

Presbyterian Support New Zealand

Report

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is with pleasure, and considerable thoughtfulness, that I write my first report for General Assembly as National Executive Officer of Presbyterian Support New Zealand. For me, it is a great privilege to work for an organisation that is closely aligned in its mission and values with the Christian community of faith, and that draws on the history and spirituality of the Presbyterian tradition to underpin the work it does.

One of my favourite Bible verses is Micah 6:8, which says “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” This one pithy sentence to me encapsulates the essence of Christian values, lifestyle and mission. It also goes to the heart of what Presbyterian Support is all about.

Ever since 1906 when *“the deaconesses at Knox and First Church...became so concerned about children on the streets near their churches that they took various children into the rooms they shared...”* (*Making a Difference: A Centennial History of Presbyterian Support Otago 1906-2006* (with Jane Thomson), Presbyterian Support Otago, 2006), Presbyterian Support has had a “mercy mission” of meeting the needs that it sees at its core. When I sit in at regional board meetings I hear repeated concerns about families under stress, older people who do not feel they have a secure future as they become increasingly frail, a shortage of residential care beds, or buddies and mentors for youth who need another responsible adult in their life – the list goes on. In every one of our seven regions of Presbyterian Support, the response to the challenge is the same – let us identify the unmet need - those people who are crying for mercy – and marshal our resources towards meeting that need.

As resources for social services shrink, more working together with other like-minded agencies and organisations, including churches, provides better support for families, at the right time, by making scarce dollars stretch further. The Presbyterian Church continues to be a partner in this work of supporting the needy and vulnerable in our society – the ones who need the benefit of our mercy.

Presbyterian Support’s Family Works service operates out of 34 sites around New Zealand, providing social work support, counselling services and parenting programmes. In the past 12 months we have signed a national Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Social Development that recognises us as a national scale provider of social services to children and families. There remains a funding shortfall, and so Presbyterian Support rely on funds from grants and other sources to enable them to do the work required.

Whether in residential, supported accommodation or general community based settings, Presbyterian Support’s Enliven services for older people emphasise the importance of someone’s quality of life, not just quantity. The restorative approach to elder care focuses on enabling people to remain active, independent and socially connected – as far as possible continuing doing things in life that are important to them, and for as long as possible. It means going above and beyond basic physical and medical care needs

to provide services that creatively respond to people in their own particular circumstances. This is no easy task when funding for home based support is dwindling, and residential care beds are filled with people who are far more frail than those who entered rest homes even 10 years ago.

The challenge is constantly to innovate and take on new projects to meet emerging needs. For example, Presbyterian Support Central region responded to the desperate call of the community for more residential care beds in the Wairarapa. They also took over a residential and supported independent living complex in Wellington that had foundered under previous management. Presbyterian Support Upper South Island is pioneering new packages of care for people at home living with dementia and their carers, in partnership with the DHB. South Canterbury has invested capital into refurbishing its rest home at Wallingford in Temuka, and Presbyterian Support Otago has redeveloped the Lindsay Unit in its Ross Home.

Presbyterian Support is recognising, and actively planning for, the impacts of an ageing population, with a particular focus on the increasing numbers of older folk being diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease and other forms of dementia. The changes undergone by the person living with dementia, and those around them, require particular types of support and provision for the future in a way that is sustainable. Our services for older people managers are engaging strategically around how to meet these needs. It is a growing need that will also be evident in church congregations.

Acting justly as an organisation often means standing up when seeing that justice isn't being done. As such Presbyterian Support has an ongoing advocacy role to inform the government how its policies will impact on people, and provide advice on better ways to support social service delivery. Through meetings with Ministers, senior government officials, submissions to select committees and involvement in various forms of government consultation, we try to give a strong voice to those whose plight is not well heard or understood. We are there to remind government of the cold hard reality of a benefit cut to a family already struggling to make ends meet, of the removal of home help support to an older person in their own home who cannot manage without it, of the trimmings of health and housing budgets here and there which trickle down to reduced quality of life for many people at the bottom. As partners with the Presbyterian Church and the other denominations represented by the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services, we advocate for justice that will apply to all people in Aotearoa New Zealand regardless of their faith, but from the principles of justice rooted in a Christian faith. It is a message that only faith based social services can deliver.

Presbyterian Support is not one of those organisations you hear about much in the media. We don't shout too loud because we are busy getting on with the job of delivering quality services. The "humble" ethos that we follow is generally to work quietly behind the scenes of media and politically charged debates to try and get tangible policy gains for our clients. In our experience, that doesn't come from an adversarial approach to government Ministers and government departments via the medium of the press. There is a lot more of sitting down in rooms with people, trying to nut out some solutions to the ever increasing needs we see, in the context of social policy that can be as fickle as an election cycle. As organisations, the regions of Presbyterian Support have been around for more or less 100 years. We have seen many governments come and go, seen the popularity of the welfare state rise and fall, seen funding and operations successively centralised and de-centralised. Like the Church, we are in for the long haul, and weather the storms as best we can, while staying true to our purpose.

How can we work more closely together? The Presbyterian Church has its ongoing mission to defend, nurture and spread the Christian faith. Presbyterian Support continues its mission to make a positive difference in the lives of New Zealanders, through the provision of high quality social services. The outworking of Presbyterian Support's practical work in the world is in many ways more secular, but its root is in that same spirit of acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God. There are already some exciting joint initiatives between Presbyterian Support and the Presbyterian Church. To mention a few:

Support Sundays held across the country offer churches a chance to find out more about our work and support us through prayer and contributions.

Presbyterian Support Northern has appointed Anne Overton in a new role of Community Mission Liaison to help parishes develop and implement outreach initiatives, and respond to needs in their communities.

The Northern region is also offering Positive Ageing seminars to Presbyterian parishes.

Presbyterian Support East Coast's Befriending Service continues to be a great example of parish partnership. Older people are offered friendship and support.

In Wellington, a recent Presbyterian Schools charity concert raised funds for Presbyterian Support Central's Enliven and Family Works Services.

Last year, St Alban's Uniting Parish and PS Upper South Island set up a community partnership to establish a Men's Shed in the parish and this is now up and running.

Also in Christchurch, the Church and Presbyterian Support have teamed up to provide family counselling services at St Stephen's Community Centre.

Presbyterian Support Otago has a Community Mission Advisor, the Rev Dennis Povey, who is working with congregations to help them connect with their communities.

We do value your prayers for the work we do, and we value your support in other ways. We are very keen to hear from parishes in local areas who would like to get actively involved in collaborative social services ventures with Presbyterian Support. Perhaps you see a need in your local community and you are not sure how to meet it. Maybe you have some people with particular skills or time to contribute as volunteers or as partners in some community programmes a local region of Presbyterian Support is running. Or maybe you would like someone to come along to your local church one Sunday and tell you more about what we do in your area. Please let us know.

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