

E17: Dialogue on sexuality, biblical morality and leadership

Recommendations

1. That the Moderator and Immediate Past Moderator work with participants in the dialogue on sexuality, biblical morality and leadership to offer the opportunity for the people in various regions of the Presbyterian Church to have conversations about the issues, using the same model as that for the dialogue set up by the 2022 Special Assembly.
2. That the Dialogue leaders report back to the next General Assembly.

Report

Introduction

General Assemblies have held divisive debates about sexuality and leadership in the church since 1985. This process of General Assembly debate and vote has produced winner/loser outcomes that have caused hurt and anger over the years. There is much residual ill feeling about the way these issues have dominated Assembly for many years. Many lament the way this process divides us and diverts attention from other issues. However, the issue remains very alive in our church and re-emerges at most General Assemblies in one form or another, leading to divisive debates and win/lose votes. The dialogue reported on here is part of a desire for the Church to address these issues in a different way. The dialogue was commissioned by the 2022 on-line Special Assembly to be 'a dialogue on a way forward in a church divided over issues of sexuality, biblical morality and leadership led by the Moderator and Moderator Designate who will gather a group together representing a variety of views on this issue.'

The goal of the dialogue was to talk about a way forward for a church very divided on these issues. It was not about relitigating who is right and who is wrong. See appendix 1 for the full proposal brought to the Special Assembly.

To help inform the conversation some work was done before the meeting, including the following:

- a. Statement of our present state in the Presbyterian Church and the recent history that has led us to this point (prepared by Rev Dr Stuart Lange and peer reviewed by Rev Dr Susan Jones).
- c. 'Across the Spectrum' style statement of theological and biblical understanding of views on the differing perspectives around this issue (prepared by the Doctrine Core Group)

These documents are available in the [Supporting Papers](#) section of the Assembly website.

The Dialogue took place at Mangere Presbyterian Church on 4-5 October 2022.

The Dialogue was led by the Moderator, the Rt Rev Hamish Galloway, the Moderator Designate, the Rev Rose Luxford and the immediate previous Moderator, the Very Rev Fakaofu Kaio. There were 21 participants in the dialogue, chosen to give representation to the breadth of opinion on this matter in the Church. Te Aka Puaho and the Pacific Presbytery were invited to be represented. Te Aka Puaho indicated that, when it comes to this topic, their

decision is that they stand aside. The Pacific Presbytery indicated that they preferred to engage with the outcomes of the dialogue once it had taken place.

Process for the Dialogue

The dialogue took place both in whole group times and in three small groups. The whole group time involved setting the scene, hearing each other's story, establishing our values and ground rules and giving feedback on small group work. In the smaller groups, time was spent identifying different scenarios (variously representing aspects of competition, compromise, collaboration, or avoidance), and brainstorming the pros and cons of each scenario.

At the end of the dialogue the group reflected on the process and agreed that:

1. There was genuine respect for the other, their stories, integrity, opinions, theological viewpoints, and perspectives on the Bible.
2. There was a shared desire for shalom, specifically in attending to how we deal with this issue – avoiding repetitive hurtful debate - balancing people's constitutional right to raise issues against the situation where there is unhelpful relitigating of the issues at every Assembly.
3. There was a high level of honesty in the sharing of stories and perspectives, taking seriously the trust we committed to.
4. There was a willingness to acknowledge the hurt and the pain that conversations and decisions around this issue has caused in the church.
5. There was agreement that there is potential for a similar style of dialogue to take place throughout the church.
6. Questions were also raised for further consideration:
 - a. What does unity mean and how does this relate to truth?
 - b. How do we make space for an informed conversation – for understanding why there are different perspectives; for learning new language; for listening to the stories of others.
 - c. How do we give expression to the value of reconciliation?
 - d. How are we being called to engage with the emerging world?

Scenarios that emerged from small group work

Many different scenarios emerged from the small groups and were discussed in the larger group. In the discussion a list of pros and cons were made for each scenario. While there was not a preferred option that emerged from the discussion, it was agreed that the list of options with their pros and cons are a useful starting point for broader dialogue in the Church. The full list with the pros and cons is available as part of the full notes from the dialogue. Commissioners are encouraged to read the full notes as what follows are only the headings. The full notes are available in the Supporting Papers section of the Assembly website.

The scenarios that came out of the discussion and were explored were as follows;

- Maintain the status quo
- The Church becomes fully inclusive
- Separate Synods (The Church restructures into two synods one of which maintains the status quo with regard to ordination and marriage, the other taking an inclusive position.)
- Every congregation allowed discretion to make its own decisions on sexuality and ministry
- General Assembly sets aside the status quo for five years

- Congregations wishing to be more inclusive become cooperating ventures or be in a closer relationship with the Methodist Church
- A five-year moratorium on discussion across the whole church
- A five-year moratorium on debate or decision in General Assembly only
- General Assembly decides that it will require a 60% decision to debate on sexual morality and sexuality matters
- The Church allows Presbyteries to licence and ordain people from the Rainbow community as Locally Ordained Ministers to work in safe rainbow spaces
- The Church supports Rainbow church communities with finances and ministries
- Full schism (each stream setting the other free to follow their own convictions and conscience, through the Church collaboratively dividing and giving birth to two separate Presbyterian denominations)

Property issues in event for a schism

This was also a topic of discussion at the Dialogue. The following consensus emerged at the dialogue:

In the event of a scenario that leads to an inevitable outcome of schism, the Presbyterian Church would be well served by learning from other churches in New Zealand and around the world. Measures that avoid expensive and toxic disputes and litigation are highly desirable.

Therefore, it would serve the Church well to explore options for a 'just and gracious settlement' for those people of either perspective who find themselves on the grounds of conscience unable to remain in the Church. It is noted that the Church's stance has been, relying on the legislation and the opinions provided, that a congregation cannot decide to leave the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. Only individuals can leave. However, it is worth noting that options have been developed in other denominations when a whole congregation decides to leave where schism is seen as 'inevitable', that is, a recognised and logical outcome of a national church decision.

Options used in other denominations include

- a) gifting property and money to a leaving congregation (as in a Presbyterian Church of Canada proposal where the leaving congregation could buy the buildings with money gifted to them by the national Church on the day of purchase)
- b) long term peppercorn leases with appropriate conditions regarding upkeep and liability (it was noted that this has the potential for reunification in the future)

The strong consensus of the dialogue was that it would be essential to ensure in the in any cases of gifting or long term leases assurance that the leaving group would have accountability to a denomination and appropriate governance.

(See Appendix 2, Response of the Book of Order Advisory Committee and Church Property Trustees).

Conclusion

The members of the dialogue believe that the constructive way this dialogue took place is a model for creating safe space in the church that gets us talking, learning, understanding and

appreciating each other around this important topic. The documents generated by this dialogue could form helpful background for similar ongoing dialogue in the church. There is a recommendation that the same kind of dialogue be made available to each Presbytery.

E17: Appendix 1

2022 Assembly Proposal 8: Inclusivity

This proposal is brought to Assembly by Presbytery Central. It was initiated by St Andrews Presbyterian Church Hastings Parish and adopted by the presbytery.

The proposal originally recommended that the Church commit to being fully inclusive by (a) opening positions of leadership to all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender, age, disability or ethnicity, (b) advocating for equal rights in church and society for all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender, age, disability or ethnicity, (c) recognising the pain and suffering caused by excluding or discriminating against people on the basis of sexual orientation, gender, age, disability or ethnicity.

Leave is sought to withdraw the original wording of the recommendations, to be replaced by the following:

- a. That the Church commits to a dialogue on a way forward in a church divided over issues of sexuality, biblical morality and leadership.
- b. That this dialogue be led by the Moderator and Moderator Designate who will gather a group together representing a variety of views on this issue.
- c. That the outcomes of the discussions be reported to the 2023 General Assembly for consideration.

Rationale for the proposal

- a. General Assemblies have held divisive debates about inclusivity issues since 1985.
- b. This process of General Assembly debate and vote has produced winner/loser outcomes that have caused hurt and anger.
- c. There is much residual ill feeling about the way these issues have dominated Assembly for many years. Many lament the way it divides us, and diverts attention from other issues.
- d. However, the issue remains very alive in our church. We remain divided.
- e. Churches around the world similar to ours are making decisions to accept people in same sex relationships into positions of leadership or are recognising that the different positions cannot be reconciled and are choosing to formally, graciously, and justly separate. We have a chance to learn from what is happening elsewhere and to avoid the acrimonious and difficult type of schism which involves property disputes and court cases.
- f. The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand has the chance to prepare for a situation where such decisions are made and plan for a way ahead that is collaborative and lifegiving.