

E18: Social Voice Work Group

Recommendations

1. That General Assembly acknowledge its understanding of “social voice” to mean both words and actions used and expressed in engaging with, and addressing, the social issues of our day.
2. That General Assembly encourage the Moderator to form close working relationships with the heads of other organisations with a social voice, and to be alert to the possibility of issuing joint or complementary statements on issues of the day.
3. That General Assembly encourage presbyteries to engage with the Social Voice report and to identify and support networking opportunities in their regions.

Report

1. Introduction

The Council of Assembly was asked by the 2016 Assembly to set up a Social Voice Work Group (SVWG) to enable the Church’s social voice to be heard. [Decision 16.064.]

The Council of Assembly, at its March 2017 meeting, appointed the members of the Social Voice Work Group, with the following Terms of Reference.

- (a) *To identify and review how the PCANZ has in the past engaged in both assisting the mission of congregations communicating on social issues and supporting the Moderator on behalf of the PCANZ to speak on these matters.*
- (b) *To discuss with the PCANZ representative on the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services and with Presbyterian Support NZ how material, research and findings can be shared across the whole church to assist local congregations in making their social voice heard.*
- (c) *To take any advice from the Communications team and the Book of Order Advisory Committee on any matters identified.*
- (d) *To report to the Council of Assembly no later than the October 2017 Council meeting and bring any recommendations.*

The members of the Social Voice Work Group were the Rev Richard McLean (convenor), the Rev Pauline Stewart, Mr Wayne Ogden, the Rev Dr Jaco Reyneke and Mrs Rhee Barry, with power to co-opt others.

2. Report to Council of Assembly

The work group followed the terms of reference as outlined above, and submitted a 12 page report to the Council of Assembly in October 2017. The pertinent points are summarised below:

- a) Exercising a “social voice” in today’s environment requires more than a committee that will issue statements on various issues (as we have tended to do in the past). Through our conversations and discussions, the Social Voice Work Group heard a plea for our social voice to be made heard through our compassion and action.
- b) In simple terms, what we do is the most effective way for us to say what we believe concerning social issues. The focus of the report was on ways in which we can raise the profile of Christian service in action across our land as we highlight work already being done by the Church in various ways.
- c) Words and action are not polar opposites, however. Both are necessary, although we believe that Christian actions speak far louder and are more effective than Christian words when it comes to our contemporary witness to the world around us.
- d) In considering our social voice in society today, the Social Voice Work Group recognises that the word “voice” needs to be understood in its broadest form when used by the Church and its people.
- e) There are many resources that can assist the PCANZ in enabling our “voice” to be heard and seen. Rather than re-invent the wheel, so to speak, the PCANZ would do well to use the resources already at its disposal when it comes to sourcing material to use in addressing social issues (Appendix A).
- f) The work group strongly recommends that individuals and congregations interested in raising the profile of their social voice regularly visit the various websites mentioned, as these are continually updated with the latest research and findings and comments on current issues.
- g) The work group acknowledges the PCANZ’s current contribution of \$ 15,000 per annum to the work of the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS), which Presbyterian Support matches with a further \$ 15,000.
- h) PCANZ can use its existing structures to raise the profile of current social issues (i.e. through our existing Communications Team and communication tools like SPANZ, websites etc.)
- i) Networking is essential in raising the profile of our social voice. The work group was impressed by the number of congregations and individuals within our congregations who are involved in the work of addressing the social

issues of our day, and we see a huge opportunity for these various individuals and groups to network together across the country (Appendix B).

- j) A networking list of all the individuals and congregations across the PCANZ who are actively involved and engaged with their communities in various ways would be greatly beneficial, as well as establishing special interest clusters within presbyteries and other associations that cross geographical boundaries like special purpose Facebook groups and other similar groups on social media that share ideas and encouragement to others engaged in similar activities. Is there someone keen to take this on?
- k) Some congregations refrain from speaking out due to a lack of information and confidence around what they should and shouldn't say in the public arena, and the development of suitable guidelines could embolden confidence to step out into this arena.
- l) Congregations that are already active in works of mission and ministry which address various social issues and/or their consequences should be encouraged to continue their good work, and to share their ideas and experiences with others.
- m) There are existing guidelines for our Assembly Moderator to speak on the Church's behalf regarding social issues. Establishing a readily available reference document which contains a summary of all decisions of past General Assemblies on matters considered to fall under the "social voice" category would greatly assist the Moderator in being able to respond quickly to any presenting issues that arise.
- n) The Social Voice Work Group encourages the Moderator to establish and maintain good ties with other heads of churches and organisations who have a social voice in order to strengthen the effectiveness of messages that are issued by these various Christian organisations.

3. Response of Council of Assembly

As a result of the Social Voce Work Group's report to the Council of Assembly, the following decisions were made at the June 2018 meeting of the Council.

- a) Council of Assembly strongly encourages individuals and congregations interested in raising the profile of their social voice to regularly consult the available resources as detailed in Appendix A of [the Social Voice Work Group] report.
- b) That the Communications Team, in consultation with the Assembly Executive Secretary and Council of Assembly, develop a suitable strategy for raising the profile of available social issues resources throughout our denomination.

- c) That the Council of Assembly calls for individuals amongst our congregations currently engaged in addressing social issues to form networks and to share ideas amongst each other and the wider Church.
- d) That the Council of Assembly requests the Communications Team to assist and make available suggestions and resources to build a network of networks using any and all forms of technology and social media to create and promote a collective understanding of what is being done and what can be done around the country.
- e) That the Council of Assembly encourages presbyteries to establish cluster groups that encourage and share resources and stories of work that is being done amongst our people to address social issues.
- f) That the Communications Team, in consultation with the Assembly Executive Secretary and the Council of Assembly, develop a suitable set of guidelines and parameters outlining the roles and responsibilities that various Presbyterian individuals and groups should follow when making statements concerning social issues.
- g) That Council of Assembly ask the Moderator's Role Work Group to consider the issue of expanding the ability of the Moderator to speak on behalf of the Church.
- h) That the Assembly Executive Secretary arranges for the compilation of a reference list of past decisions made by the General Assembly which relates to social issues.
- i) That the Assembly Executive Secretary compile a list of knowledgeable and competent people in the area of social issues that the Moderator can refer to and/or consult when needed.

4. Opportunities

In compiling this report, the Social Voice Work Group is aware that many opportunities exist for members of the Church to interact with each other and to both support and encourage each other with engagement in social issues. In addition to this, all of the social agencies we interacted with were keen to discuss further future involvement in terms of working more closely together with the Church on local, regional and national levels. The work group is hopeful that the spirit of this report inspires many instances of these opportunities being taken up.

Recognition also needs to be given to the work of Presbyterian Support in this area, and it is our hope that presbyteries and local congregations will find appropriate ways to engage with Presbyterian Support in their part of the country. We sense a great opportunity for PCANZ and Presbyterian Support to work more closely together in addressing the social issues of our time.

Richard McLean
Convenor
Social Voice Work Group

Social Voice Work Group

Appendix A: available resources

A number of **resources** are available, with many booklets available for download, and occasionally hard copies can be requested from the organisation:

Presbyterian Support (www.ps.org.nz) – with links to their regional organisations on their website. Collectively, the Presbyterian Support organisations are one of the largest providers of social and health services in the country, working with older people, people with disabilities, families at risk, children and young people. The seven Presbyterian Support organisations are governed, managed and operated separately providing local services in each region. They come together under the PSNZ federation to share information, best practice ideas and where possible resources across the country.

Resources for Speaking Out (www.presbyterian.org.nz/speaking-out/resources-for-speaking-out) is a very handy section of the Church's website with Case Studies, Discussion Papers on various topics and a link to the World Council of Churches ecumenical call to Just Peace programme.

Also available are various **downloadable booklets** which can be used as Bible study guides to inform leaders or groups in a congregation and help them to consider and understand pertinent issues more fully. The well researched topics covered are: Justice and Action; Sexual Ethics; Caring for Creation; House to Home; Caring for our Children (Child Abuse); Connecting with Young People; Bring on the Baby Boomers: Coming of Age (Aging); Giving and Getting; Parenting Today; Crime and Justice; Family Raising Kin; Churches Working Together; Understanding Multiculturalism in the Church and in New Zealand.

New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS) represent six church networks: the Anglican Care Network, the Baptist, Catholic and Presbyterian social services agencies, as well as the Methodist and the Salvation Army churches. NZCCSS works for a just and compassionate society in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the PCANZ continues to support their work financially each year. Their website (www.nzccss.org.nz) has a wealth of information on it, containing many resources which cover a broad spectrum of issues and interests. It should be noted that the NZCCSS has a non-partisan, issues-based approach, meaning the value of their resources are not diminished by changing governments.

For those congregations or members who are more business orientated / focused, the **New Zealand Initiative** also provides resources on social issues: www.nzinitiative.org.nz.

The **InterChurch Bioethics Council (ICBC)** is an ecumenical cross-cultural body supported by the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand (first established as the “Interchurch Commission on Genetic Engineering” in 2002). ICBC members have between them considerable expertise and knowledge in science, ethics, theology, medicine and education. The terms of reference for the original Interchurch Commission on Genetic Engineering have been expanded to include the ethical, cultural and spiritual issues relating to biotechnology. Their website contains both resources and submissions that have been made relating to various issues (www.interchurchbioethics.org.nz). Members of the ICBC are also available to run workshops on request.

Uniting Care Australia (www.unitingcare.org.au) see encouraging of theological reflection on the Church’s community services work as one of their key responsibilities and has done good work on Aging; Child, Young people and Families; Disability; Employment; Housing and Homelessness; Financial Health and Wellbeing; Funding and Taxes and Not For Profit Sector reform.

The **World Council of Churches** of which the PCANZ is a member is a rich source for background and principal thinking on various social issues (<https://www.oikoumene.org/en>).

Social Voice Work Group

Appendix B: possible networking partners

Te Aka Puaho
Pacific Island Synod
Regional Presbyteries (5)

Local congregations

Global Mission office
Presbyterian Youth Ministry (PYM)
Presbyterian Women
AFFIRM

Presbyterian Support, especially regional organisations
New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services (NZCCSS)
The InterChurch Bioethics Council (ICBC)
Howard Paterson Chair in Theology and Public Issues at Otago University

Section E18: Social Voice