

Key Questions for PCQ Review Consultation

Setting: The PCQ is currently in a unique position to review itself; with a transition in process from senior leaders to younger leaders, new financial challenges, and the impact of Covid 19. The following are 5 key questions for the Review to consider:

Preamble

Firstly, I am acutely aware that in answering these key five questions it would be easy for those who have gone before, labouring in the Presbyterian Church of Queensland in the days immediately after Union in 1977 to possibly feel critiqued, after all, we are engaged in a review of the present form of the PCQ that has only existed for the last 43 years. So, at the beginning of this paper I want to acknowledge those who faced enormous personal and structural challenges post 1977 and have worked hard, prayerfully seeking to build a denomination and culture that is God-honouring as well as Presbyterian.

Secondly, I am to some extent of that generation. I was accepted as a candidate in 1977 and began ministry in the PCA in 1985. As I look back over those years I have realised I must, with humility, embrace my limitations as a time-bound fallen human being. Every person's work, even our best work in Christ through the power of the Spirit, bears the marks of our historical context, our response to the perceived desperate needs of the 'present' as we understood them, the weaknesses as well as the strengths of our theological training and our naïve employment of perspectives and strategies that have not borne the fruit for the kingdom we had intended and hoped for.

In humility, those of us who have a significant number of years behind us must not be defensive or personalise the findings and recommendations in the Review. What is most true of us all is that we are slaves of Christ no matter what generation or age we belong to and serve in. We are together, forgiven and fallen image bearers seeking to be used by God to work in this part of his kingdom called the PCQ, with all the wisdom we have, all for the glory of Christ.

- 1. What have the current PCQ challenges revealed about the changes we as a denomination need to consider and why? For example, what do we as Congregations, Sessions, Presbyteries and a Denomination need to let go of? What new approaches to how we work together do we need to find? Have we discovered any new strengths?**

I have three suggestions regarding changes we need to make as a denomination:

1. Develop positive accountability by describing agreed and stated characteristics of biblical health at multiple structural levels.
2. Develop a discipling culture that is as strong as our Sunday Church culture.
3. Equip elders to be fellow-workers in the church of God.

Develop positive accountability by describing agreed and stated characteristics of biblical health at multiple structural levels.

One of the distinctives of Presbyterianism as a form of government is its emphasis on accountability. This arises from our belief that even as forgiven but fallen persons we

require accountability as a healthy check to the abuse of power. What I observe is that while we have the forms of accountability – Committees of Management; Sessions; Presbyteries and Assemblies, there is very little healthy accountability. The accountability that does exist tends to be more akin to ‘damage control’. By the time things have become undeniably dysfunctional or morally reprehensible or financially threatening, we step in to deal with the problem, but up to the tipping point every ‘leader’ is permitted to do what they want. I would suggest that in going forward, the PCQ needs to embrace the notion of positive accountability as of first importance. What does that mean? We should as a denomination come up with the fundamental characteristics of a healthy and fruitful:

- Church
- Communicant member
- Minister
- Elder
- Session
- Presbytery
- Committee
- Theological College
- Assembly
- Presbyterian Denomination

The failure to have such agreed and stated characteristics leads to the failure of Presbytery Visitations to be little more than encoded ‘hoops’ for churches and ministries to jump over rather than a set of characteristics we are all working toward¹.

Develop a discipling culture that is as strong as our Sunday Church culture.

I am not saying that meeting on Sunday as the church is not important nor am I saying that the public proclamation of the word is not important etc. What I am saying is that after the sermon is prepared, the songs chosen, prayers written, rosters organised, Growth Group material written and aligned with the preaching program, as well as the chairing of the Committee of Management, moderating of the Session, attending Presbytery, there is not much left for discipleship training in a pastor’s week and then it starts all over again.

I suspect that around 70-80% of most minister’s time and energy is devoted to Sundays and most training that goes on in church is around the Sunday meeting. The ‘How Tos’ of Sunday - welcoming, reading the Bible, praying in church, and giving a kids’ talk etc². All this is good but my question is this, does this activity represent the balance of ministry presented in the priorities of Paul’s letters? I don’t believe it does. Training and equipping for life and service in the body of Christ and beyond, is a fundamental aspect of New Testament ministry that is not replicated well in our churches.

What would our churches look like if the pastor was devoting 30-40% of their time to the discipling of leaders who would then disciple others?

¹ Having standards does not mean we ‘homogenise’ ministry and churches rather we distinguish between the healthy and the unhealthy.

² This doesn’t always change when a church has a staff because most of the staff’s time is directed to producing a higher quality of service for Sunday.

I have enormous sympathy for those who are on the Sunday 'treadmill' but I suspect it is a model we together have adopted as the way to grow a church that has more to do with consumerism than the priorities of the New testament³.

Equip elders to be fellow-workers in the church of God.

One of the greatest ironies as a Presbyterian denomination (rule by elders) is our failure to intentionally equip the elders of the church. One of my lecturers in NSW in the early 1980s taught us how to 'lead in such a way that unbelieving elders were not able to put road blocks in front of gospel work'. The most strategic thing we did with regards to our sessions was to ensure that new elders were Christian and supportive of gospel ministry but we did little to train them to be healthy courageous fellow-workers.

What training should elders have?

According to the Code 3.38(d)

The Session holds a course of instruction for the nominees relative to the doctrine, government and discipline of the Church.

While this is significant it is hardly adequate for becoming a fellow-worker in the Gospel of Christ. A fellow-worker assumes a level of spiritual, emotional and relational maturity that when missing becomes dangerous.⁴ Elders are like our blood system; they are at times like red blood cells carrying food and oxygen to the body and at other times like white blood cells fighting the infection that would destroy the health and integrity of the body it serves.

We find ourselves with Sessions who are ill prepared for making difficult decisions, engaging with strategies for ministry and promoting the health of the congregation. One suspects that perhaps the reason elders aren't trained in these things is because the pastors themselves feel inadequate to the task.

As a denomination we are seeing Sessions that function at times like 'rubber stamps' to the pastor's strategies. The real failure in this is only seen when there are troubles in the church and the session responds in one of two ways: bewildered inactivity, shying away from conflict or a reactivity that is as destructive as the inactivity. What else could be expected when there has been no deep investment in the maturing of character and insight.

Until we define what the role of a healthy elder and Session is and then train up to that definition, we are failing to be what we claim is the distinctive of our denomination. I believe if we 'grasp the nettle' of discipling elders into maturity of leadership we will be laying the foundation of the discipleship culture we need to embrace.

2. If you were to set four or five strategic priorities for us as a denomination for the next five years, what would they be?

³ Paul himself felt the pressure to perform but resisted it as a gospel imperative 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. For Paul the God-given message, the message shaped community and the message giving messenger should be congruent 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5.

⁴ This is made explicit in 1 Tim.3:1-7

- a. Define and state what the healthy biblical characteristics are of a:
 - Church
 - Communicant member
 - Minister
 - Elder
 - Session
 - Presbytery
 - Committee
 - Theological College
 - Assembly
 - Presbyterian Denomination
 - b. Have those characteristics approved by Assembly and used when reviewing all churches, ministries etc
 - c. Develop a pilot course for training elders⁵ that was endorsed by the Assembly.
 - d. Train and supervise a PCQ Church Consultancy Team in common challenges in the life of a congregation. This should include, where possible, members from every Presbytery in the state. A consultancy team is made up of facilitators who are trained and skilled but have no power or authority therefore they can assist both churches and presbyteries in addressing pressing issues.
 - e. Ensure that the focus of all our resources and efforts is directed to building healthy fruitful churches.
- 3. To achieve these priorities, what changes do you think we need to make in the way the denomination is structured, the way we relate, how we are governed and how individuals and committees are held accountable within our denomination? What resources do we have or need, to achieve these priorities?**

I believe there is very little in the way of structural changes that we need to achieve these priorities. It is not because we lack good structures that we are where we are, it is because we lack the will to submit ourselves to the healthy use of them. In behaving in this way, we are functionally not Presbyterian.

The bigger issue is the matter of how we relate to one another as we seek to work in our own 'patch' with as little input (interference) as possible from others. We are in danger of living out George MacDonald's description of the city of Gwynty-Storm in *The Princess and Curdie*.

"No man pretended to love his neighbour, but everyone said he knew that peace and quiet behaviour was the best thing for himself, and that, he said, was quite as useful, and a great deal more reasonable."

⁵ This is not a theological course although such a course should have theological components. I believe we need a course that deals with the practice of leadership in the complex of relationships in a church and our denomination. A course that defines responsibilities, character requirements as well as skills for the task.

Pretending to love our neighbour is not an option open to us. Biblical love involves personal engagement, the seeking of the other's best and using God's Spirit breathed word not only to make us wise for salvation but also for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work⁶.

I believe that in the process of wrestling with these priorities we have a God-given opportunity for coming together for the sake of the kingdom and inhabiting the sort of community we deeply want and are called to be. As we wrestle with what is a healthy church etc and how we can serve one another and our churches, we have an opportunity to develop a loving trust as we pursue the kingdom in a concerted way.

I believe we have the resources to pursue these opportunities as the resources are largely God's word, his Spirit and his people. The loss of our previous financial security, approached the right way, is a severe mercy that provides us with new opportunities to repent, believe, hope and love in community without distraction.

4. What do you think a healthy Presbyterian denomination looks like in 21st century Australia? For example, what services and processes, formal and informal would a healthy denomination provide to churches, ministry workers and presbyteries?

I think a healthy Presbyterian denomination in the 21st century will look both more like the church of the 1st century and more Presbyterian. We need to reclaim both heritages but not as a reaction to a time of anxiety and the loss of Christendom, but rather as a reaffirmation of who we are called to be, a people who are a distinct community shaped not only by the story of the Bible but by its community life that is characterised by both love and truth. The church before union undermined the markers of membership such as communicant membership and infant baptism by making them available for all, whether someone was a follower of Jesus or just a cultural 'Christian'. Things are not greatly improved. Today membership and baptism are easily agreed to if there is a credible interview and the public assent to a few questions. As a consequence, our churches struggle to be true identifiable communities, they are places where people freely associate when they feel the need, and leave when the mood takes them.

The denomination we need to become is a community of grace communities of Christ, actively committed to living lives worthy of the gospel and submitting to the discipleship of life together as local communities, and the community of the denomination.

This is not the work of five years, it is the commitment of multiple generations, but unless we have in view what Christ has called us to be, we will succumb to cheap cultural imitations that will postpone the pain. I suspect it is given to this generation to wrestle with being church in a way that is different to ideas of 'successful church' that we find so alluring.

A healthy denomination will help:

⁶ See 1 Tim.6:11 where Paul uses 'man of God' to refer to Timothy the pastor.

- Co-ordinate the conversations that need to happen to create biblical descriptions of health.
- Leaders frame success as more than large numbers and budgets, and faithfulness as more than just preaching the gospel.
- Continue to promote informal relational networks of health like the Spiritual Renewal Groups.
- Support and co-ordinate the training of church consultants in the denomination for the service of the churches and the presbyteries.
- Co-ordinate a program of training for elders that leads to a healthy team approach to leadership in our churches that is accountable.

5. What kind of culture would we have if we were a healthy denomination? How might that culture come about and be sustained?

The culture of a healthy denomination is one that:

1. has been humbled but not humiliated by its losses and failures. This severe mercy has happened for our humbling and for our good and we need to take this opportunity to learn and grow in new ways.
2. is prayerful because we know and acknowledge our all too fallen human limitations. It is prayerful also because the effective work of the kingdom is done in God's power not ours.
3. is attentive to God's word because the kingdom of God is not only a matter of biblical ends but also biblical means.
4. is patient because birth from above and maturity take time and our goal is not simply to grow big churches, big budgets but deep Christian communities that resist the deforming power of the culture by being light for the glory of God in the surrounding darkness.
5. is about the other six days and not just Sunday.
6. is a discipling culture where all are encouraged to grow to spiritual, emotional and relational Christian maturity.
7. knows what health is and pursues it.
8. seeks mutual accountability.
9. seeks to strengthen and equip and not simply critique.