



PANEL ON REVIEW AND REFORM

Comparison of how other Presbyterian churches inform, resource and encourage their Presbyteries through their central bodies

Introduction

To assist the Panel in fulfilling its remit to bring to the General Assembly of 2010 proposals for an alternative presbytery structure, a subgroup was established to study how other churches with similarities to the Church of Scotland, structured and ordered themselves.

Initially, the focus was on how presbyterian churches, or the like, informed, resourced and encouraged their presbyteries through their central bodies. At that stage what seemed to be most useful to the Panel would be information about the division of responsibilities and what administrative tasks currently carried out by Councils and Departments of the Church could perhaps be devolved to Presbyteries

With this in mind, a questionnaire was drawn up seeking information on areas of governance and resourcing. This information was sought from churches whose structures, where possible, approximated to those of the Church of Scotland and the areas covered related to the areas of responsibility of its six Councils.

As the Panel's main work progressed, it became clear that the focus needed to shift from that specific comparison more towards the shape and form, frequency and size of presbyteries and to a lesser extent the General Assembly (GA) or equivalent of other Presbyterian churches. Major alterations to the structure of Presbyteries would also entail consideration of how the local and supporting structures might also be affected.

The questionnaire was brief and flexible enough to allow a straightforward response. Some provided additional, more in-depth material for which The Panel is grateful.

The Group is also grateful to the Very Rev Dr Sheilagh Kesting (Secretary and Ecumenical Officer, Ecumenical Relations Committee) and Ms Carol Finlay (Associate Secretary (Local Development), World Mission Council) for providing the group with a wide range of churches to investigate from which we chose:

The Reformed Church in America (RCA)
The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ)
The Presbyterian Church of Canada (PCC)
The Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN)
The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (PCN)
The Church of South India (CSI)

The Group also looked at recent changes in the structure of the United Reformed Church in Great Britain. These, together with the changes in the encouraged us to believe that the Church of Scotland could adopt positive changes to the way presbyteries relate to local churches and the supporting bodies. The Group looked in detail at the Presbytery of Europe which operates very differently from others in the Church of Scotland because of its geographical spread.

Findings from the Questionnaires

None of the churches involved in the study was the major provider of Protestant Christianity in its country, nor was the national church. Numerical size, geographical area, and population were taken into account when assessing the results and how directly they related to the Church of Scotland. The greater the similarity, the more likely the results would be directly applicable.

Frequency of General Assemblies

Responses demonstrated that an annual assembly was not always necessary if sufficient business was devolved down to Presbyteries.

Choice of Commissioners

There was a variety of procedures and terms of eligibility for commissioners. Given the size of the Church and number of Commissioners, no change need be made. Fewer Assemblies or Commissioners would distance the Assembly from both Presbyteries and congregations and the C of S probably does not wish to increase the current numbers. PCANZ, CSI and PCN all hold General Assemblies every two years. Ministers' attendance can be every 2, 4 or 6 years. PCANZ alternates between Minister and Elder Commissioner. In PCN, one third of the ministers are Commissioners at each General Assembly. Elders in general have fewer opportunities to be Commissioners. There will always be a tension between more frequent GA with fewer Commissioners through to fewer GA but more Commissioners. Somewhere each church sets a balance which allows adequate participation and effective conduct of GA business.

Repeat attendance

As in the Church of Scotland, elders return to subsequent assemblies less often than ministers.

Number of Presbyteries

This varied from 21 to 75, in general the smaller presbyteries tended to meet in assembly biannually.

Number of Congregations covered

Presbyteries varied widely in size: PCC ranged from between 4 and 35 congregations per Presbytery, CSI ranged from 100 to 500 congregations per Presbytery. Other churches lay somewhere in between.

How often they met

Some met with same regularity across the church but this varied in others. In its new structure, PCANZ Presbyteries may meet every 1, 2, 3 or 6 months!

For what purposes they met other Presbyteries

Most rarely met unless they were committees with specific functions: educational Trust (PCC), Superintendence (PKN), educational development (RCA) or as delegated assemblies with judicial remits.

Ministry recruitment and Training

The almost universal model was for an enquiry for ministry to begin at local, congregational and Presbytery level. As they progressed into the Acceptance and Training system, their contact increasingly became more centralised. Only in the PKN was the enquiry process centralised.

Finance

There was a range in the support given to non self-sufficient churches. Factors contributing to the amount of support included how much local financial autonomy there was and how independent each congregation or Presbytery felt themselves to be.

Social Care;

The resourcing of social care was in general not an immediate function of Presbyteries. PCANZ has a separate 'Council' similar to Crossreach. PCN had some local involvement funded by Government

Mission at Home;

Although mission initiatives within a country was more often locally driven, where it was a central function, provision of assistance was small.

Mission outside the country;

Where mission initiatives outside the country were concerned, there was a variety of centrally organized work and local involvement. As the Panel's Group looking at Overseas Mission and Local Communities during 2008-2009 also discovered, there were as many official links as unofficial ones. This is reflected across the churches in this study.

Relationship with the nation;

Local issues tended to be dealt with at a congregational level rather than through a central spokesperson or Committee issuing a press release. As issues provoked wider interest, Presbytery rather than a congregation would be the link. If the matter were of national interest, contact then would be through a central body or representative.

Changes

Where changes to presbytery structures in the last ten years were concerned, the RCA, which displayed the greatest sense of central organization, moved from being legislation-driven to policy-driven with a focus on 'doing things better'. This involved internal changes without an alteration to the overall structure.

The PCC introduced Commission to deal with various matters on behalf of the General Assembly without making any real structural changes. PCANZ moved away from Presbyteries' focus on administrative workload to making mission and resourcing possible at a local level. The URC's abandonment of the presbytery system encouraged synods and local congregations to work more closely together.

The Presbytery of Europe: an existing alternative model.

The Presbytery of Europe provides a different model of Presbytery administration within the present structure. It operates with the same Councils and the same relationship to the General Assembly and other Presbyteries but because of its wide geographical spread (Brussels to Malta if we exclude Sri Lanka and, at the time of writing, the Bahamas) and relatively few charges (16), the way it conducts itself is quite different from most of the mainland Presbyteries, being more akin to some of its neighbours in Europe.

The Presbytery meets twice a year, usually over a weekend. These weekends are a mixture of business, worship, table fellowship and opportunities to talk during breaks over the three days. Each congregation is visited in turn with the host church normally giving a presentation to show the breadth of mission and ministry in that area. Time is also set aside for other presentations by visitors or members of the Presbytery. During the meetings, there is time for both committee and plenary sessions.

Part of the success of the smooth running of Presbytery is seen to come from the fact that much of the preparation work has to be done outside the meeting weekend by the various committees. Decision-making is delegated to the Presbytery Business Committee which is in regular contact either by tele-conference or occasionally in person.

Meeting only twice a year seems to enhance the importance of the meetings with nearly always 100% attendance from serving ministers, congregational elders and additional elders. Partners may attend and elders from the local congregation frequently join in to experience the Presbytery at work

One disadvantage is the success of the model! There can be over forty attendees in addition to partners and visitors so accommodation has become an issue with members being accommodated further and further afield, with the consequent increased travel time to the main venue. One solution was to take over a hotel (in Brussels) and, on other occasions, a group of small hotels (in Fuengirola) and a church centre (in Gibraltar). This had the advantage of increased time for informal gatherings, with breakfast added to the meals shared together. The disadvantage was, however, the increased costs of the presbytery meeting and less contact with the members of the local congregation.

All but one of the Presbytery members has access to the Internet and broadband, making communication much easier. Papers are distributed electronically, with the Clerk scanning papers and sending them out in PDF format. Use of available technology ensures international phonecalls and video-conferencing are inexpensive and easily managed with the resultant reduction in travel time and cost. Communicating this way works well when the participants know each other well, less so when they do not.

Some feel that this structure has resulted in a decrease in the number of contacts with the Church councils has decreased due to the change in but this has been balanced a little by the willingness of members of the councils to attend Presbytery meetings.

The Presbytery of Europe has worked hard across national divides. A major challenge is that the charges are widely spread and while all are recognised as congregations of the Church of Scotland, they have varying legal constitutions, lie in different jurisdictions, fall into a variety different tax régimes and experience different costs of living. This affects not only the work of Presbytery, but also ministers and members of its congregations. There has been a focus over the years of building up a body of knowledge and an expertise in dealing with some of these complex issues, often by harnessing the talents of experienced elders in the congregations. Since 1992, the Presbytery has conducted a survey every four years to examine attendance and other information such as age profile, denominational background, nationality, those worshipping on one particular day – a snapshot of the congregations across the Presbytery. This has allowed it to build up a picture of each worshipping community over the past 15 years.

Retired Ministers

There are not many retired ministers within the Presbytery. Expenses would not be paid for the one or two ministers who The Presbytery Clerk commented that in general Dutch churches would see the Church of Scotland's system as weighted far too heavily in favour of the elderly. They have no place for retired ministers (or moderators) and office bearers retire in congregational terms at 70 so responsibility is continually moved down the church in terms of age. On a visit to the Protestant Church of Westphalia in 2009, he asked about the role of retired ministers and got a blank look: a system which gave non-working ministers a vote and a role in the governance of the Church was incomprehensible to them.

What can be learned from this model

An alternative workable model along the lines of the Presbytery of Europe could be crafted which would operate within the current structures providing it met the needs of the Presbytery. The Presbytery of Europe model will not necessarily work in other geographically closer Presbyteries but there is no reason for it not to be viable in areas which are more widely spread.

The model works because of the relatively small number of members but it would be difficult for a larger body to meet in this way. With only two main meetings each year there is a high priority on ensuring attendance is possible.

Good use of information technology, video-conferencing and use of the Internet removes much of the difficulties of geographical spread. The Presbytery works hard to ensure close links are maintained, trusting the Committees to carry out their remits. Small numbers ensure this is workable.

Presbytery meetings are popular and enjoyable!

Examples of Change

Both the URC and the PCANZ have undergone major structural change in the last few years. For the URC, these have been effected and are in place. In the case of PCANZ they are in the earlier stages of implementation.

Reform in the United Reformed Church

In the first years of the twenty-first century, the United Reformed Church undertook an exercise to reform its structures to make it more effective for mission, the success of which depended on an awareness of what was not working and a willingness to change.

The URC currently operates with a General Assembly meeting every second year, Synods twice a year and Church Meetings (Kirk Sessions) monthly. There are 13 Synods of which Scotland is one. Since the Scottish Congregational Church joined the URC in April 2000, difficulty arose especially in the Glasgow Area Council, (equivalent to Presbytery) to recruit officers for it. This led to the

decision to remove Area Councils, initially in Scotland and then 2 years ago in the rest of the church.

When the Area Committees were removed, sending people to Synod was devolved to a Synod Nominating Committee which has proved much better at harnessing new talent from a much broader base. Congregations have become more involved

In Scotland there had been 4 area councils (North, South, East, West), each with between 5-19 congregations per council. They became very small scale, with the same static membership and having little local impact. Area/District Councils were perceived as not working.

The restructuring was designed to bring the Synod closer to the local churches, the latter becoming the centre of gravity for the Church's mission. It is a bottom-up structure.

Synod now appears to be more relevant and accessible. The local church seems reinvigorated in places by the reforms and restructuring. Church Links (informal groupings of local congregations) are given space for 2 hours during Synod meetings to meet together.

Congregations have been given much greater freedom: some are scared by this but others have enjoyed the opportunity. Congregations choose their priorities, making local mission pledges about things they want to concentrate on and setting out where they hope to be in ten years time.

Congregations can choose if they want to take up one or more initiative using the UK wide produced resources.

Reform in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction:

Since before 2002, there has been consideration of the operation of Presbyteries which has resulted in the adoption by the General Assembly of 2008 of the report which is currently being implemented

The proposals see a strengthening of Presbyteries to resource local congregations, at the same time moving some administrative functions to its supporting structures in order to free Presbyteries from them.

A framework was proposed of five Presbytery groupings that would enter discussions about reconfiguration. The intention was not to create five Presbyteries but five areas which might be large enough for substantial and

realistic reconfiguration. It was recognised that some congregations might fit better in a different area to their existing Presbytery.

The following is taken from the report on "The Reform of Presbyteries" submitted to the General Assembly of 2008 by the Presbyteries Task Group (<http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/publications/news-archive/reform-of-presbyteries-news>)

Statistics:

(source: 2006 Statistics and 2007 Yearbook)

	North Island	South Island
Number of Presbyteries	11	11
Number of Parishes	253	150
Number of Parish Ministers	189	101
Presbyterian membership	17197	11255
Adults in worship	17490	10584

The report proposed the following model:

5. PROPOSED MODEL FOR THE REFORM OF PRESBYTERIES

Given the critical situation facing Presbyteries and the need to enhance the support of congregations, the Task Group explored a number of models that might enable the Church to better carry out its resourcing and governance functions. After consultation with Presbyteries the Task Group recommends the adoption of the following model for the Reform of Presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The model is based around the following major changes:

- a. Establishing Resourcing Groups and separating structurally governance and resourcing see Functions of Presbytery. (5.1)*
- b. Separating the Governance functions of Presbyteries into Core and Discretionary functions, and vesting some functions in national bodies. (5.2)*
- c. Reconfiguring Presbyteries into larger bodies for effectiveness in governance, and to increase personnel and diversity for resourcing functions. (5.3)*

The model prioritises resourcing over governance, a reversal of the current situation, where feedback has made clear that the 'default' mode of most Presbyteries that of governance. This change is not to devalue governance functions but to invest our best time and energy in what supports congregations

in mission; a more strategic use of people resources. The model also reduces the Governance functions of Presbyteries.

The model is also a balance between the need for a clear framework for the Presbyteries of the PCANZ as a whole but to allow for significant variation regionally to take account of particular contextual realities such as demography or geography. Presbytery feedback emphasised the importance of both.

The following were the perceived advantages as presented to that year's General Assembly:

Advantages: in the above resourcing proposals include

- A specific structure that is focused on mission resourcing in local congregations, unhindered by governance functions.
- A specific structure that is relationally focused; fostering trust, enabling personal support and encouragement of ministers and elders, unhindered by governance functions that currently claim priority. Structuring the church smaller to foster strong relationships.
- Flexibility in structure and operation to allow for the varied contexts across New Zealand.
- Maintains involvement of ministers and elders, but allows for wider participation.
- A mission and personal focus that will encourage involvement and leadership from those with little inclination to be involved in the Governance of the Church and who currently find Presbytery 'irrelevant, dull and bureaucratic'.
- Increase the number of Presbytery personnel who have ongoing understanding of local congregations.

Advantages: in the above Governance proposals include

- Reduced functions recognising reduced personnel and capacity in Presbyteries.
- Discretion with regard to some functions in order to respond appropriately in the varied Presbytery contexts.
- Reduced functions allowing for a reduced number of Presbytery meetings with savings in travel, time and costs.
- Allowance for flexibility of structure in the varied Presbytery contexts.
- Reduces duplication of tasks among Presbyteries and over the levels of the church.
- Maintains corporate government of ministers and elders but, as is practiced now, entrusts operations to sub-groups within Presbytery.
- Most importantly, freeing up ministers and elders, and time for resourcing purposes.

Advantages: in larger reconfigured Presbyteries include:

- Provide a greater pool of people with appropriate skills and experience to carry out governance tasks. This larger context also enhances the equipping of new leaders. Structuring the church larger for greater order, efficiency and cost saving.
- Reducing duplication across the country and associated costs, freeing up resources for mission.
- In many smaller Presbyteries significantly broadening the mission context and increasing the range of people available for Resourcing functions.
- Providing a greater resource base for paid positions and specialist ministries; e.g. a skilled Clerk for the administration of Presbytery, or a Mission Enabler to foster mission development and growth in the Presbytery area.
- Providing some greater distance from personal relationships to enable the 'hard and wise decisions' concerning congregations and ministers to be made.

Initial Comments

This appears to be a bold step towards resourcing and mission in the local and regional church requiring recognition of the need for a rebalancing of priorities, and moving the major focus from administration on to Mission. The division between governance and resourcing is positive and helpful in achieving this.

It recognises that each of the new Presbytery Groupings may well have differences from the next.

Their Report Convictions indicated that there would be no sacred cows which were exempt from action.

An e-newsletter, 'Reform of Presbyteries', keeps everyone up to date.

What has this for the Church of Scotland?

While recognising the differences between the two churches, the PCANZ restructuring highlights some of the issues they addressed and which the Church of Scotland would also need to consider in any restructuring of a similar nature.

More Presbytery staff were appointed to carry out the increased workload in the reconfigured Presbyteries although that increase was the result of larger Presbyteries and not a wider workload and extra duties.

Additional staff raised implications for finance at the Presbytery level. Any additional powers in Presbytery needed appropriate financial support to be effective.

Some functions were moved to central administration. This was to allow Presbyteries to have more time to focus on Mission rather than to increase central control.

Greater geographical areas for Presbyteries brought the expectation of greater use of electronic communication and that this would be the norm.

Once the process had settled, Presbyteries might not need to meet as frequently, perhaps only twice a year in person. The Presbytery of Europe already demonstrates how this might function.

The major issue was the desire to change the balance in Presbytery between Governance and Mission. This could have happened, only with difficulty in their old structures. The new structures alone would not necessarily mean this change of balance would be achieved. However, the new balance gave the impetus for the restructuring and the restructuring provided the place for the new balance to become effective.

In practical terms, the most important strategy used was to consult with Presbyteries. The first time was with a small research project, and the second and third times were with drafts of the Assembly paper after which the Task Group made amendments to the paper. In this way Presbyteries had significant dialogue about the issues and were able to contribute to the final paper prior to the Assembly. This process allowed the Task group to clarify and reassure those consulted which helped there to be an agreeable Assembly debate. The Church was ready to go. Once the restructuring was under way there was regular updating on the progress of the different reconfigured Presbyteries by newsletter. The Task Group had time to take special care to help people understand that their current Presbyteries were not working well. There was nevertheless still opposition from some quarters but on the whole the Church was aware of the needs for change and had raised expectations from the consultation process that the proposed changes could bring improvements.

What can be gained from the comparisons?

The returns from the various churches demonstrate a wide range of church governance. At its simplest, we might say that Presbyterianism provides a framework for the church administration but that each church will work that out in detail with what is appropriate to its own situation. As a result while a General Assembly is always the senior court it may be held with varying frequency. Frequency of Presbyteries may vary even more than that of the General Assemblies.

Two factors appear to have made the URC's changes more acceptable:

- 1 They had a specifically clear acceptance that change was required.
- 2 The piloting of a new model which works, with ongoing modifications throughout the period of the pilot, makes the process of rolling out the whole programme easier and more readily acceptable.

In the case of both the PCANZ and the URC, the timescales involved for major structural change are significant with the necessity for there to be adequate time to consult, collate responses, reflect and reconsult if necessary. In the case of the former Church, it took protracted discussion before the matter came to the 2002 General Assembly followed by 6 years before the proposed changes outlined in the Report were agreed and rolled out.

While the URC recognised that it had to – and was willing to – change, the PCANZ also had to alter their thinking about the balance between governance and mission, recognising that structural change itself would not be effective.

Conclusion

The Church of Scotland has for a long time recognised the need to find a more effective way of doing the work involved in being the Church. It is clear that there are many different models for that and even when a Church has decided on its model, there is likely to be the need for local variations within the whole. Larger Presbyteries should not mean greater bureaucracy but should provide a wider pool of resources for individual congregations and the greater possibility of sharing in and pursuing common interests.

The greatest need is to recognise where we can do things better than we do at present. This does not mean rejecting all that has been done before but exploring where we might need to change. If we are to implement the Great Commission, Mission needs to be central to the Church of Scotland, assisted by and not dominated by our Presbytery structures. This Comparison has identified some of the ways in which that might be achieved.

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