

Working Paper

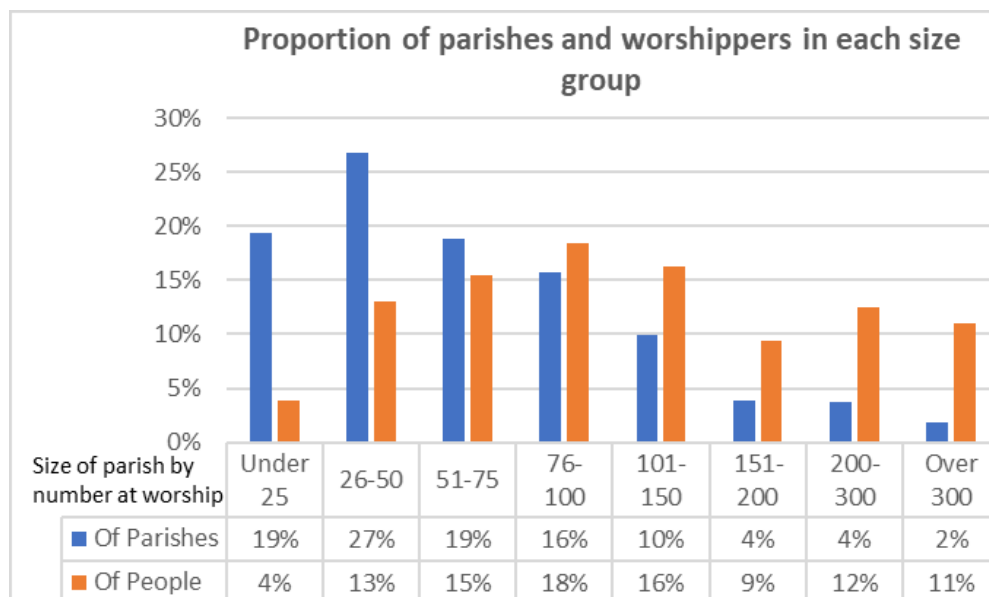
The context for ministry in the future: trends in parish life in the PCANZ

This note contains some information about trends in the life of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and discusses what the implications of these could be.

Number and size of parishes

According to the 2017 *Survey of Parish Life Report* prepared by the Church Property Trustees as a resource for the wider church:

- In June 2017 there were 22,800 adults and 5,500 young people worshipping in 382 Presbyterian parishes throughout New Zealand, an average of approximately 60 adults and 14 young people per parish.
- About two thirds of people belong to churches with more than 75 people whereas nearly two thirds of churches have less than 75 members as shown in the graph below.



Source: 2017 Snapshot of Parish Life

- From 1981 to 2017, the number of parishes has declined by over 20% from nearly 500 to 382.
- The past performance of a parish does not predict its future performance. Parishes that were growing between 1997 and 2007 were no more likely to be growing, or less likely to be declining, than parishes that were declining earlier.

Implications of declining membership

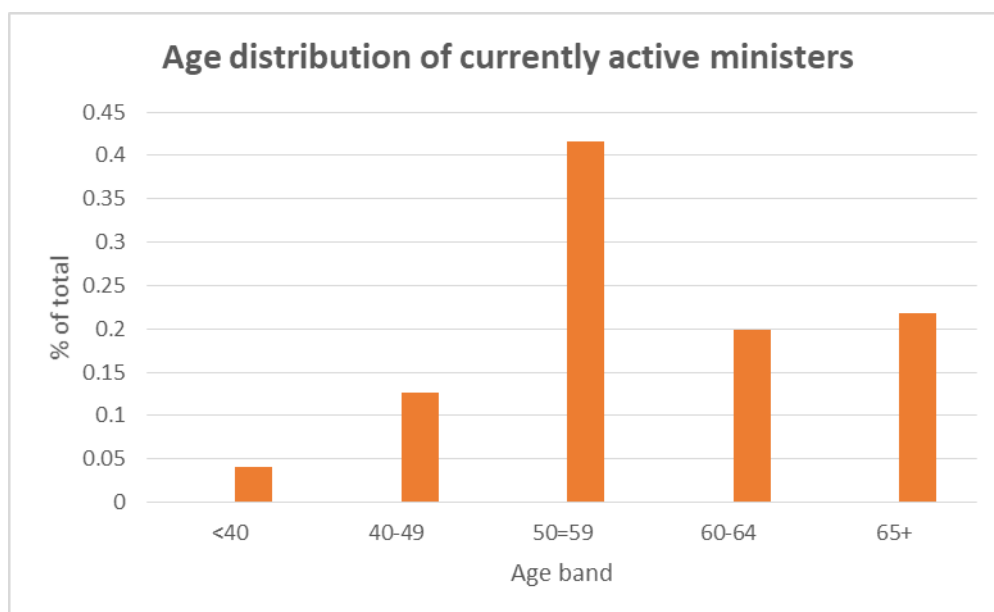
Parish amalgamation and closure has been common in recent years. This trend is likely to continue into the future. Given that nearly two thirds of our parishes have less than 75 members, a level at which it is likely to be challenging to sustain full time ministry over time, it is conceivable that many of these could either close or amalgamate over the coming 10 to 20 years. While it is not possible to forecast with accuracy, we could see the number of parishes trend to 250 or less over the coming years, down from 382 in 2017.

Parishes without ministers

- Figures from the PCANZ national office suggest that there are around 130 parishes or slightly less than a third of the total of parishes without a minister currently. An unknown number of these parishes will not be able to support a full time or part time minister.
- As at July 2019 there were 24 part time or full time parish minister vacancies listed on the PCANZ website. This might be a lower limit on the number of parishes currently seeking a minister as some parishes may not yet have got to the stage in the search process of advertising for a minister. For instance feedback from one Presbytery suggests that there are 14 Ministry Settlement Boards at work in the Presbytery currently but there are only 4 vacancies currently being advertised on the PCANZ website for that Presbytery. We can be fairly confident therefore that nationally parishes are seeking to fill more than the 24 ministry positions currently being advertised, but how many more we cannot be certain.

Age profile of current ministers

- The age profile of current ministers is significantly skewed to older age groups. Figures on the distribution of ministers' ages have been obtained for 363 of the approximately 420 ministers who are regarded as currently active in the Presbyterian Church (figure includes those working in chaplaincy positions). The graph below shows the distribution of ages for those ministers who the PCANZ national office holds data on.
- The data shows that the age profile of currently active ministers is significantly skewed to older age groups. While it is possible that the ages of the nearly 60 ministers who are excluded from the data below are significantly younger on average, it would still not change the overall picture greatly. There will still be around 150 ministers aged sixty and over many of whom will be likely to retire from ministry within the next ten years, and a further 150 who will be likely to have retired by the end of the following decade.



Source: PCANZ national office statistics – excludes the ages of 63 currently active ministers for whom age data is not available.

Summary

Even if, as discussed above, the number of parishes drops by say a third over the coming years through closure and amalgamation, the impact of this on the demand for ministers will be offset by the fact that about a third of our parishes currently have ministerial vacancies. Therefore it seems reasonable to assume that we will continue to need in the coming years about the same number of ministers as we currently have in parishes. This means that the approximately 300 currently active ministers who are likely to retire over the next two decades will need to be replaced which implies the need on average for 15 people per year to be entering ministry across the church nationally.

Implications

Some of the implications of the trends and data outlined above would appear to be the following:

- The replacement challenge implies a higher number of ordinations than is being met by NOM preparation currently. While ordination via the LOM pathway may help in meeting the shortfall, because of the way it is structured this will not necessarily assist with meeting the needs of all parishes, nor might it produce sufficient ministers with the breadth and depth of preparation that the church requires to lead it into the future.
- While the current age profile shows the desirability of boosting the number of younger people entering ministry, both to better position the church with younger age groups and to even out the age profile from a human resource management perspective, it would be wrong to assume that future needs can be met solely by younger people entering ministry. Rather it would seem safer to assume that to meet the need identified we will continue to need to bring people of all ages into the ministry (and from all backgrounds including from overseas). This implies the need for multiple pathways into ministry so as to create different pathways for different candidates to choose from according to their circumstance.
- Amalgamations and the reality that larger parishes are more likely to survive over time means that an increasing proportion of ordained ministry could occur in larger parishes and/or in teams. This in itself raises different requirements for ministry preparation. For instance larger parishes require significantly more management and leadership expertise and working in a team also creates a different dynamic from a sole charge ministry.
- On the other hand some smaller parishes will continue to exist, particularly in rural and remote areas and the preparation for these will have distinctly different requirements than that for larger team ministry in urban areas. In addition, even if the number of such churches declines over time through closure and amalgamation, it is still likely that some paid ministry will be part time. Preparation for ministry needs to take account of this, both in terms of how it is structured and the nature of the preparation that is provided.
- This diversity of contexts for which ministers are being prepared means that ministry preparation will need to be flexible enough to be able to offer candidates a range of experiences, perhaps customised to some extent to match the ministry circumstances that they most expect to be working in.
- Finally the fact that we currently have a significant number of parishes with vacancies in ministry and the projected high level of retirements from ministry suggests that reliance will continue to be placed on lay leadership in many different situations, emphasising the importance of lay leadership training.