

## **Guidelines for Presbytery Commissions Reviewing a Congregation**

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## A. Introduction

Presbytery commissions tasked with reviewing congregations under ch 5.10 of the Book of Order carry significant responsibilities. Their determinations shape not only individual congregations' futures but also affect the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand's broader mission and witness.

Typically initiated in the context of declining attendance or other significant challenges within a congregation, the review commission's task is to conduct a thorough and fair assessment of the congregation's current state and future viability. Based on this assessment, the commission must decide whether the congregation's life and mission can be continued, if renewal should be conducted, or if dissolution is necessary.

The review process requires commissioners to balance procedural fairness with pastoral sensitivity. The appointment of a commission can have significant impacts on congregation members, potentially causing anxiety, uncertainty, and distress. This underscores the importance of conducting the review with empathy, natural justice, and respect.

These guidelines, prepared by the Book of Order Advisory Committee, provide practical advice for conducting reviews. **They are not binding, and not all steps will suit every context. The Book of Order and its supplementary provisions must prevail over any inconsistent parts.** It is hoped that following these guidelines will reduce the likelihood of successful appeals, but deviations from them are not, in themselves, grounds for an appeal.

The material is structured in layers to allow commissioners to engage at the level of detail they need. A process roadmap is set out in part C, followed by an elaboration of the key principles in part D. More specific guidance for the process is set out in subsequent parts.

Successful review processes are guided by certain fundamental principles that shape both the approach and outcomes. These principles help ensure that the review is conducted with integrity, compassion, and proper discernment. Throughout these guidelines, commissioners will find specific applications of these principles:

- *Discernment*: commissioners should approach their task with an attitude of prayerful and communal discernment, seeking God's guidance throughout the process.
- *Natural justice*: the review process should be fair ensuring decisions are made without bias or predetermination, and providing the congregation or church council with opportunities to be heard and respond to matters relevant to the outcome.
- *Pastoral sensitivity*: commissioners should take a pastoral approach, recognising the emotional and spiritual significance of the congregation to its members.
- *Inquiry*: engage with genuine curiosity about the congregation's experiences, challenges, and potential.

## B. The text of ch 5.10

### 5.10 Review of a congregation on the initiative of presbytery

- (1) A presbytery may appoint a commission to review the future of a congregation, with the options of continuing its mission, renewing its life and mission, or if need be, dissolution.
- (2) The presbytery commission for such processes will comprise no more than 5 members, including persons particularly suited for appointment, having regard to
  - (a) the nature of the congregation under review
  - (b) an understanding of contemporary theological and mission practice
  - (c) the legal and administrative requirements of the Book of Order.

The majority of members should be members of presbytery.
- (3) The role of the presbytery commission is to enhance the mission of the Church by engaging with a congregation to discern how its life and mission fulfils the functions of a congregation as described in section 5.2. It will do this by
  - (a) informing the congregation that a review is being undertaken
  - (b) stating at a congregational meeting the possible outcomes of the review process
  - (c) setting a state at which the congregation will report to the commission
  - (d) making a determination as described in subsection (6)
- (4) A presbytery commission appointed under this section must require the church council to call a congregational meeting in accordance with section 3. The meeting must be chaired by a member of the commission.
- (5) The purpose of the meeting called in accordance with subsection (4) is to inform the congregation that a review of the congregation's future has been initiated by the presbytery, and that one option being considered is the review is the dissolution of the congregation. The reasons for the review must be given. The commission must ask the congregation to give a report as to its life and work in fulfilling its functions under section 2. This report may be in both verbal and written forms and must be presented to the commission within three months of the congregational meeting.
- (6) In its consideration of the report, the commission must decide on one of these three options
  - (a) that the congregation is fulfilling the functions as set out in section 2 and it should be encouraged to continue in its life and mission
  - (b) that, although some of the functions in section 2 are being met but the viability of the congregation is marginal, the presbytery will work closely with the church council to find creative ways to stimulate its life and mission, and a further review should be undertaken within a defined period
  - (c) that the congregation should be dissolved. In this case, the presbytery must consider facilitating and resourcing a restart worshipping community in the premises occupied by the dissolved congregation, under the leadership of another congregation within the presbytery. In any event the presbytery must ensure the continued pastoral care of the congregation [members].

## C. Process overview for review commissions

The review commission's process is designed to provide a clear and fair assessment of the life and mission of a congregation, as outlined in ch 5.10 of the Book of Order. While ch 5.10 mandates some key procedural steps, it allows flexibility in how the commission gathers information and interacts with the congregation. This section provides a roadmap of how the review process will usually take place.

### 1. Initial church council meeting (highly recommended)

The process usually begins with an introductory meeting between the commission and the church council. Although it is up to the congregation to decide how it wishes to go about preparing the report, usually the church council takes the lead.

- *Purpose and scope*: explain why presbytery initiated the review, the possible outcomes (continuation, renewal, or dissolution) and the key aspects to be evaluated as per ch 5.2.
- *Guidance on report preparation*: provide the church council with an overview of information needed. **Appendix 1** offers a suggested checklist that may be adapted as needed. For church councils that may struggle with a comprehensive report, **Appendix 2** provides a simplified template with direct questions and rating scales.
- *Timeline and submission requirements*: agree on deadlines for the written report (typically three months after the congregational meeting, per ch 5.10(5)), and dates for the oral submissions and any additional information.
- *Transparency and sensitivity*: allow time for the church council to raise any questions or concerns, including sensitivities to be aware of when engaging with the congregation.
- *Contact person*: if there is no minister and no council clerk, confirm who will be the commission's contact person throughout the review process.

### 2. Congregational meeting

A congregational meeting must be held as specified in ch 5.10(3). This meeting serves as the formal announcement of the review and its purpose, giving the congregation an opportunity to understand the process and expected outcomes.

- *Presentation of the review process*: outline the reason for the review, key steps, and possible outcomes, clearly stating that dissolution is one possible outcome.
- *Preparation for the congregational report*: clarify that the congregation must prepare a report detailing how it fulfils each function under ch 5.2. Note that while the church council typically leads this preparation, the congregation's input is important. It may be helpful to have a member of the church council speak.

- *Encouragement of participation*: encourage members to contribute to the report and to present oral evidence directly to the commission.
- *Communication materials*: ensure that a written summary of the meeting's key points is available (e.g., through a bulletin or letter) for those unable to attend.
- *Request prayer*: invite the congregation members to pray for the process and the commissioners.

### 3. Submission of the congregation's report and oral evidence

Within three months of the congregational meeting, the congregation should submit its written report, which will be a central source of evidence for the commission's review.

- *Content and format of the written report*: the written report should address each function outlined in ch 5.2, with specific documents, records, and detailed descriptions.
- *Structured session for oral evidence*: hold a structured session for hearing direct testimony from congregation members, typically a week or so after the written report is submitted. This allows commissioners time to familiarise themselves with the report before discussions.
- *Additional input and transparency*: schedule follow-up meetings with the church council to discuss the report's content, seek clarification, or request further documentation if needed. Ensure any additional requests are documented and shared with the council to promote transparency.

More specific guidance about this step is provided in part E (Gathering the evidence).

### 4. Review and evaluation of evidence

Once the report and oral evidence are gathered, the commission undertakes a careful and systematic review of all evidence, assessing the congregation's fulfilment of its functions as outlined in ch 5.2.

- *Systematic review of functions*: evaluate each function individually, considering the guiding prompts in part F and the systematic approach outlined in part G.2. This structured approach helps ensure a thorough and consistent assessment of worship, mission, pastoral care, faith formation, and property/finance functions.
- *Deliberations and discernment*: enter a period of prayerful discernment and honest discussion to explore the congregation's strengths, challenges, and potential. Listen for God's guidance, remaining open to different perspectives and recognising the congregation's unique context and mission. Specific guidance is provided in part G (Deliberations).

- *Writing the decision*: once a determination is reached, prepare a written decision that clearly outlines the chosen course—continuation, renewal, or dissolution. Reference specific evidence and ensure the reasoning is thorough, particularly for dissolution outcomes. Specific guidance is provided in part I (Writing, communicating and finalising the decision).

### **5. Release draft report (highly recommended where dissolution is the proposed outcome)**

Before reaching a final decision, consider issuing the decision in draft to the church council or congregation to promote transparency and allow for feedback on the commission's initial findings. The step is particularly relevant if dissolution is the proposed outcome.

- *Timeframe for response*: allow a reasonable timeframe for the congregation or church council to review and respond to the draft report, typically two to three weeks.
- *Refinement of findings*: any significant feedback provided should be carefully considered and may be used to refine the commission's final recommendations.

More specific guidance about this step is provided in part I (Writing, communicating and finalising the decision).

### **6. Determination and communication of the decision**

After considering all evidence and feedback, the commission makes its final decision, choosing among continuation, renewal, or dissolution.

- *Communication of the decision*: coordinate with presbytery to communicate the decision clearly and pastorally. A summary may be shared broadly, with the full report available to those who wish to read the details.
- *Know presbytery's role*: the commission's decision carries the full authority of presbytery and is not open for debate, modification, or overruling by presbytery or presbytery council. Challenges must occur through appeal to the General Assembly.

More specific guidance about this step is provided in part I.

### **7. Record keeping**

Provide presbytery with a complete set of review documentation, including:

- The final written decision
- All evidence received and considered, including the congregation's report, any records or minutes of oral submissions, other evidence gathered, and minutes or notes from meetings (excluding internal commission deliberations).

More specific guidance about this step is provided in part I (Writing, communicating and finalising the decision).

## D. Key principles relevant to the review process

### 1. Prayerful discernment

The review of a congregation is not merely an administrative process, but a spiritual one requiring prayerful discernment. Commissioners should approach their task with openness to God's guidance, recognising that they are participating in God's ongoing work in the life of the Church.

- Seek God's will as the primary aim of the review process. This discernment should be grounded in prayer, Scripture, and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit. Approach the process with humility, acknowledging God's wisdom surpasses human understanding.
- Frame key decision points as discernment questions, such as "What is God calling this congregation to be and do in this season?" or "How can we best support God's mission through this decision?"
- Begin and end each meeting with prayer, whether it be an internal commission meeting, a congregational meeting, or meetings with other bodies and persons. This recalls our dependence on God's guidance. Where appropriate, also consider holding a short devotional.
- Value communal discernment, especially in-depth discussions and debate with fellow commissioners. The Holy Spirit often speaks through the collective wisdom and experiences of the body of Christ.
- Invite the congregation to pray for the process and the commissioners, fostering a sense of shared spiritual journey and openness to God's leading.

### 2. Natural justice

Natural justice—fairness in action—is fundamental to the commission's role and applies to all stages of the review process. While not explicitly mentioned in ch 5.10, these principles ensure a fair, transparent process with meaningful participation from the congregation.

- *The right to be heard:* The congregation—through its members and the church council—must be given the opportunity to present evidence, arguments, and responses to any matters that could adversely affect them before any decision is made. Primarily, this will be achieved through the congregation's report, submitted in accordance with ch 5.10(5).
  - The decision must not be based on information that comes as a surprise to the congregation. In other words, there should not be any material or information in the decision that the congregation has not had an opportunity to comment on. The church council should be informed of all relevant



material, and the congregation should be given clear summaries of key points through regular updates (such as in the bulletin) or congregational meetings.

- The church council typically serves as the primary point of contact for detailed information, though individual members must have opportunities to speak at oral submissions
- Although the right to be heard broadly applies to the congregation, practically, the church council as the elected representatives of the congregation may be the primary point of contact for detailed information and discussions.
- *Right to know and understand:* clearly inform the congregation about the reasons for the review, the process and timeline, possible outcome, and any significant issues or concerns identified.
  - Communicate in clear and direct language.
  - While many details (particularly sensitive details relating to or uncovered during the process) may need to be shared only with the church council, the broader congregation should receive regular updates about key developments.
- *Right to unbiased assessment:* commissioners must be impartial, avoiding any actual or perceived conflicts of interest, prejudgments, or biases.
  - No matter how dire the situation may appear, avoid any indication that dissolution is inevitable.
  - Congregation members may be sensitive to such attitudes and interpret them as signs the review process is merely a formality without genuine consideration of alternatives, leading them to believe they have not had a fair opportunity to present their case or influence the outcome.
- *Right to a reasoned decision:* provide clear reasons linking evidence to conclusions, especially for dissolution cases. Each key finding should be supported by specific examples from the evidence, avoiding assumptions or subjective judgments.

By adhering to these principles, the commission ensures that the review is conducted respectfully, maintaining trust and integrity throughout the process.

### **3. Pastoral sensitivity**

The review process can be emotionally challenging for congregation members. Approach the task with pastoral sensitivity, conducting the review with empathy, clear communication, and an understanding of the congregation's unique dynamics and traditions.

- *Respect for emotions:* the prospect of change can provoke anxiety, fear, and resistance. When dissolution appears likely, some may also feel a sense of failure and shame. Make space for people to express their emotions, including during meetings, and respond to concerns with understanding and compassion.
- *Be compassionate and clear:* even when handled with care, the review process may trigger grief responses that lead to accusations of insensitivity.
  - If an appeal is brought against a commission's decision, these accusations can strain relationships between commission members and others in presbytery. Commissioners should be prepared for this possibility while remaining focused on their task of discernment.
  - Being pastoral does not mean avoiding hard truths; rather, it means delivering them with grace and clarity
- *Recognise those with most at stake:* pay particular attention to ministers, employees, and key volunteers whose livelihoods or deep commitments are tied to the congregation. Ensure they have opportunities to voice concerns and access support.
- *Maintain momentum and communication:* stick to announced timelines. Aim to release final decisions within 2-3 months of the congregation's report. Promptly explain any delays beyond this and provide revised timeframes. This helps the congregation feel involved and less "in the dark", reducing anxiety.
- *Manage confidentiality with care:* where confidential or sensitive information is disclosed, clarify with those involved what information is appropriate to share more widely, keeping in mind that decisions must not be based on information kept secret from the congregation or at least the church council. Confidences should be kept except where misconduct must be reported.
- *Handle sensitive revelations carefully:* occasionally, "skeletons in the closet" may be discovered during the review. Handle these revelations with care and discretion, avoiding judgment or blame. If serious issues arise, consult with presbytery to determine if separate processes or actions are needed.
- *Congregational group dynamics and culture:* all congregations have their own cultures, power structures, and traditions (theological or otherwise). Engage with these sensitively and be aware of potential tensions or leadership struggles.

Overall, the commission's actions should uphold the dignity of the congregation and its members. The process is not about assigning blame but about discerning the congregation's future with care.

#### 4. Inquiry

The commission's role is not simply to make decisions but to actively inquire into the life and mission of the congregation. This requires an attitude of openness and curiosity, engaging deeply with the congregation's experiences and challenges. Commissioners should:

- *Engage deeply with the congregation:* take time to understand the congregation's history, current challenges, and future aspirations. A thorough inquiry involves listening carefully to reports, submissions, and the views of different members, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued.
- *Ask probing questions:* commissioners should ask detailed and thoughtful questions that get to the heart of how the congregation is fulfilling its mission. This inquiry should extend beyond surface-level issues, exploring deeper aspects such as how well the congregation's ministries serve its members and the wider community, and where potential for positive change might exist.
- *Consider options:* If dissolution is a possibility, the commission must also seriously consider the potential for renewal. Renewal possibilities should not be dismissed prematurely: meaningfully consider whether the congregation can continue to serve its mission in new or innovative ways.
- *Be open:* Avoid fixed conclusions. This means being willing to adapt and evolve the inquiry based on what is discovered.

This spirit of inquiry ensures that the commission's decisions are well-informed and grounded in the congregation's lived reality.

## E. Gathering the evidence

A thorough, transparent gathering of evidence is essential for the commission to assess the congregation's fulfilment of its functions and determine its future viability. Evidence gathering is a foundational step that allows commissioners to see the full picture of congregational life and mission. This section outlines the main types of evidence to be gathered, along with key considerations related to documentation and natural justice.

### 1. The written report

The congregation's written report, usually prepared under the leadership of the church council, forms the primary source of evidence for the commission's review. The written report is typically a mixture of existing documents, records, and specially prepared descriptions. These materials collectively give the commission an in-depth view of the congregation's operations and challenges.

- *Guidance for content:* to aid the church council in preparing a comprehensive report, the commission should provide clear instructions on the types of information required. **Appendix 1** offers a suggested checklist which can be offered or adapted as needed. The council should be encouraged to include any additional material they feel is relevant to demonstrating their congregation's fulfilment of each function.
- *Descriptive approach:* the report should include a mixture of existing documents (e.g., meeting minutes, attendance records, financial statements) and narrative descriptions to contextualise these records within the congregation's unique circumstances.
- *Further details:* the commission may specify further details, such as format or additional documentation requirements, to ensure clarity.
- *Submission timeline:* the written report should be submitted within three months of the congregational meeting, in accordance with ch 5.10(5).

Sometimes congregations may be unable to produce comprehensive reports, often due to the very challenges that prompted the review. In these situations:

- *Consider using a simplified template.* **Appendix 2** provides an example template that breaks down each function into direct questions and includes rating scales. This can help congregations that find the full report format overwhelming.
- *Focus on obtaining essential information:* while Appendix 1 outlines ideal content, prioritise core evidence about worship patterns, financial position, and current activities. Work with whatever records are available, even if incomplete.
- *Document attempts to gather information:* note what was requested, what assistance was offered, and why certain information couldn't be provided. This helps demonstrate the commission conducted a fair process despite limited information.

- *Use oral submissions more extensively to fill gaps:* consider scheduling additional sessions to gather information that would normally be in the written report.

In many situations, difficulty producing a report may itself be evidence of the congregation's challenges. While the commission can note this, the decision should ultimately be based on the evidence produced regarding the functions.

## 2. Oral submissions

Oral submissions allow congregation members to share their perspectives and experiences, adding depth to the written report and providing personal insights that might not be fully captured in documents. These sessions provide a space for open dialogue and can deepen the commission's understanding of the congregation's life.

- *Dedicated session:* at the initial congregational meeting, the commission should set a specific date for hearing oral submissions, such as a Sunday afternoon shortly after the written report submission. Ideally, commissioners should have time to read or familiarise themselves with the written report beforehand, allowing for more informed discussions with congregation members.
- *Interactive dialogue:* while the primary purpose of oral submissions is to listen, the commission should take the opportunity to ask clarifying questions to better understand particular points. However, this session is not an interrogation or cross-examination; it must be conducted in a supportive, non-confrontational and pastorally sensitive manner.
- *Documentation of oral evidence:* to maintain a clear record, oral submissions should be documented through detailed written minutes or audio recordings, ideally capturing all significant points raised. This documentation is essential for transparency and for any appeals process, and it helps ensure that oral submissions are accurately represented in deliberations.
- *Feedback to church council:* summaries of key points raised in oral submissions should be shared with the church council, allowing an opportunity to respond or clarify as needed. Provide the church council with a clear deadline – unless the information in the oral submissions contained new revelations or was radically different from the report, usually a week or so will be sufficient. This process reinforces natural justice by ensuring that council members have access to all pertinent information.

## 3. Additional evidence

Beyond the written report and oral submissions, the commission may need to gather supplementary evidence to gain a comprehensive understanding of the congregation's fulfilment of its functions. This additional evidence should be collected thoughtfully and transparently, with attention to potential biases and natural justice considerations. In particular, information gathered (including any structured observation forms used,

documents collected, recordings) should be shared with the church council so they have an opportunity to comment and respond.

- *Observations of worship and other activities:* having commissioners attend worship services and other congregational activities to obtain first-hand experiences is common but can be risky. Decisions can be unfairly influenced by subjective, personal impressions (positive or negative) which often lack objective grounding and can risk compromising commissioners' impartiality if strong. Natural justice concerns can also arise if no opportunity is given to respond to impressions held. Approaches to mitigate these concerns include:
  - *Use structured observation forms to take notes and record impressions:* these forms allow for a more systematic and consistent evaluation of qualitative matters.
  - *Use independent observers:* where possible, consider having independent observers conduct the observations. The observers can provide feedback without risking the commission's impartiality.
  - *Have different observers attend, and on different occasions:* this can provide a more balanced view and reduces the impact of single, subjective experiences which may not represent the broader life of the congregation.
- *Interviews with key leaders or ministry teams:* one-on-one or small group interviews with church council members, ministry leaders, or other key figures can help commissioners understand specific aspects of congregational life, such as pastoral care, mission activities, or faith formation initiatives. To maintain objectivity:
  - Conduct interviews with structured, documented questions, and summarise responses carefully.
  - Avoid questions that appear leading or suggestive of particular conclusions.
- *Meetings with presbytery officials:* presbytery officials who have direct knowledge of the congregation's context or past involvement can provide a broader perspective on support and resources available for congregational renewal. Be careful about placing weight on the impressions shared by presbytery officials in relation to the congregation, however, as these may not be based on objective information.
- *Review of presbytery records and correspondence:* the commission may also review presbytery records or correspondence to understand the congregation's historical context, past interactions with presbytery, and any support previously offered.
- *Visiting congregational properties:* an on-site property visit can help commissioners understand the physical context of the congregation, including the condition, suitability, and potential of facilities to support ministry.

#### 4. Natural justice in evidence gathering

To ensure a fair, balanced, and transparent review, commissioners should uphold natural justice principles throughout the evidence-gathering process:

- *Share summaries with the church council:* for transparency and fairness, provide the church council with summaries of key findings, observations, and interviews so they can respond or provide clarification.
- *Prioritise objective evidence over personal impressions:* personal observations, especially of worship or activities, can overshadow more objective evidence. Focus primarily on documented evidence and broad congregational feedback.
- *Seek multiple perspectives:* aim to represent a range of viewpoints from across the congregation, avoiding over-reliance on a single source.
- *Document evidence clearly and objectively:* use structured notes, observation forms, and summaries to record all additional evidence, helping to prevent subjective interpretation and ensuring transparency.

## F. Functions and their evaluation

The central task of the review commission is to assess how effectively the congregation is fulfilling its key functions as outlined in ch 5.2. These functions form the basis for evaluating the congregation's viability, and they guide the commission in identifying strengths, challenges, and areas where support might be beneficial.

Chapter 5.2 is set out in full below:

### 5.2 Functions of the congregation

- (1) The functions of the congregation are
  - (a) to worship God,
  - (b) to participate in God's mission to the world,
  - (c) to provide pastoral care for one another and the wider community,
  - (d) to nurture faith within the congregation and the wider community, and
  - (e) to provide for the congregation's property and finances.
- (2) In participating in God's mission to the world, the congregation must
  - (a) identify and play its role in God's mission to the world,
  - (b) call appropriate ministry leadership,
  - (c) elect congregational office bearers, and
  - (d) accept the discipline and government of the Church.
- (3) The congregation may make proposals to the church council which will further God's mission.
- (4) In providing for the congregation's property and finances, the congregation must
  - (a) support its life, mission and work.
  - (b) approve the budget at a congregational meeting and approve the financial statements at the Annual General Meeting.
  - (c) The church council must ensure that the accounts of the congregation are prepared each year and, if required by the Assembly Executive Secretary or the Assembly, make those accounts available for examination or review by an approved external party.
  - (d) hold any meeting necessary to deal with the congregation's property.
- (5) In undertaking any function set out in subsection (1), the congregation must have regard to
  - (a) its mission and financial resources, and
  - (b) the policies of the General Assembly.

The matters in this section are intended as a guide to help commissioners think deeply about each function and the congregation's fulfilment of them. They should not be treated as a checklist or as headings for the report. Instead, use them to support a thoughtful evaluation that reflects the unique context and challenges of the congregation.



## 1. Worshipping God

Worship is central to the life of a congregation and will often reflect its spiritual health and vitality. When considering how the congregation fulfils this function, commissioners should explore not just the logistics of worship but also its deeper spiritual significance and engagement with the congregation.

### A. What to look for

Matters to look for or consider when assessing how a congregation fulfils its function of worshipping God might include:

- *Frequency and consistency*: How regularly does the congregation gather for worship (whether that be through traditional Sunday services, house church gatherings, outdoor worship, contemplative practices, or other expressions of communal worship)? What is the pattern and frequency of these gatherings? What is the typical level of participation, and has this changed significantly over time? What might be the reasons for those changes?
- *Quality of worship elements*: What is the quality of the various elements of the worship, whether that be liturgy, music, prayer, scripture reading, preaching, testimony, artistic expression, movement, or other forms.? Does worship inspire spiritual reflection and participation, or does it feel routine or disengaging? Does the congregation/church council regularly assess the quality of worship, and is there a desire or capacity for improvement if needed?
- *Engagement and diversity*: Are there different groups within the congregation (in terms of age, cultural background etc.) engaged in worship? To what extent does worship involve various members of the congregation?
- *Perception by newcomers*: How welcoming and accessible are worship gatherings to newcomers? What is the first impression that a newcomer might have when joining in worship?
- *Connection to life and mission*: How does worship inspire and equip the congregation for daily discipleship and service? Does it motivate the congregation to live out its faith in the wider community?

### B. Contextual considerations

- The style or tradition of worship is far less important than its authenticity and ability to connect people with God and one another. Avoid making judgments based on style preferences or differing theological views.
- Consider the significance of any special or seasonal services, and whether these play a meaningful role in the community's or congregation's life.

- Assess whether worship genuinely inspires the congregation's daily life and witness in the community, rather than merely maintaining routine practices.

## 2. Participating in God's mission to the world

In participating in God's mission to the world, a congregation must fulfil certain obligations outlined in ch 5.2(2). These include identifying and playing its role in God's mission, calling appropriate ministry leadership, electing congregational office bearers, and accepting the discipline and government of the Church. Each of these aspects should be carefully evaluated to assess the congregation's commitment to serving God's mission in practical and meaningful ways.

More broadly, the commission can also consider the *five faces of mission* affirmed by the Church: proclaiming the gospel, nurturing Christian faith, responding to human need, seeking societal transformation, and caring for creation. These offer additional insight into how the congregation lives out its mission in the world.

### A. What to look for

Matters to look for or consider when assessing how a congregation fulfils its function of participating in God's mission to the world might include:

- *"Identify and play its role in God's mission to the world"* Has the congregation discerned its specific role in God's mission, reflecting the Church's five faces of mission? How well does it understand the needs and characteristics of its community? How integrated are mission activities in the life of the congregation? Is there evidence of meaningful impact and engagement? Are mission activities sustainable with current resources?
- *"Calling appropriate ministry leadership"*: Does the congregation have appropriate ministry leadership for its context and mission? How well do the skills and gifts of ministry leaders align with the congregation's mission? What support and resources are provided to ministry leaders? Are there viable succession plans or strategies for future ministry leadership? Is there is no ministry settlement, is one realistic?
- *"Election of congregation office bearers"* Do elected leaders understand their responsibilities and commit to the Church's mission? Do they work together effectively in leadership? Is there diversity among office bearers that reflects the congregation? Are proper procedures followed for electing office bearers (whether elders, deacons or church council members)?
- *"Accept the discipline and government of the church"* How well does the congregation (particularly the church council) understand and follow Presbyterian governance structures? Are Church regulations and policies properly implemented? Is there evidence of resistance to or difficulties with Church governance?

**B. Contextual considerations**

- Effective participation in God's mission can be an indicator of vitality, even when other metrics like attendance may be declining.
- Look carefully at leadership capacity and engagement in relation to mission activities, including whether people are willing and able to lead or participate in mission initiatives, whether the burden falls on too few individuals, and whether there would be capacity to maintain current mission activities if key leaders stepped back.
- Consider cultural and contextual factors that might affect how mission activities are perceived.

**3. Providing pastoral care for one another and the wider community**

Understanding pastoral care requires looking beyond formal systems to see how, in practice, the congregation functions as a compassionate community that attends to the needs of its members, supports those facing challenges, and extends care beyond its walls.

**A. What to look for**

Matters to look for or consider when assessing how a congregation fulfils its pastoral care function can include:

- *Responsibility:* Who is responsible for providing or overseeing pastoral care (e.g., minister, church council, individual leaders), and are they well-equipped for this role?
- *Pastoral care in practice:* What does the congregation's pastoral care look like for those in personal or spiritual need (e.g., illness, bereavement, crises)? How well does the congregation balance organised pastoral care with informal mutual support? Are there small groups, prayer chains, or other events or structures in place that help create a sense of community and connectedness?
- *Information:* How does information about pastoral needs flow within the congregation? What barriers might exist that prevent people from seeking or receiving care?
- *Accessibility:* How accessible is pastoral care for all members, including different age groups, new members, and those who may not actively seek help?
- *Pastoral care in the community:* How does the congregation extend pastoral care beyond its membership? How does the congregation identify and respond to needs in the wider community? Do relationships exist with local community services and support agencies?

### B. Contextual considerations

- Approaches to pastoral care in smaller congregations can often be less formal compared with larger, better resourced churches. Often small congregations can maintain effective pastoral care through informal networks and mutual support, in comparison to larger congregations who may need more structured systems.
- The pastoral care needs of a congregation can change over time with shifts in demographics or community circumstances. Consider whether the congregation's approach remains relevant and responsive.
- Assess whether the current pastoral care system is sustainable given the congregation's resources and capacity. Look for signs of burnout among care providers or over-reliance on key individuals.
- Effective pastoral care often integrates with other aspects of congregation life (worship, mission, etc.). Consider how well pastoral care connects with and supports these other functions.

### **4. Nurturing faith within the congregation and the wider community**

Nurturing faith involves fostering spiritual growth, discipleship, and deeper engagement with Christ's teachings and the Christian life. It can involve formal education programmes, mentoring relationships, fellowship, and outreach, providing a supportive environment for individuals at various stages in their faith journeys.

#### A. What to look for

Matters to look for or consider when assessing how a congregation fulfils its function of nurturing faith might include:

- *Nurturing faith in the congregation:* what opportunities exist for members to grow in their understanding of Christian teachings and practices? Are there regular programs like bible studies, discipleship groups, community service, or fellowship events? Does the congregation encourage members to explore and deepen their personal faith, and how are they supported in integrating faith into their daily lives?
- *Nurturing faith in the wider community:* how does the congregation reach out to the wider community to invite engagement in faith-oriented activities? Are there partnerships with local organisations or other churches that help extend faith-nurturing opportunities?
- *Supporting leaders in faith nurturing:* who is responsible for leading faith development initiatives, and how are they equipped for this role? Does the congregation provide training, mentorship, or resources for those involved in teaching and discipling? Are there opportunities for congregation members to take active roles in faith development, such as leading small groups or mentoring others?

- *Connection with worship and mission:* how does faith nurturing connect with the congregation's worship and mission activities?

### B. Contextual considerations

- Smaller congregations often have less-formal approaches to faith formation, but these can still be meaningful. In these contexts, often faith formation can take place through shared participation in church activities, close relationships (particularly across generations) and community service, rather than organised or structured programmes.
- Assess whether the congregation's faith nurturing efforts are responsive to changing needs and circumstances, adapting programs to meet evolving community needs or interest areas.

## **5. Providing for the congregation's property and finances**

A congregation's stewardship of its property and finances directly impacts its ability to sustain its life, mission, and work. The review must consider both compliance with Book of Order requirements and the overall financial viability of the congregation.

In particular, ch 5.2(4) outlines specific requirements, including budget approval, financial accountability, and property management, which the commission should carefully evaluate to determine the congregation's ability to maintain and use its resources effectively.

### A. What to look for

Matters to look for or consider when assessing a congregation's property and finance function may include:

#### *Supporting life, mission and work:*

- *Income:* How diverse is the congregation's forms of income? What proportion of income comes from rental or other external sources? What are the trends in giving over the past 5-10 years? How sustainable is giving – is the congregation dependant on the generosity of a small number of donors?
- *Debt and alternative financing:* What is the congregation's debt position? Are there assets that could be leveraged or sold to fund necessary improvements? What is the likelihood of the Church Property Trustees or presbytery/synod providing financial support? Are there other potential sources of funding (e.g., grants, community fundraising)?
- *Resource allocation:* Are financial resources allocated appropriately to support core functions? Are staff and ministry leaders properly compensated? Does the congregation have sufficient income to meet its basic operating costs? Are property

and finances used primarily to support the congregation's life, mission, and work, or are they more focused on maintenance and upkeep?

- *Strategy:* Does the congregation have a sustainable financial strategy, balancing mission activities with property maintenance and financial obligations?

*Budget and financial reporting processes:*

- *Budget preparation:* are budgets properly prepared and presented to congregational meetings? Are financial statements approved at Annual General Meetings? What is the quality of financial reporting to the congregation?
- *Preparation and review of accounts:* Are annual accounts properly prepared? Have accounts been reviewed or examined when required? What systems exist for financial management and oversight?

*Property management:*

- *Current property conditions and maintenance:* What are the current conditions of the congregation's property and buildings, including maintenance needs, insurance costs, and any necessary repairs? Is there a plan in place to address maintenance issues? Are day-to-day maintenance needs being addressed?
- *Major property concerns:* Are there specific concerns related to the property, such as earthquake strengthening, water tightness, or other significant repairs? Does the manse (if any) meet the healthy homes standard? What are the estimated costs and timelines for any required upgrades? How does the congregation plan to cover them, and is that plan realistic? Are these concerns being actively addressed, or are they ignored?
- *Property and leadership:* does the congregation have the necessary leadership to properly manage the property and any related issues?
- *Property and mission:* how does the congregation view its property in relation to its mission? Is the property seen as an asset that enhances mission activities, or does it present more of a financial burden? Would presbytery/synod be willing to facilitate the sale of any property if this would meaningfully advance the congregation's mission?

*B. Contextual considerations*

- In many cases, property and financial considerations tend to drive the review process. However, they should not be considered in isolation from the congregation's broader life and mission and its fulfilment of its other functions.
- The significance of property and financial challenges should be evaluated within the congregation's context, including its location (urban/rural, growth/declining areas),

available alternative worship venues, local property market conditions, and community needs or opportunities.

- Consider whether maintaining buildings is consuming resources that might better serve mission. Sometimes alternative property arrangements might better support the congregation's calling.
- Financial challenges, while significant, should not automatically determine outcomes. Creative solutions, including partnerships, property development, or alternative funding models might provide ways forward.
- Consider the congregation's property and financial position within the wider Church context, including Presbyterian Church Property Trustees' and presbytery's policies, presbytery planning, and opportunities for cooperation with other congregations.

## 6. General Assembly policies and the functions

In evaluating the functions of a congregation, the commission should be aware that ch 5.2(5)(b) requires congregations to have regard to policies set by the General Assembly. When considering these policies, commissioners should follow these guidelines:

- *Limited weight*: while Assembly policies are relevant considerations, they should be given appropriate but limited weight as one factor among many. A congregation's compliance (or not) with an Assembly policy should not by itself be a basis for a conclusion about whether a congregation fulfils a function.
- *Ensure relevance of Assembly decisions*: be cautious about treating Assembly decisions or recommendations as binding policies. Look for clear policy language and enforceable standards to determine if a decision should be treated as a policy. Assembly decisions that are merely exploratory or invitational in nature should not be treated as policies.
- *Natural justice*: if Assembly policies appear relevant to particular functions, inform the congregation early in the process, ensuring there is an opportunity to address or respond to the policy.

## G. Deliberations

With the congregation's report and all other evidence gathered, the commission now enters a period of focused deliberation. This phase is essential for synthesising findings, applying prayerful discernment, and reaching a thoughtful, well-grounded decision.

Through a systematic review of each congregational function, the commission assesses strengths, challenges, and the overall viability of the congregation's life and mission. This approach ensures that the final determination—whether continuation, renewal, or dissolution—is based on a thorough, balanced understanding of the evidence and the congregation's unique context.

### 1. Deliberations

After the report has been presented and all evidence has been gathered, the commissioners should move into a period of deliberation. This phase is critical for synthesising evidence, applying prayerful discernment, and reaching a well-considered decision.

- *Keep up momentum:* although commissioners should have had time to digest the details of the report, avoid delaying the commencement of deliberations. Set aside sufficient time for thorough discussion, ensuring that each aspect of the congregation's functions can be considered fully.
- *Prayerful discernment and consensus:* engage in prayerful discernment throughout the deliberations, inviting God's guidance to help clarify areas of uncertainty. Differing views among commissioners should be viewed as opportunities for deeper exploration rather than barriers to decision-making.
- *Initial impressions:* begin by inviting each commissioner to share their initial, high-level impressions of the evidence and the congregation's situation. This step helps highlight key areas of agreement or concern but should be viewed as a starting point rather than a conclusion.
- *Systematic review of functions:* even if initial impressions suggest a consensus, it is essential to systematically review each of the congregation's functions in a logical, methodical manner, before determining the outcome. Conducting this analysis systematically helps ensure that decisions are not reached hastily or based on incomplete analysis. Often initial impressions can change when evidence is considered more deeply.
- *Define next steps:* once a general direction emerges, clarify the next steps. If a consensus has been reached, designate a commissioner to prepare the first draft of the written decision (or at least of parts reflecting areas of agreement), which should be circulated for review and feedback. If consensus has not yet been achieved, schedule a follow-up meeting to allow time for further reflection and prayer.



- *Review of draft decision:* feedback and discussion on the draft decision may occur via email; however, before finalising the decision, a properly convened meeting should be held to review the draft in person or virtually. This meeting allows the commission to ensure that the document accurately reflects the collective decision, reasoning, and prayerful discernment that guided the process.

## **2. Systematic review of the functions: synthesising the report and the evidence**

As part of the deliberations, it is essential to thoroughly and systematically review each congregational function in light of the gathered evidence:

- *Evaluate each function individually:* begin by assessing each function of the congregation separately. Use the matters set out in part F as a guide to your inquiry.
  - Take time to reflect on the evidence gathered for each function, and identify any standout areas—whether strengths, challenges, or unique qualities—that define the congregation’s approach to that function.
  - Consider how context affects each function—including congregation size, demographics, local needs, available resources (financial, human, physical), possible support from presbytery, and potential for future development.
  - If the congregation is struggling with a function, is there any reasonable solution that the congregation has not considered or properly implemented, but which might be available?
- *Identify patterns and interconnections:* once each function has been reviewed individually, consider how they influence one another. Try to identify areas of emerging potential or gradual decline.
  - For example, financial issues or property limitations might negatively impact multiple areas of congregational life. Conversely, a high level of engagement in worship might result in strong missional drive or faith formation.
  - Look for recurring themes or systemic challenges across multiple functions. For example, poor leadership capacity or quality, or declining participation may affect multiple functions.
- *Stand back and assess the overall health and sustainability,* balancing the strengths against the challenges, consider which functions are most crucial, and look for signs of adaptability and resilience.
  - Consider if strengths in certain functions compensate for challenges in others, or if critical issues might undermine overall sustainability.
  - Some functions may carry more weight depending on the congregation’s context and needs. Certain aspects, like financial stability, may be more urgent

if there are pressing property maintenance or staffing costs. Conversely, strong missional or worship engagement may support congregational vitality despite moderate financial constraints.

Be sure to consider all the evidence before moving to the next stage. Considering possible determinations before thoroughly evaluating the evidence can risk prejudging the outcome based on initial impressions, missing important patterns or connections, overlooking the potential for renewal, or giving undue weight to single factors such as property or finances.

## H. Considering the three possible determinations

After evaluating the report and the evidence, including a careful and systematic assessment of how the congregation fulfils each function outlined in ch 5.2 and the the commission will need to weigh the feasibility of three potential outcomes for the congregation as set out in ch 5.10(6): continuation, renewal, or dissolution. For reference, the provision is set out in full below:

- (6) In its consideration of the report, the commission must decide on one of these three options
- (a) that the congregation is fulfilling the functions as set out in section 2 and it should be encouraged to continue in its life and mission
  - (b) that, although some of the functions in section 2 are being met but the viability of the congregation is marginal, the presbytery will work closely with the church council to find creative ways to stimulate its life and mission, and a further review should be undertaken within a defined period
  - (c) that the congregation should be dissolved. In this case, the presbytery must consider facilitating and resourcing a restart worshipping community in the premises occupied by the dissolved congregation, under the leadership of another congregation within the presbytery. In any event the presbytery must ensure the continued pastoral care of the congregation [members].

### 1. Continuation

If the congregation is effectively fulfilling the functions set out in ch 5.2, then the determination should be continuation. This means the congregation is deemed viable to continue in its current form with its existing structures, programs, and leadership, or with only minimal adjustments that can be conducted without special external assistance.

Key indicators supporting continuation include:

- Any challenges that the congregation faces—even potentially significant challenges—are manageable through normal congregation processes and within its resources.
- Resources (human, financial, property) are adequate to meet current and immediately foreseeable needs. Generally, this includes:
  - Enough committed members and leaders to maintain or improve core functions like worship, pastoral care, faith formation and mission.
  - Stable finances that cover operating costs, routine maintenance, and planned expenses, ideally with some capacity to manage unexpected needs.
  - Facilities and property resources are adequate for current ministry needs, without any critical or costly repair needs that would jeopardise sustainability.

- Leadership capacity exists within the congregation to support ongoing ministry and governance.
- The congregation demonstrates signs of vitality and purpose, even if not consistently across all areas.
- The congregation shows a willingness and ability to adapt and respond to change. This includes an openness to new ideas, and a sense of readiness for the future.

While perfection is not required, there should be confidence that any current challenges can be addressed with changes that can be managed internally. The commission may suggest areas for attention or improvement while affirming continuation. Remember, the question is not whether the congregation could do better, but whether it is viable in its current form.

## **2. Renewal with presbytery support**

Renewal is the determination when the congregation is of marginal viability: it is fulfilling some of its functions in ch 5.2 but substantial changes or support is needed to address key challenges. Usually, the congregation's current trajectory is not sustainable without intervention, revitalisation, or external assistance from the presbytery or other resources.

Key indicators indicating renewal include:

- Core challenges are identified that could be addressed with support. The commission should be able to pinpoint specific challenges that, if addressed, could make a meaningful difference to the congregation's health. For instance, these might include limitations in leadership, financial management issues, unengaging worship, or low involvement in mission activities.
- The congregation shows willingness to engage in change, rather than resistance or complacency.
  - Evidence of willingness might include an openness to new ideas and initiatives that address specific challenges (whether revitalising worship, increasing community involvement, improving financial practices etc.).
  - Openness to change might be demonstrated through constructive responses to feedback or recommendations from the commission, even if some reservations or initial concerns exist.
  - The congregation should ideally be willing to take ownership of the renewal process, viewing it as an opportunity for growth rather than as an externally imposed obligation.
- For renewal to be viable, there should be some individuals—either within the congregation or identified from external sources—who can take on leadership roles in guiding renewal efforts, even if additional development or training is needed.

- The congregation may have resources that are not being fully leveraged or could be better aligned with its mission and goals. These could include underutilised spaces, financial assets that could be reallocated toward mission activities, or untapped talents among congregation members.
- Despite current challenges, there should be indicators that the congregation still has some sense of purpose or mission. A supportive and positive environment within the congregation provides a solid foundation for future growth and renewal.

It is not the commission's role to determine the nature of presbytery support that should be provided. That said, understanding the range of possible interventions can help assess whether renewal is appropriate. The possible range of support might include:

*Basic support and capacity building:*

- Assistance with budgeting, financial management or stewardship practices can help the congregation manage resources more effectively. Lending or temporary financial support from presbytery may also be a possibility, especially in where the needs are acute or in times of crisis.
- Leadership development training or mentorship programs to develop current leaders or identify new leaders who can guide the congregation through renewal.
- The appointment of a new or replacement members to the church council, including the possibility of new members from outside the existing congregation to support renewal.
- Mission planning facilitation to help the congregation discern role in God's mission and develop practical steps forward. External facilitators often bring fresh perspective and can help congregations see new possibilities within their context.
- Administrative support or systems improvement. These matters might seem basic but can free up energy for mission. This could involve helping establish better communication systems, record-keeping practices, or property maintenance planning.

*Moderate programmatic or structural support:*

- Providing a mission enabler or consultant to work closely in the congregation, developing outreach initiatives or revitalising ministry programmes.
- Assisting the congregation in refreshing or reimagining its worship services, outreach efforts, pastoral care programmes or targeted ministries (such as children's or youth ministry) to better engage both members and the wider community. This could include new employees such as a music director or a youth worker.

- Encouraging strategic partnerships or mentoring relationships with neighbouring congregations or community organisations to share resources or collaborate on mission projects.
- Sharing a minister with another congregation can provide continuity in pastoral care and worship leadership at a reduced cost. Note, however, the option may not be attractive to potential ministry candidates.

*Major or transformative changes:*

- **Property sale:** this involves exploring options such as selling or leasing buildings to alleviate financial strain, particularly if current property impedes mission. The congregation might acquire new buildings or become a congregation without its own permanent property. However, such changes require Church Property Trustees/Synod approval and may not always be viable options.
- **Merger with another congregation** may be an option where renewal would require a significant shift. This may involve being formally absorbed under the governance of another congregation, or multiple congregations dissolving and becoming a new congregation with a fresh identity.

Remember that renewal often requires combining multiple approaches, and solutions that work in one context may not work in another. Renewal can also be a gradual, multi-step process. While the examples provided here give a sense of the range of interventions, the commission's role is to identify whether renewal is viable, not to prescribe specific interventions.

### **3. Dissolution**

Dissolution is appropriate where the congregation is unable to fulfil its functions under ch 5.2, and efforts towards renewal are unlikely to succeed. This determination should only be reached after careful consideration of alternatives and clear evidence that continuing is not sustainable.

*Key indicators pointing towards dissolution:*

- **Critical and unresolvable challenges:** persistent issues that cannot reasonably be addressed through renewal—such as severe financial instability, unmanageable property maintenance, or a chronic lack of leadership—may indicate that dissolution is necessary. These challenges are often long-standing and resistant to prior efforts, making sustainable continuation unlikely.
- **Resistance to change:** unwillingness or lack of desire to engage in change or respond constructively to feedback indicates that renewal may be unlikely to succeed. If the evidence shows that the congregation resists (or will resist) presbytery support, creative solutions, or adjustments to worship, mission, or financial practices, it may

lack the flexibility needed to adapt to evolving needs or challenges. Note that findings around resistance to change should be based on evidence, not speculation.

- *Absence of leadership capacity:* a clear lack of leadership capacity exists, with no realistic prospects for developing or attracting effective leaders, even with presbytery assistance or secondment suggests the viability of the congregation might be compromised. This might include both formal leadership roles (e.g., ministers, elders) and informal support roles that are essential for sustaining congregational life.
- *Insufficient resources to sustain congregational life:* financial resources, membership numbers, and volunteer capacity are no longer adequate to meet the congregation's needs. In such cases, the congregation may be struggling to cover basic expenses, maintain property, or support essential ministry activities. When financial or human resources are focused solely on survival, rather than mission and ministry, dissolution may be a responsible step.
- *Loss of sense of purpose or cohesion:* indicators of internal disengagement—such as persistent conflicts, low morale, or lack of enthusiasm for worship and mission—may signify that the congregation has lost its foundational sense of purpose and unity. Without these qualities, renewing congregational life can be difficult.

Importantly, no single factor should automatically trigger dissolution. Even serious financial/property challenges or dwindling numbers might be addressed through renewal if other aspects of congregational life remain vital. The key question is whether the congregation can realistically continue to function as a congregation.

*Essential consideration before considering dissolution:*

- *Renewal alternatives:* have reasonable options for renewal been properly explored? This includes not just obvious solutions but creative possibilities that might emerge through presbytery support or partnerships. If there is any realistic potential for renewal, explore this before recommending dissolution.
- *Resource stewardship:* how can the congregation's resources (property, finances, ministry experience) best serve God's ongoing mission? Could these resources better support mission through alternative arrangements?

Remember, the commission's role is to make a determination based solely on the congregation's ability to fulfil its functions. Implementation details surrounding dissolution, ongoing pastoral support for congregation members, and broader decisions about the availability of Christian or Presbyterian ministry in the area are presbytery responsibilities. The commission should focus on making a clear determination while leaving these practical and strategic arrangements to presbytery.

## I. Writing, communicating and finalising the decision

After considering all the evidence and prayerfully considering the congregation's situation, the commission must communicate its decision to the congregation. Whether the outcome is continuation, renewal, or dissolution, the commission must provide reasoning, and the reasoning should be clearly articulated and proportionate to the gravity of the decision.

### 1. Provide sufficiently detailed reasons for the decision

The level of detail in the commission's written reasons should reflect the significance of the determination.

- *Continuation*: when continuation is the outcome, relatively brief reasons of a couple or a few pages may be sufficient, though this is not a limit. The decision should include a brief overview of the review process, a summary assessment of how each function is being fulfilled, notes about any areas of possible concern, and may include suggestions for ongoing development.
- *Renewal*: where renewal is recommended, more detailed reasons will be needed, providing enough information to guide presbytery's support and the congregation going forward.
  - Clearly identify areas requiring attention, as well as areas of strength.
  - Include an assessment of the congregation's potential to address its challenges, with specific areas where presbytery support is needed. Suggestions for specific support may be mentioned, but it is ultimately for presbytery to decide what will be provided.
  - Explain why renewal rather than continuation or dissolution is appropriate.
  - Clearly outlining these points will help both the presbytery and the congregation understand the focus for renewal.
- *Dissolution*: where dissolution is recommended, a full and detailed explanation is essential. This determination has profound implications for the congregation members, so the reasons should be thorough and clearly document the evidence and considerations that led to this conclusion.
  - The decision should respond to all significant matters that were raised by the congregation to ensure their concerns are acknowledged and answered. Not addressing these points could lead to feelings that the process has been unfair, potentially prompting appeals that are time consuming and expensive for the Church.



- The commission should articulate why renewal was not the chosen outcome, detailing any alternatives that were seriously considered and outlining any key challenges that it believes cannot realistically be overcome.
- It is recommended to also include recognition of the congregation's history and its contribution to the community. This honours the congregation's legacy, framing dissolution as a faithful transition in God's ongoing mission rather than a failure, and provides members with a sense of closure and respect for the role their community has played.
- A failure to provide clear and comprehensive reasons will likely result in a dissolution being overturned on appeal by an Assembly Judicial Commission. This has occurred on previous occasions, and it may result in the entire review process having to be repeated.

## 2. Key principles for writing the decision

In writing a decision where dissolution is the outcome, the commission should adhere to several core principles to ensure the outcome is clear, evidence-based, and respectful. This approach helps the congregation understand both the reasoning behind the decision and the care taken in reaching it.

- *Engage with the congregation's perspective:* directly address the congregation's understanding of their situation, particularly where the commission's view differs. When diverging from the congregation's self-assessment, clearly explain why. This shows respect for the congregation's input while helping them understand how the commission reached its conclusions.
- *Focus on evidence:* the decision should demonstrate clear links between evidence and conclusions. Support each significant finding with specific examples or data from the report, rather than relying on impressions or assumptions. Do not make vague, unfavourable statements such as 'the congregation seems unmotivated' without concrete supporting evidence showing how the commission reached that conclusion. Clarity helps congregation members see how the commission arrived at its decision.
- *Write with pastoral sensitivity without avoiding difficult truths:* balance compassion with honesty, avoiding harsh language that might wound while being clear about any hard realities the congregation needs to understand. The goal is to communicate with both grace and clarity, especially when delivering challenging news.
- *Avoid personal criticism and blame:* the commission's role is to assess the viability of the congregation, not to assign blame or criticise individuals. Frame the decision in terms of structural or systemic challenges rather than personal shortcomings.

- *Use clear, direct language:* avoid unnecessary complexity or technical church-y jargon. Write in a straightforward and clear style, using headings for clear organisation, and consider providing a brief executive summary if the decision is long.

Overall, keep the congregation in mind as the primary audience. Write in a way that helps members understand not only the outcome but also the reasoning behind it. Anticipate questions they may have and address them within the text, aiming to provide as much clarity as possible.

### **3. Providing a draft decision to the church council or congregation**

When the commission's preliminary determination is dissolution, it is strongly recommended to provide a draft report to the church council for review and feedback.

- This step allows the congregation to engage with the reasoning and findings, providing an opportunity to address any factual inaccuracies, misunderstandings, or overlooked considerations before the final decision is made.
  - This draft review period can help ensure natural justice through transparency, it can improve accuracy, and will allow the congregation to feel heard, building trust in the outcome and the review process itself.
  - It may also reduce the likelihood of appeals by addressing concerns early.
- Usually the draft decision can be provided to the contact person on the church council, who can then decide whether or how to share it with the wider congregation.
- Give enough time to engage with the report and provide any feedback. Clearly indicate how and by when feedback should be provided. Generally two to three weeks will be sufficient, but longer may be needed if the council wishes to explore matters, including potential options for renewal. Be flexible, extensions should generally be granted if sought.
- While feedback does not require the commission to change its decision or its reasons, it may help refine the final report and reinforce the fairness and thoroughness of the process.

While this step is especially important for dissolution decisions, it may also be valuable when recommending renewal, particularly if the commission's assessment differs significantly from the congregation's own view of their situation.

### **4. Communicating the final decision**

Once the decision is finalised, it should be communicated to the congregation in a clear and pastoral manner, with implementation steps left to the presbytery.

### *Communicating the decision*

The way a decision is communicated can significantly impact how it is received by the congregation, particularly if the determination is dissolution or renewal.

- *Coordinate with presbytery on timing:* work with presbytery to ensure the timing of the announcement is coordinated, allowing for adequate pastoral support and preparation for next steps.
- *Prepare a brief summary:* consider providing a summarised version of the decision in a newsletter or announcement to be shared with the congregation. This summary should outline the key points and reasons for the decision and acknowledge the congregation's participation in the review process. If renewal or dissolution is recommended, presbytery can also use this newsletter to outline initial next steps.
- *Make full decision available:* the full written decision should be available to those who wish to read it. The church council may distribute it electronically to those who request it, and printed copies should be made available for those without internet access.

### *The role of presbytery once the commission makes its decision*

The commission acts with presbytery's full authority under ch 5.10. Its written decision is provided to presbytery (or presbytery council) as a report to be received, not as a recommendation. No further approval or ratification by presbytery is needed. Regardless of what views may be held amongst members about the conclusion reached, the presbytery's role is to implement the decision in good faith, not to debate or alter it.

### *Supporting the implementation*

The commission is not responsible for implementing the decision, and its role formally ends once a decision has been made and announced. However, if the outcome is renewal or dissolution, presbytery will typically arrange a congregational meeting shortly after or on the same day as the announcement to discuss implications and next steps.

It may be helpful for some commission members to attend this meeting to provide continuity between the review process and the implementation stage. Their presence can offer reassurance and continuity, helping bridge the transition from decision-making to action.

## **5. Record keeping**

After making its determination, the commission should provide presbytery with a complete set of review documentation, including:

- The final written decision.
- The congregation's report and any submissions (including any transcriptions or recordings of oral submissions).

- Other evidence gathered during the process, whether referred to in the decision or not. This includes any structured evaluation forms or observation notes, correspondence with other persons, and minutes or notes of meetings conducted as part of the evidence gathering phase.
  - Do not, however, provide notes, minutes or documents relating to the commission's private deliberations, including draft decisions not shared beyond the commission members.
- Correspondence with the congregation, including any draft decision provided to the congregation and feedback provided.

These records should be organised to facilitate access if needed in the future, particularly for appeals or review. Presbytery may maintain these records as part of its official documentation.

## **6. Appeals and judicial review**

A decision to dissolve a congregation may be appealed to the General Assembly, and any decision may possibly be challenged in civil courts.

- *Appeals*: decisions to dissolve congregations may be appealed to an Assembly Congregation Evaluation Commission, as outlined in ch 5.10A. While the Book of Order is not clear about who has standing to initiate this appeal process, practice has been that any member of the congregation may pursue this appeal.
- *Judicial review*: it is also possible that decisions made by review commissions may be subject to judicial review by the High Court on grounds such as breach of natural justice, illegality, and unreasonableness. Although this has yet to be fully tested, decisions made by other Church judicial bodies have been challenged in civil courts.

To avoid costly appeals or court challenges, presbytery review commissions should focus on ensuring their processes and decisions are fair, well-reasoned, and compliant with the Church's own rules and policies. Adherence to these guidelines will reduce this risk while also supporting good decision making.

## Appendix 1: Suggestions for the congregational report

This checklist outlines information that congregations may wish to include in their reports to review commissions. It is intended as a guide rather than a mandatory list. Congregations should feel free to include additional material that demonstrates how they fulfil their functions under ch 5.2.

All descriptions should be as detailed as possible to provide a clear and accurate picture of the congregation's life, mission, and challenges.

### A. Background and history

- *Brief history of the congregation:* Include key milestones and developments over time.
- *Significant changes in recent years:* note any changes in ministry, leadership, or community context.
- *Current demographic profile of the congregation:* describe relevant age, cultural, and socio-economic factors.
- *Description of the local community:* include how the community has changed over time (e.g., population growth, economic shifts).
- *Current relationship with presbytery and the wider Church:* outline collaboration, support received, or any shared initiatives.
- *Strategic plans or vision documents:* provide any available documents outlining current goals and future direction.

### B. Worship: ch 5.2(1)(a)

- *Detailed description of typical worship services, covering:*
  - Times and frequency of services (e.g., Sunday morning, evening, mid-week services).
  - Style and format, including liturgy, sermon approach, or any unique elements.
  - Special or seasonal worship services (e.g., Easter, Christmas, community events).
  - Use of music, art, or other creative elements, specifying if these vary by service.
- *Attendance patterns:* describe trends or shifts in numbers over the past 5–10 years, including the numbers provided to the National Office if available.
- *Involvement of congregation members in worship leadership:* outline roles such as readers, musicians, or worship leaders.

- *Examples of how worship connects with mission and discipleship:* illustrate how worship inspires or supports outreach and spiritual growth.
- *Feedback from the congregation about worship life:* include any surveys, informal feedback, or discussions on worship quality. This can also be provided in oral submissions.

### **C. Mission: ch 5.2(1)(b)**

#### *Leadership and governance*

- *Current office bearers and leadership roles:* provide a list of key positions and roles, and outline how long each has held the relevant role.
- *Church council structure and membership:* describe composition and decision-making roles.
- *Leadership succession planning:* outline strategies for maintaining continuity.
- *Decision-making processes:* describe how significant decisions are made and communicated.
- *Relationship with presbytery:* detail interactions, support, and joint initiatives.
- *Compliance with Book of Order requirements:* note any specific practices or challenges.
- *Leadership development initiatives:* describe any training, retreats, or mentorships.
- *Current leadership challenges:* identify any issues impacting effective governance.

#### *Mission activities*

- *Current mission activities and programmes:* describe ongoing mission efforts, including their frequency and purpose.
- *Community engagement initiatives:* detail activities focused on serving the local community.
- *Partnerships with other churches or organisations:* highlight any collaborative mission efforts.
- *Mission planning documents:* include documents outlining mission priorities, goals, or areas of focus.
- *Evidence of mission impact:* provide testimonials, stories, or observable changes within the community.
- *Resources allocated to mission:* note budget, volunteers, and other resources dedicated to mission.

- *Leadership arrangements for mission activities*: list who coordinates, supports, and leads mission efforts.
- *Recent mission developments or changes*: describe any introduction or discontinuation of key programmes.

**D. Pastoral care: ch 5.2(1)(c)**

- *Description of pastoral care systems*: specify the structure and approach (e.g., informal networks, dedicated teams).
- *Care initiatives for different age groups*: outline support available for children, youth, elderly, and families.
- *Support for those in crisis or need*: describe services such as grief support, counselling, or practical assistance.
- *Hospital and home visiting arrangements*: include details if applicable.
- *Small group ministries*: describe groups that foster community and mutual care among members.
- *Examples of pastoral care extended to the wider community*: highlight outreach beyond the congregation.
- *Resources and leadership for pastoral care*: detail budgets, volunteer involvement, and staff support.

**E. Nurturing faith: ch 5.2(1)(d)**

- *Christian education programmes*: describe Sunday school, bible study, or other regular teaching events.
- *Children's and youth ministry details*: cover scope, frequency, and leadership of these initiatives.
- *Adult education initiatives*: include discipleship programmes, topical studies, or retreats.
- *Small group or bible study programmes*: note attendance, format, and frequency.
- *Leadership development activities*: list any training or mentoring programmes supporting faith formation.
- *Resources for personal spiritual growth*: include recommended readings, study guides, or spiritual practices.
- *Baptism and confirmation practices*: provide details of preparation and follow-up, if applicable.

- *Mentoring or discipleship programmes*: describe programmes designed for deeper faith and spiritual accountability.

## **F. Property and finance: ch 5.2(1)(e)**

### *Financial information*

- *Annual accounts for the past 5 years*
- *Current year budget and actual figures*: provide recent financial information if available.
- *Giving patterns and analysis*: describe any significant changes in donations or giving levels.
- *Financial projections*: provide anticipated income and expenses if available.
- *Details of any investments or trusts*: include conditions or intended uses of these funds.
- *Information about funding sources*: list grants, bequests, or external support.
- *Stewardship programmes*: describe any programmes encouraging financial responsibility within the congregation.
- *Significant financial challenges or opportunities*: outline any issues or prospects impacting financial health.

### *Property information*

- *List and description of properties*: detail each building's purpose and significance.
- *Current state of buildings*: include recent inspections or assessments.
- *Maintenance schedules and records*: list planned or completed upkeep activities.
- *Building compliance certificates*: provide certificates where applicable. Details about whether any residential properties (particularly any manse) reach the Healthy Homes standards, and if not, plans and estimated costs to bring the property into compliance.
- *Insurance documentation*: include details covering buildings and contents.
- *Usage patterns of facilities*: describe both congregational and community use.
- *Deferred maintenance items*: note any needed repairs that have been postponed.
- *Plans for property development or upgrades*: describe any plans under consideration and estimated costs.



- *Earthquake ratings*: provide ratings if applicable and any related plans to achieve PCANZ standards.
- *Details of tenancies or regular users*: include rental agreements and community partnerships.

### **Notes for congregations**

- This checklist is a guide to help structure your report. Not all items will be relevant to every congregation.
- Include any additional information you believe demonstrates your congregation's vitality and mission.
- Where formal documentation is unavailable, detailed descriptive accounts are acceptable.
- Highlight particular strengths or unique opportunities in your congregation's life.
- Be open about challenges—the aim is to provide a true and thorough picture of congregational life.
- Consider both written documentation and oral presentations when preparing your report.
- Contact the commission for clarification if you have questions about any requirements.

### **Notes about presentation**

- Written material should be clearly organised and dated.
- Include a table of contents for longer reports.
- Number pages and sections for easy reference.
- Provide context or explanation where helpful.
- Draw on both historical data and recent information for completeness.
- Include examples or stories that illustrate key points.

## Appendix 2: Simplified template

*The template below was successfully used by a commission in Southern Presbytery to assist a congregation in preparing their report.*

In your reporting back to the Commission, we need information and your assessment on what is going on in the congregation in all these areas. You may have had some interesting things happening in the past, even up to a year or two ago. But to be useful to you and to us the information you give us needs to be current, and your assessment needs to be based on how things actually are now.

Below is a practical guide to help you put together your response to the commission. It just works through those 6 essential areas.

### 1. Worship

Does the congregation meet regularly for worship? Where? And how often?

Over the last 6 months what would be the average weekly attendance?

Have there been any special services in the last year?

How easy is the congregation finding it to look after this part of its life? Rate on a scale of 1-6

1      2      3      4      5      6

No trouble    some challenges    very challenging

### 2. Mission

How is your congregation serving God in your neighbourhood and further afield?

What sort of leadership structures do you have in your congregation and how many people are involved in them? E.g. in church council? And sub committees?

How are these leadership groups sharpening the congregation's mission focus and its connections with the wider community?

What sort of congregational interaction is there with community groups that use the church facilities?

How easy is the congregation finding it to look after this part of its life? Rate on a scale of 1-6

1      2      3      4      5      6

No trouble    some challenges    very challenging

### 3. Pastoral Care

Is the congregation roll up to date?

If someone in the congregation is sick or in need of help, how do you find out?

How do you provide care for one another in the absence of a minister?

How easy is the congregation finding it to look after this part of its life? Rate on a scale of 1-6

1      2      3      4      5      6

No trouble    some challenges    very challenging

#### **4. Nurturing faith**

Is prayer happening?

Does the congregation run or take part in programmes/groups/activities that encourage people to grow in faith?

Are people being helped and sustained in their faith through the congregation's worship services?

How easy is the congregation finding it to look after this part of its life? Rate on a scale of 1-6

1      2      3      4      5      6

No trouble    some challenges    very challenging

#### **5. Stewardship of property and finance**

How does the congregation look after its property - through a committee/a team/ an individual/other(specify)?

How does the congregation look after its finances - through a committee/a team/ an individual/other(specify)?

How easy is the congregation finding it to look after these parts of its life? Rate on a scale of 1-6

1      2      3      4      5      6

No trouble    some challenges    very challenging

What state are your finances in?

Have your accounts been reviewed?

Overall are the buildings that you are in more of a help or more of a hindrance to your congregation's worship

and mission?

#### **6, Accepting the discipline and oversight of the Presbyterian Church**

Do you have a functional church council?

What is being done to ensure that the congregation is compliant with the policies of the General Assembly? (For example, in regards to health and safety, and compliance with policies around earthquake prone buildings)

How easy is the congregation finding it to look after this part of its life? Rate on a scale of 1-6

1      2      3      4      5      6

No trouble    some challenges    very challenging