those represented by the old presbyteries.
2. That the Assembly approves the amalgamation of the Presbyteries of Dunedin and North Otago, Central Otago, Clutha, Mataura and Southland to form the Southern Presbytery, and that the boundaries of the new presbytery be those represented by the old presbyteries.
3. That the Council of Assembly be encouraged to continue in its dialogue with Partner Denominations and the UCANZ to review and simplify denominational oversight of Cooperative Ventures, and to review the role and future of Joint Regional Committees.
4. That the responsibility for licensing candidates for the ordained ministry remains with presbyteries, and that the Assembly requests the Leadership Sub-Committee to consult with presbyteries to facilitate the formation of supplementary provisions as referred to in Regulation 9.1.b., to provide for and govern presbytery approval for licensing.
5. That the process for handling property requests, in place prior to the decision of the 2008 General Assembly, be retained.
6. That the Council of Assembly reviews the Assembly's missional

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spending with the view to implementing the proposal to release Assembly funding to support the mission of new, larger presbyteries as outlined in the report of the Task Group.

7. That the Council of Assembly establishes an appropriate process for new presbyteries to be consulted in determining the life and business of the General Assembly, and that, where possible, this process be implemented for the 2012 Assembly.

8. That the Council of Assembly establishes the process by which new presbyteries report on their mission to the General Assembly, and that this reporting be implemented for the 2012 Assembly.

Introduction

The 2008 General Assembly received the report of the Presbyteries Task Group and adopted the model therein for the Reform of Presbyteries; a model with the vision for establishing a new mission oriented culture as well as larger capacity in presbyteries. That Assembly agreed that presbyteries should establish Presbytery Reform Teams with appropriately skilled leaders to implement the model, and that the Council of Assembly was charged with the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of those tasks being vested in national bodies.

1 A new model

The model of Reform included the following major features:

- Establishing Resourcing Groups, separating structurally the governance and resourcing functions of presbytery, and prioritising resourcing over governance.
- Separating the governance functions of presbyteries into core and discretionary functions; and,
- Vesting some current presbytery functions in national bodies.
- Reconfiguring presbyteries into larger bodies for effectiveness in governance, and to increase personnel and diversity for resourcing life and mission.

- Providing a model framework that allows for regional variation according to contextual realities.

Following the Assembly, the presbyteries and their Reform Teams, and the Council of Assembly began their work and the Presbyteries Task Group maintained a watching and coordinating role. This report outlines the progress that has been made in reform and highlights some of the key issues raised in the process.

2 The need for reform

The Presbyteries Task Group wishes to remind this Assembly of the urgent need for the reform of presbyteries. Research, experience and widespread comment continue to underline the need to find more effective ways of working within a changed culture, and to fulfil the primary purpose of presbytery as defined by the Book of Order; *“to facilitate and resource the life, worship, spiritual nurture and mission of the congregations for which it has responsibility”* (8.3).

The situation outlined by the Presbyteries Task Group in 2008 underlying the need for reform still exists and includes the following realities, with trends in these continuing:

- Growing requirements and expectations, but declining capacity to fulfil them.
- Presbyteries that are small by international comparisons and some presbyteries that are very small in New Zealand terms.
- Declining numbers of active personnel and an aging membership, relating to trends in the Presbyterian Church as a whole.
- Increasing unwillingness to be involved in the institutional oriented life of presbyteries by some clergy, lay people and younger generations.
- Attitudes, perceptions and experiences of presbytery that are summed up in words such as irrelevant, dull, bureaucratic and ineffective.
- Increasing demands being placed on Assembly Office staff to carry out presbytery roles.
- A culture that defaults to “governance mode” rather than a “mission resourcing mode”, and is often marked by low levels of trust.
- Parishes that have no experience or expectation of resourcing assistance from presbytery and question its value.

The Task Group acknowledges the ministers and elders who are currently investing their time, talents, energy and heart in the operation of presbyteries, and who bring considerable goodwill and service to those presbyteries. However the reality is that in a number of presbyteries the number so involved is very small, and in all presbyteries there is ongoing decline in capacity.

3 Sister journeys

The journey of reform is reflected in similar journeys in other sections of the church, and these sister reform movements are an encouragement for us. Of

particular interest is Synod Reform in the Methodist Church of New Zealand over the past five years, and progress of reform in the Church of Scotland.

The Church of Scotland's Panel on Review and Reform's research revealed a situation paralleling that of the Presbyterian Church. In a progress report to their Assembly this year they recommended a similar model of reform, partly formed from accessing the experience of the Presbyterian Church: that presbyteries should be "mission-oriented rather than administrative-driven", that new structures should provide a "flexible framework of the regional church which can be adapted" to the circumstances of the particular presbytery, and that resourcing groups be established to provide forums to explore specific issues. Their commitment to reform continues.

Report

1 Progress in reform

Consultation on reform and reconfiguration has taken place within five groupings of presbyteries. The contribution of leaders, the nature of approaches and proposals, and the pace of deliberation and change have all varied across the five areas. The process has called for considerable creativity and faith as well as hard work to facilitate progress toward a new future, and the Task Group warmly acknowledges the admirable contribution of many to the process.

At this two-year point there has been significant progress in reform.

Two new Presbyteries have come into being: the Kaimai Presbytery (September 2009) and the Southern Presbytery (February 2010). Inauguration took place after new approaches and structures were determined and the Moderator of the General Assembly was present for both inspirational occasions. Both presbyteries have entered into a period of experimentation to ensure the creation of a new culture and a missional resourcing focus in operation. In both cases governance functions have been delegated to a smaller representative group. The Southern Presbytery for example is finding the new resourcing groups give greater opportunity for parishes to share ministry ideas and explore cooperative mission initiatives such as combined children and families days in the community.

The variation in structure and approach for the two new presbyteries has also highlighted the wisdom in not imposing a rigid model for all new presbyteries. The framework agreed to by the General Assembly allows for variations that reflect different histories, geographical and missional contexts and convictions. However the Task Group does acknowledge that some in the Church would have found more prescription helpful in the process. This may also have helped those who have really struggled to grasp the new vision for presbyteries, and a paradigm for its life and ministry markedly different from the current one.

Recommendations to formalise these two new presbyteries are before the General Assembly.

2 Northern North Island area

(Churches Together in Northland, North Shore, Auckland, South Auckland)

This area is working with a combined Reform Team and some significant energy and creative ideas have come to the fore. The key discussion document exploring the framework of the new presbytery has gone through several versions and is centered on the three primary convictions for the future of relationships, releasing gifts and resourcing. The need to work closely and creatively with Pacific Island and Asian Congregations is a critical challenge for this area, for this is where the majority of Asian and Pacific Island people live. This area is working with the idea of becoming one presbytery.

3 Southern North Island area

(Taranaki, Manawatu-Wanganui, Gisborne-Hawkes Bay, Wairarapa, Wellington)

After the 2008 General Assembly there were some meetings of Presbytery Reform Teams, but it was generally found difficult to generate ownership of the need for reform or to facilitate progress. Some presbyteries withdrew from the process, while others became frustrated by the lack of progress. Subsequently renewed initiatives and meetings have taken place and there is now a growing consensus on the need for and benefits of reform, and a shared commitment to making reform a reality. Representatives are exploring different possibilities concerning governance and resourcing.

4 Northern South Island area

(Nelson Marlborough, West Coast, Christchurch, Ashburton, South Canterbury)

The Reform Teams of this area, after considerable enthusiasm, consultation and work, presented to their presbyteries a model for reform at the end of 2009. The presbyteries did not accept the model and the reform teams were disbanded to clear the decks for new approaches to be explored. Conversations continue and action at this stage includes shared events to build closer relationships between presbyteries to provide a platform for new initiatives.

In the process of reform there are inevitably 'ups and downs' in the journey, and the occasional setbacks. There will also be some who have difficulty in engaging positively and actively in change for a different and better future, or groups who struggle to find the capacity to engage. However it is crucial that the whole church continue on the journey of reform, not only to honour the decision of the General Assembly in 2008, or affirm the Presbyterian commitment to being "*reformed and reforming*", but to work towards a more effective future for the church in which presbyteries have a crucial role to play.

5 Ecumenical considerations

The three United District Councils (Churches Together in Northland, Wairarapa and West Coast) are essential to the process of reform, but have found some difficulty being involved given their ecumenical ethos and ways of operating. The participation of UDCs in their area discussions is essential to ensure that in the outcome of reform they do not become small isolated bodies and to ensure

that their ecumenical voice is heard in the wider Presbyterian Church. In presbytery reform structures and ways of operation need to be created that include UDCs fully, affirms their ecumenical experience and ethos, and provides for their voice in presbytery. Within new larger presbyteries some “semi-autonomous” arrangement may be one option.

This would also be an ideal time to simplify the connections and responsibilities of Cooperative Ventures and United District Councils with “parent denominations”. The functionality and role of Joint Regional Committees also needs to be reviewed, as many of these are no longer operating. Effective mission and ministry at a regional level will be enhanced with the resolution of the complexity of denominational oversight and in creating alternative arrangements for Joint Regional Committees. If it is abundantly clear that new models need to be found for Presbyterian parishes and presbyteries, it is no less clear for those in ecumenical arrangements. Formal dialogue with Partner Churches at the national level has already begun and a recommendation before the General Assembly urges the Council of Assembly to strengthen our participation in these conversations.

This national dialogue may also address the concerns of some personnel from Partner Churches who feel that the Presbyterian Church has acted unilaterally in presbytery reform. The view of the Task Group has always been that members of Cooperative Ventures are fully represented on presbyteries and have therefore been part of the discussion and process of reform, and that these people are also connected to ecumenical and denominational bodies.

6 National tasks

The General Assembly in 2008 agreed that certain presbytery functions should be transferred and vested in national Work Groups. In some cases that process had already begun, in others progress has been made, and in others some variation will be needed.

1. Reception of ministers from other denominations and overseas: All aspects of this task are overseen by the Personnel Work Group.
2. Collection of statistics: This task, from the June 2009 year, is overseen directly with parishes by the financial services team of the Assembly Office.
3. Applications for Presbyterian Foundation Grants: This task is handled directly with parishes by the Presbyterian Foundation Grants Committee.
4. Appeals and disciplinary processes: While presbyteries are often involved as parties to such cases processes are now overseen by the national office.
5. Assembly Assessment: This task is overseen by the Resource Committee of the Council of Assembly and the Assembly Office.
6. Students for the Ministry: Presbyteries are involved in the initial selection process, with candidates then being assessed by the National Assessment Work Group. Thereafter student ordinands and their internship training is

overseen by the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership. Once readiness for ministry is assessed as complete candidates are licensed.

It was the intention of the Task Group and of the GA08 decision that licensing should also become a national function, reflecting concerns about current presbytery capacity to ensure competent processes and a consistent national standard. Subsequent dialogue with key parties has made clear that presbyteries should retain the function of licensing for the following reasons: to provide for a second body to discern readiness for ministry and one that is closer to the congregational life of the church where the candidate and their ministry is known personally, and to provide for appeal independent of the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

If presbyteries are to carry out this task then the “supplementary provisions” referred to in Regulation 9.1.b. need to be prepared and approved. These provisions need to make clear the purpose of licensing and the processes needed to competently assess readiness for ministry, the latter in association with but independent of the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership. A recommendation to this effect is before the Assembly

7. Property and borrowing: Currently requests are processed first by presbyteries then by the Church Property Trustees, with the approval of both bodies required by the Act.

It was the intention of the Task Group and the GA08 decision to re-order in part the process of approvals between the presbytery and the Church Property Trustees, again reflecting concerns about current presbytery capacity to transact requests from congregations and to find ways of handling them that were more objective, standardised and nationally strategic. The suggested change in process was to have requests go through a set of nationally defined standards first, both missional and fiscal, then be submitted to presbytery for comment and approval, and then be finally approved by the Church Property Trustees.

The Task Group has reviewed their original proposal in liaison with the Church Property Trustees and for a number of reasons proposes that the process for handling property transactions prior to the 2008 General Assembly be retained.

- (i) The Church Property Trustees have indicated that they consider that their impartiality and objectivity in assessing and approving property and loan applications would be compromised by being closely involved with parishes at the earlier stage of the process.
- (ii) The new and larger presbyteries are now providing a larger pool of people for the competent handling of applications, including personnel who are far enough removed from the situation to provide objectivity in handling applications and
- (iii) The 2008 General Assembly ruling that all property transactions must be shown to serve the purposes of God’s mission has given a more robust intent to the process of discerning a wise use of resources. This missional aspect of the process continues to be monitored.

Threats and Opportunities

While the Church is clearly only part way through the process of presbytery reform, the Task Group wishes to signal some possible threats and new opportunities.

1 Possible Threats

First: One possible threat is that a few smaller presbyteries might decline or be unable to engage with the process of reform as adopted by the General Assembly. This conceivably could lead to the situation of the Presbyterian Church having three or four larger presbyteries and several small ones. This possibility would create the situation of there being two styles of presbytery – some working with old paradigms and some new, which would raise concerns regarding the unity and strategic direction of the Church.

This situation would also raise serious issues concerning the General Assembly's nomination and representation procedures. It is important to discern accurately the voice of the Church and be assured that the concerns of the majority of members is heard, for example in voting procedures concerning the Moderator Designate or in matters passed down under Special Legislative Procedures (previously the Barrier Act). Altering representation and voting procedures would of course be possible, but the reform of all presbyteries across the country is the preferable option for the future and one keeping us united in the decision the Church made in 2008. It would be possible as a last resort to determine reform from the General Assembly, for example to direct a presbytery to become part of a new presbytery.

Second: A similar threat concerns Union District Councils where one or some may not become part of new larger presbyteries. This would not only leave them as isolated bodies but close the door on the important ecumenical contribution they bring to the church. All Union District Councils need to be warmly embraced in the journey of reform. It would be possible as a last resort for the General Assembly to withdraw the presbytery powers given to these bodies and embrace them in new presbyteries.

It is important for our future together as a Church to work proactively for reform in the culture and structures of new presbyteries.

2 New Opportunities

First: As the new larger presbyteries are formed it is with the clear objective of embracing a new culture and ways of operating that are mission focused. Presbyteries exist to resource congregations, but will need resources themselves for facilitating this, particularly skilled personnel. The Task Group proposes that some Assembly funding be released for the larger reconfigured presbyteries for missional purposes or for purposes more generally defined in terms of the primary purpose of presbyteries.

It is proposed that this funding be allocated to new presbyteries once they reach a certain size (for example: in adult worship attendance) and perhaps be allocated to new presbyteries in proportion to that size. It is proposed that such

funding be for the financial year beginning 1 July 2011 and that it be sourced from a re-working of missional spending priorities within the current budget rather than with an increase in congregational levies. A resolution to that effect is before the Assembly with the Council of Assembly being asked to undertake the work.

Second: The primary purposes and functions of General Assembly are defined in Regulation 14.2 of the Book of Order. It is the “governing body of the Church”, and along with its judicial, administrative and legislative functions, the General Assembly also has the responsibility “*to facilitate and resource the life, worship, and spiritual nurture of the Church*”. In this the General Assembly has a servant role, and more particularly in the polity of the church should be a servant to presbyteries.

The Presbyteries Task Group proposes that this servant role be strengthened, and that along with presbyteries the General Assembly also enters into a process of reform to create a culture and way of operating that stresses mission resourcing rather than governance. The people of presbyteries make up the General Assembly of course, and as presbytery reform continues the desire for reform at Assembly level will inevitably follow. Two recommendations are before the General Assembly to facilitate this journey - firstly that the life and business of the General Assembly be determined in consultation with new presbyteries. This will enable the new presbyteries, operating with a missional culture, to inform the Church about the common and/or critical issues they are facing, to make clear the resourcing they require from the General Assembly, and to contribute early to any strategic initiatives of the Church. This proposed role is considerably greater than the current provision for References (previously Overtures etc.) giving a means of raising more broad-based, future-focused missional issues. It is proposed that this consultation begin with the 2012 General Assembly and that an appropriate process be established to implement it.

Secondly, that new presbyteries be required to report on their mission to the General Assembly partly to inform and inspire the wider Church, and partly to reflect a clearer accountability. It is proposed that these reports be written and concise, and that they be under the headings of mission vision, mission capacity and mission achievement, the same framework as Parish Reviews. It is proposed that this reporting from new presbyteries begin with the 2012 Assembly.

Conclusion

In summary, there has been very encouraging progress in reform since the last General Assembly. New presbyteries have been formed, creative discussions continue in other areas and set backs are being woven into new initiatives. We are, however, only part way through this journey together and we need to continue in faith and hope and love.

Prayer remains central to this outworking of our new future as presbyteries; the seeking of God's guidance and enabling in reform, in spiritual nourishment and in mission.

We ask you to pray:

- For a spirit of openness to reform and for discernment of the Spirit's guidance.
- For a willingness to engage with the process of change and for trust and peace to mark that journey through periods of uncertainty.
- For God to raise up new leaders who can inspire and encourage us in the journey of forming presbyteries with a new culture and ways of working in life and mission.
- For new presbyteries to become strategic agents in regional mission and in resourcing local congregations.

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations for ever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)

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