

Strategic Planning Task Group

Mission in a time of organisational transition

Introduction

In late 2009, the Council of Assembly established a task group to develop a strategic direction document for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. The group was asked to consult widely and report initial findings to the Council of Assembly. The material that follows was informed by this consultation and will be discussed in dialogue groups at this General Assembly to gain additional feedback.

Our consultation revealed that there was no new great all-encompassing vision for the Presbyterian Church at this time, but that the Church was being called to complete the race (Acts 20:24) and the strategic direction already before it.

Report

1 The mission of the Church

Since 1995 our Mission has been described in this way:

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand believes it is called by God to work with others to make Jesus Christ known –

- *through proclamation of the gospel*
- *through the nurture and teaching of people in the Christian faith*
- *through response to human need in loving service*
- *through seeking to transform society*
- *through care for the creation*

These components of our Mission are referred to as the five “faces of mission”. While they are inter-related and all important, our Church is more confident about doing some more than others. At this time, we believe particular attention needs to be given to the task of teaching and equipping Presbyterians to share the gospel with confidence and without shame to both the church and the unchurched. This is the task of evangelism.

As a Church we seek to connect faith with everyday life.

The local church is the agent of mission and the Presbyterian Church has an important role in developing and sustaining healthy congregations (refer to appendix) for mission. The Healthy Congregations model has been endorsed by successive Assemblies since 1995 and we again affirm its relevance in our current context. In doing so, the Council recognises that church life can take a variety of forms. We are challenged to expand our view of “congregation.” In addition to the conventional self-sufficient local parish with the full-time trained Minister, we need to look to other possible configurations. Some of these are already emerging; and it will be increasingly important to encourage others.

As we listened and reflected, the image of a braided river occurred a number of times in different contexts. This braided river has clear boundaries and encompasses multiple expressions of faith and life within those boundaries. Those boundaries are seen in our supreme and subordinate standards and our Book of Order and are further defined by Assembly decisions. Going forward, new and different expressions of our church life will appear; how we work to live with clear boundaries yet flexible structures will be an ongoing missional challenge. It is important to clarify what it means to be Presbyterian and what holds us together and then, in that understanding, allow greater flexibility and autonomy.

Question 1: Is there anything about the mission of the Presbyterian Church, as described above, that you think needs to be added or changed?

2 Responding to change

Despite valiant efforts and significant pockets of revitalization and growth, the dire predictions of increasing decline in church attendance are coming true. This is consistent with patterns of decline among mainline denominations throughout the Western world. The demographic profile of the Presbyterian Church shows that decline will accelerate rapidly so that within 15 years we could be facing the loss of 33 percent of our parishes as any kind of viable worshipping community. Very little of what has happened in the last decade has prepared us for the next decade. Any notion of structural tinkering, cosmetic makeovers or grand schemes to revitalize parishes as they are, is not facing up to what is in front of us.

Parish and ministry appraisals have been developed to help congregations take stock and understand the urgency and importance of the call to mission. Some congregations are so worn down by simply surviving that they have difficulty understanding the need for missional engagement. This is unfortunate because taking a realistic look at the congregation and the mission field in which it is placed is often the beginning of a process of renewal or transformation.

The pace of change is accelerating and it will impact not only the European congregations but also the Pacific and Te Aka Puaho congregations. Interestingly, it will have little impact on Asian congregations – who tend to have younger demographics. In addition, growth in Asians living in New Zealand is expected to continue, so that by 2025, the total Asian population will represent about 25 percent of the total greater Auckland population.

The scope and complexity of this change is daunting. Our processes and structures do not allow us to move quickly. Leadership in these times has become critical, but time is not on our side.

We are being challenged to think about tough issues, including: congregational sustainability; the use and maintenance of ageing buildings; the reality of sole-minister ministries and the potential for other models of ministry; the use of investments and accumulated funds; the sustainability of the Beneficiary Fund, Assembly Assessment and the funding of various nationally provided services.

A renewed focus on the Healthy Congregations model puts increased emphasis on individual congregations engaging with the big questions of identity and purpose. The congregational appraisals are a key to this as they help a congregation assess where they are at and make plans for the future. If there is a good level of accountability in the appraisal process then congregations which are no longer viable will come to a point of recognising this and dealing with it in a constructive way, which in some cases may lead to closure. The Council of Assembly is bringing recommendations to the General Assembly on this topic.

Despite the negative picture this may seem to paint, many congregations *are* engaging in mission and growing. While there is no one-size-fits-all formula about this, we do know that leadership is an important factor. We also know that outreach initiatives in our communities, hospitality, robust worship and lively preaching are inter-related in drawing people towards life in Christ. Confidence in the Gospel and its message of personal salvation, and a commitment to making that Gospel known in word and deed are integral to the transformation of lives. Outreach without the gospel message is not mission.

There is much to celebrate. God is doing new things in surprising places. A key element in moving forward as a Church is discerning what the Spirit is saying and where the Spirit is leading.

Question 2: What are some of the “new things” you see God doing in your congregation’s life?

3 Reforming our structures

If we accept that as a Church we are in a stage of institutional transition then we have to acknowledge that we are moving from one way of being the church, to another. Structures that have served us previously may very well be the ones which are barriers to us in the future. This is a discussion to involve the whole Church and it will require a considerable amount of courage to do things differently. It is important to stress that a large number of changes are already underway. The topics mentioned are not an exhaustive list, but represent those mentioned frequently in the consultation meetings.

Presbyteries

The development of larger presbyteries will ultimately create regional administrative and mission bases. There is no prescribed structure that they will need to adopt, but, based on what seems to be working it is possible that many will have staff (either paid or volunteer) who handle administration, financial and mission matters. Presbyteries need to be encouraged in their outworking of their key role and function to assist the mission of local churches.

As the presbyteries re-form, they will need to levy their constituent parishes to fund their infrastructure. This will put greater pressure on parish finances and there will be an ongoing expectation that Assembly Assessment reduces in line with dependence on nationally provided services and that congregational funds are therefore available for regional purposes.

Any church in any community which is engaged missionally can rightfully claim to be in a “missional hotspot”. While it is true that the greater Auckland region represents an area with huge potential for mission, demographically speaking, churches there are also caught up in the momentum of decline. There are a growing number of parishes that are struggling in terms of leadership – in their own local setting, and at a regional level. There is also a struggle in terms of capacity to grapple with the concept of a new presbytery structure and there are challenges with various ethnic cultures and structures that are part of the Presbyterian Church. The greater Auckland area encompasses one third of our members and the largest number of newcomers to New Zealand, so the importance of the reformed presbytery equipping congregational mission in that area cannot be overstated. It may well be that we have to be proactive in supporting the Presbytery reform process in the greater Auckland area.

One suggestion which has been made concerns an “Auckland Hub”, where an effort is made to co-locate staff who are Auckland based with a base for the greater Auckland Presbytery, the Pacific Island Reflection Centre and other allied groups.

The Council of Assembly will have to consider the financial implications of these expectations and determine whether it is realistic that the funds for Presbytery transition are found nationally or locally.

PressGo was established as a means of redeploying resources to support new mission initiatives. While Press Go had the full support of GA08, and has already enabled some exciting projects to be launched, the redeployment of resources is proving more difficult than first envisaged. Parishes appear to be reluctant to make available what resources God has placed in their care to support missional projects elsewhere in the country. As well as Press Go, there may well be other ways of sharing our resources that need to be considered in the future.

Question 3: What would it take to enable us to better serve the intention of PressGo? Are there other ways to share our resources that could be considered?

Knox Centre

The training of ministers is vital to the Church. The minister as mission leader is important. Ministers need to be readers of, and identify with the gospel as a personal message of salvation where the power of God is at work in our culture.

The reshaped Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership is well placed to provide our leaders with mission resources and courses and the interns are having a real impact on churches as well.

Cultural diversity

As the cultural diversity of the Presbyterian Church grows in the coming years, there will be a greater demand for very specific mission resourcing within the various cultural groups. This has already proved successful for Te Aka Puaho. A deliberate concentration on growing leadership has significantly changed their hope for the future. We hear from the various Pacific Island Synod's *fonos* that

their needs are particular to their respective contexts and cannot simply be lumped together under the heading 'Pacific Island'. Our meeting with Executive of Pacific Islands Synod highlighted some of the concerns, together with the hopes and aspirations of Pacific people. The possibility of the Synod moving towards becoming a court of the Church – maybe a nationwide presbytery – has been raised. This requires thought and prayer.

We expect to see more Asian congregations seeking pathways to belong within the Presbyterian Church. All of these situations will require extensive expertise in mission resourcing, creativity, flexibility and openness if each group is to fully develop its own mission to those who share their cultural background. A number of conversations have taken place and will continue around the process of congregations joining the Presbyterian Church and leadership of these. The continuing growth of the Asian community – especially in Auckland, presents missional opportunities that need to be explored carefully, thoughtfully, and openly.

A particular issue that has arisen from discussions concerning Asian congregations joining the Presbyterian Church is the amount of money expected to be paid to a national office. Asian congregations are generous and are supportive of mission but are not used to a national levy as large as the Presbyterian Church expects. We wonder if this is an example of the need for the braided river concept i.e. we clarify the banks (what it means to be part of the Presbyterian Church) but within that we allow greater flexibility and diversity.

Community Ministries

While noting evidence of many community ministries, it is important to remember that we are people of the Good News. Outreach has varying levels of intentionality and engagement, ranging from the provision of facilities for the local community to evangelistic outreach. Every Presbyterian needs to ask how intentional and effective we are in making Jesus known in ways that lead others to follow Him.

It may well be that this is a season for encouraging those amongst us who are gifted in evangelism to share this gift with others. This would require openness, trust and courage.

The Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand (UCANZ)

The Presbyterian Church is committed to its partnership in Uniting congregations and active membership of UCANZ. There has been recent discussion with the other partners, through the guidance of UCANZ, in relation to a new model of parish oversight. This is potentially a helpful innovation for all concerned. Because of the nature of the partnerships the Presbyterian Church has in Uniting Congregations, any changes made to regulations that affect Presbyterian parishes will have to be carefully worked through in consultation with our partner churches and the Uniting congregations themselves.

Global Mission and ecumenical relationships

Involvement in mission outside New Zealand is an outworking of a healthy congregation. What that involvement looks like is not prescribed and it is important to encourage the varied ways in which congregations engage in

ministry beyond our shores. The maintenance of historical links and ongoing relationships, and the ecumenical aspect of international mission and ministry is a national function, but local church missional involvement is best worked out at a local level. In our consultation we heard of many practical expressions of ecumenical co-operation at a local level and this can only be encouraged as we share with others in communicating the gospel.

Encouraging greater participation

The consultation document asked people to think about the various ways in which more voices might be heard in the life and work of the Presbyterian Church. There was little support for more committees because people prefer other ways of having input in areas that interest them. Some people advised

that they are already working together and sharing ideas - utilising the internet and blog sites. It was felt that the “new, enlarged” Presbyteries would have an important role in fostering greater participation.

At some stage, however, we will need to review the current configuration of national committees, for example we may ask whether too much is being expected of the Leadership Sub-Committee

Question 4: What do you think is the greatest challenge facing the Presbyterian Church at the present time?

Question 5: Are there any other things you would like the strategy group to bear in mind?

Thanks

The strategy group again expresses its thanks to everyone they talked with, listened to and spent time with; to those who wrote; emailed and phoned. The comments that you make during this discussion time will further inform the consultations and help the Council of Assembly develop a directions document to guide strategy over the next two years. Thank you for your help in doing this.

Appendix

The values associated with our mission and the strategic outworking of our mission are expressed as follows:

Our Values

We express our faith and seek to live out our mission in ways that are consistent with the Gospel and our heritage as Presbyterians in this country. We value:

- *worship, recognising and celebrating God's work;*
- *faithfulness to scripture and a commitment to on-going reform in the church;*
- *grace in our dealings with one another and all people;*
- *theological thinking – making room for debate and enquiry as to how faith might inform public and personal life;*
- *diverse ways of being Christian and of expressing spiritual needs and yearnings;*
- *ethical involvement in society, locally, nationally and globally;*
- *participatory decision-making and leadership; a church of the people; a church in which the voices of people can be heard.*

Our Principal Strategy

To develop and sustain healthy congregations for mission

The health of a congregation is reflected in the quality of four sets of relationships;

- *with God,*
- *with the wider environment,*
- *with the wider church, and*
- *within its own life.*

*A healthy relationship with **God** will be reflected in –*

- ***Worship** that is true to God, is enhancing of life, promotes growth in faith, is relevant to the cultures and contexts in which we live, and is inviting to people unfamiliar with church; and*
- ***A lively faith.** Healthy congregations tend to have a higher proportion of attendees growing in their faith or experiencing moments of conversion or faith commitment. Among attendees there is strong and healthy devotional activity, such as prayer and Bible reading.*

*A healthy relationship with the **wider environment** is shown by –*

- *An **outward focus** among leaders and attendees in their concern for evangelism and serving others;*
- *There is a readiness to discuss **matters of faith** with others; to act with Christ where there is a need, and to invite others to church; and*
- *The congregation behaves as good **stewards of creation** and works with others for justice and peace; being with those with whom Jesus identifies.*

*A healthy relationship with the **wider church** –*

- *Links the local church regionally, nationally and beyond; and*
- *The congregation participates in mission and activity at each level.*

*A healthy congregation's **internal life** will be characterised by several indicators:*

- ***A sense of direction.** Attendees perceive their congregation as having a definite sense of direction and purpose.*

- ***A strong sense of community*** among attendees embracing all generations, different cultures and diverse ways of being human - creating a sense of belonging, managing conflict, and working towards reconciliation, healing, and renewal. High levels of involvement in small congregational groups will be evident, along with participation in activities in other communities and settings.
- ***An involving leadership.*** The leadership has a strong sense of vision for the mission of the congregation, to which attendees are committed. Leadership is inspiring and purposeful yet puts a priority on listening to attendees' ideas and encouraging them to discover their gifts and use them. Those with roles receive adequate levels of support.
- ***Newcomers and growth.*** Healthy congregations are more likely to be attracting and holding newcomers, retaining young adults and growing numerically. For congregations whose mission is in the contexts in which its members live and work through most of the week, the indicators of health include the outcomes of their activities and the ways the local congregation provides support.