

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 :

- 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?**

The main change we need to consider that I would like to highlight is to change towards being a denomination that embraces healthy, strong, statesmanlike leadership—encourages it, rewards it, nurtures it, and enables it. This is leadership by those in our midst who are capable of leading other leaders—generally more gifted and more successful than the rest of us. It has the competency required to meet the responsibilities involved. It is leadership that comes from a spiritual and emotionally healthy place—motivated neither by pride, self-seeking, or insecurity. It is prepared to lead its peers and engage in conflict as needed, it has a strategic vision for change and innovation. But it does these things on behalf of the wider group—not its own interests—and genuinely accountable to the wider group, it is prepared to exercise leadership corporately rather than on its own. It has a willingness to own its strengths and weaknesses and act accordingly—stepping forward or back as fits the situation.

Doing this will require shifts in a range of other areas to create the climate to foster it. Aussies are almost allergic to leadership of this nature, and almost everything we do is designed to inhibit and prevent it (tall poppy system is a popular way to express something hardwired in our psyche and culture). I'll highlight one change as a worked example. We need to let go of a twin tendency that is mutually reinforcing.

First, a basic tendency, common to Presbyterianism, to act conservatively and to be process focused: where following the code is an end in itself and where there is little in the way of an articulated strategic vision that is being aimed at but things are just being maintained.

Second, a tendency by some visionaries to try and do things radically new without regard to both the letter and spirit of the code, where there is strategic thought but little regard for good processes to accomplish that goal, and where the new option has little grounding in our history and underlying principles.

Each of these reinforces the other—the limitations of the first tendency leads to a desire to effectively bypass the system as much as possible in the latter. The tendency of the latter to either fail outright (because trying something radically new will tend to fail more often than building on what is already present) or to introduce things antithetical to our common life tends to reinforce the former tendency.

Genuine statesmanlike leadership brings the best of these two tendencies together and so avoids the problems—building on what is there rather than kicking over the traces, respecting the underlying principles as well as the wording of the code, motivated by a strategic vision, as concerned to build up the corporate life as it is to introduce the desired change. This kind of leadership is made possible when these two tendencies engage each other constructively rather than antagonistically.

A denomination like ours has natural strengths and limitations when it comes to fostering leadership like this. Its small size will tend to mean that leaders of this nature will be few—the statistical rarity of greatness means that small size will generally act as a hard limit on the depth of the talent bench. Our polity of prioritizing corporate deliberative decision making will also tend to discourage many of the qualities of statesmanlike leadership—Presbyterians generally feel more comfortable with conservative decisions, and being in committees. Because of the historic underdeveloped nature of Queensland ministry we have tended to overly depend on a small number of people with the ability and desire to exercise leadership and have often attracted cowboy-types who do function as change agents but who lack the ability to lead peers in a constructive way. We will have to work at pushing back on these limiting factors. On the plus side, our collectivist approach can provide an environment to encourage leadership that is genuinely healthy and orientated to the whole body, and is accountable to that body, which is one of the constitutive requirements for statesmanlike leadership.

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?

The basic summary is: develop our leadership and disciple our congregations; work out how to resource regional ministry for no and solo ordained ministry; work out how to help urban and suburban churches to grow into larger multi-staff churches without staff conflict undercutting the growth; identify the new evangelistic and missional opportunities arising and intentionally invest denominational resources to take them up. I develop these ideas below.

1. Leadership recruitment, development, and retainment.

We currently have a dearth of available ordained ministers to serve in the vacant charges. Without something changing, this is likely to be the normal situation from here: multiple charges without ministers, and times of over a year (or two) between the ending of one moderator's ministry and the beginning of the next. This is due to insufficient suitable young men stepping up, too many experienced ministers leaving pastoral ministry before retirement, and a significant proportion of new ministers preferring to work as an assistant than as a moderator (and larger churches desiring multiple ministers to staff their ministries and promote further growth). We are facing a future where holding onto the charges we have will be a challenge, let alone planting new ones.

We need to increase the numbers of professional leaders, and increase the numbers and quality of lay leadership. A greater load is likely to fall on lay leaders if there are going to be sizable gaps between ordained ministry in charges, and so we need to invest in

ensuring the lay leadership in charges are capable of leading and ministering during those periods. Among professional leaders, anything we can do to help encourage the growth across the board of the kind of leadership envisaged in my answer to question 1 will be an asset, even if we don't have a big supply of unusually gifted leaders.

This will be made more complex by the differing needs in our state: regional areas generally need lay leadership that can operate autonomously for long periods of time (between moderators), and good solo ministers and home missionaries; suburban and urban areas will need to develop support for multi-staff churches. This latter is likely to generate new challenges: moderators will likely need management training to be good managers of staff teams (or else staff conflict will exasperate problems in retention and recruitment of leadership), long term assistants will need different qualities than solo ministers, challenges likely are coming in the years ahead around experienced older assistants following the leadership of younger and less experienced moderators (similar to dynamics around sergeants and lieutenants, experienced nurses and young doctors).

Ideally, we need to explore our recruitment pathways; re-examine the roles of ordained ministers, home missionaries, specialized ministry workers, and elders as to whether as currently constituted they are the best fit for purpose for both rural and urban/suburban contexts; how to develop future and existing leaders; and how to retain leaders.

2. Identify the new evangelistic opportunities opening up and formulate approaches to engage them

It seems that Christianity's, and the organized church's, relationship with broader Australian society is changing and many of the evangelistic pathways that we enjoyed are attenuating and closing. However, it seems likely that change will open up new doors for evangelism, even if (and it is by no means certain that this is the case) the overall number of opportunities are less than we previously enjoyed. It often takes some time for the church to let go of old strategies and identify new ones, and so in a period of change we can stagnate or even go backwards for up to a generation. While this is ultimately in God's hands, we can and should deliberately seek to pray and identify new ways to reach dechristianized Australia rather than just wait for this to arise organically as we do ministry. We need to be thinking proactively about the new doors opening that we can't currently see, and not just try and make the most of the opportunities in the older and (often) diminishing pathways.

3. Discipleship—spiritual, ethical and theological

Overall, our members are committed, not nominal, and have a certain resilience—Christianity hasn't been a social advantage (or even neutral) for some time and so those we have generally have something genuine about them. Nonetheless, the overall culture functions to deform Christian faith and suppress mature Christian formation. There is also a cost arising from our decision a generation ago to adopt many of the seeker service strategies—many of the basic habits and rituals of disciplined Christian living are not present in our people as they were in previous generations. Consequently, even in churches that are Bible teaching and expository, there can be surprising levels of biblical and theological and

ethical illiteracy. Further, lay people, particularly professionals and those in large companies, are often facing ethical challenges around LGBT issues and the sexual revolution more generally—challenges professional ministers are often oblivious to as it was a different era when we were in the workforce. While this point is bread and butter for any denomination, nonetheless I think it needs to be a strategic priority—we need to focus on developing healthy and maturing Christians. This needs to be on all the basic fronts: the vitality of their faith and love and walk with the Lord, the integrity of their moral life and their transformation into the likeness of Christ (with particular attention to the challenges of singleness, marriage and parenting), and their grasp of the Christian faith and the gospel. For my money the seeker service model has passed its use-by date, and we need to re-envisage how our church meetings should feel and be seeking to do. We cannot reach out if we are being hollowed out.

4. Fast growing population centers, notably the Gold Coast

Our Presbyterian polity is a great system for evangelizing settled areas. It is inherently weak when it comes to pioneer ministry and places and times of rapid population growth. There is nothing to be ashamed of in that—all polities are good at some things and weak at others. However, Queensland does have locations and periods where a frontier-like situation occurs—a period of rapid of population growth in an area. Our basic strategy of growing slowly and organically out of the health of local churches is ill-suited to those situations.

To maximize our ability to get the gospel to people, it is worth identifying fast growing population centers; ones that cannot realistically be reached merely by the local churches from the overflow of their own healthy lives. Resources at a denominational level need to be assigned to these areas to really take advantage of the opportunities present. The most obvious example of this to my mind is the Gold Coast. If we operate as normal, we will likely find ourselves in twenty years with a handful of churches trying to reach over a million people. We will then likely be trying to play catch-up for most of the next century. It is unrealistic to expect only three local churches to be able to take up the opportunities being created there. It warrants the strategic focus of the whole denomination.

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?

There are a few things I'd particularly like to highlight on this front.

1. Corporate time (session, presbytery and assembly) needs to focus attention on things of strategic importance and be efficient in addressing routine matters.

We need to spend much less time rubber stamping routine decisions, and far more time developing good social capital to enable us to work together well and sharing wisdom. This likely involves moving everything that can be moved to flying minutes to be dealt with in that format. This will involve learning wisdom as to what should and should not be treated that way, a willingness not to abuse the system to get desired decisions through by

inappropriately moving them to flying minutes, and a culture where no offence is given if a flying minute is moved to formal discussion. This will likely involve some training in governance to identify what things can be dealt with flying minute and what sorts of things should not.

We then invest the time saved to do the kinds of things that are likely to have strategic impact. My initial thoughts on that front would be to use that time saved in the following kinds of ways: proper deliberation on things that genuinely need it, discussion of long term strategy, serious corporate prayer, doing something to value add and develop the leaders present—training, sharing ways of doing things well, insights into books of the Bible/theological ideas/ethical and pastoral issues and the like

2. Look at how eldership can be tweaked to better serve our churches.

We have inherited life-long eldership for historical reasons rather than theological convictions, and it is something that has served regional churches well. It does however come with some weaknesses. Men stay on session even as they go through times of time poverty, spiritual barrenness and even sin. Ministers and sessions generally avoid choosing young strong leaders for eldership or other risky options, as they have to select people who are unlikely to cause serious problems over several decades even if things go wrong. Consequently, we tend to select for people more comfortable with being led than leading. We choose for safety rather than for potential greatness. Elders themselves have to pace themselves for decades of service and so often aren't as active as they could be.

Many of these issues—often issues more in urban and suburban contexts—would be alleviated if there was formal code or informal culture that eldership was for a season, and the expectation was that men would serve for five years or so, then step off session for a similar period before potentially serving that way again.

I know this has been looked at and rejected, but I think our strategic needs encourage us to look at it again, and see what can be done even if it again turns out that we can't make sweeping changes to the code. Eldership is too important to our polity, and especially in a possible minister-drought future, to be satisfied with it not-quite working to its best performance.

We also could do with giving some thought in systematic and organized training for eldership rather than simply expecting men to work it out more or less on their own. Men will work better if they are shown what they are expected to be and to do, and given the tools to accomplish that. It is unwise to expect all busy ministers to be able to do this, or that they can effectively do it themselves just by being on Session.

3. To head off potential future problems, we should start giving some thought to how larger churches are to function in our polity.

Denominations with a mixture of large and small churches have a challenge that is difficult to navigate well: how to balance the power and influence of larger churches and smaller ones in their governance. Some denominations ignore size and give all churches the same votes—and this leads to smaller churches directing the denomination's resources towards

maintaining smaller and often dying churches at the expense of growth. Others give votes proportional to size and this tends to result in larger churches directing denominational resources to themselves, which tends to result in the maintenance of large and expensive staff teams in a few locations at the cost of genuine growth across the denomination as a whole.

Our present system assumes that at presbytery and session level every ordained minister will function as a sole agent, not beholden to anyone. In practice however, most larger churches will tend to vote on issues that matter to their senior minister as a block for reasons good and bad. Our polity should be structured around the reality that most moderators will also in practice have the votes of their staff (and often the parity elders), not the ideal that this shouldn't occur. This requires some mature conversation about the level of political power that is appropriate for larger churches given what they bring to our denomination due to their size.

It also requires some attention on the other side as to the limits of session growth. As churches grow, ideally the session grows to have the numbers to effectively spiritually oversee God's people. However, there comes a point when a body becomes too large to effectively act as a decision-making body, which is also a key function of session. As churches grow there comes a point where the two functions of session begin to tug in opposite directions.

If we are going to be moving into an era where we have some churches that are notably larger than our systems envisaged when they were designed, we need to give some thought as to how to make those systems work under these conditions.

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?

A lot of this is going to turn on what the answer is to the question I pose at the start of my answer to question 5, below. If the future is going to be increasingly challenging than what it is at present (for example, Presbyterianism being effectively an illicit religion) then the following would need to be scaled back. In the event of something other than worst case, the following would be my sketch of a healthy presbyterian denomination in our situation, where the amount of investment in these areas will be determined by the resources available, but where this is the basic shape, whatever amount of resources we have to hand to invest. Whether this is done formally or informally matters less to me than that they occur:

A healthy denomination has resources dedicated to strategic planning. See the first part of my answer to question 5 below for the reasoning behind this in our current situation. It is the unusual person who acting as an individual has the investment in ministry, the freedom to invest time and energy in thinking about the longer term future, and the ability to tap

into the different sources of information that might help predict what might come. This something that really needs to be deliberately done on a corporate scale.

There are also resources dedicated to more immediate tactical thinking—this is thinking more about immediate opportunities and challenges in the present, than the potential shape of things in the next ten to twenty years. Part of this is trying to identify paths of best practice in the current situation for a given type of ministry context (e.g. smaller country charge vs larger suburban charge).

Resources are available to assist with logistics—much of congregational ministry involves management, administration legal compliance and financial skills. Identifying where assistance can be effectively offered to either skill people up, or to take some of this load off their workload, and then doing so, frees up time and energy that can be put into things that only professional and theologically trained leaders can do.

There are resources dedicated to leadership development and renewal—QTC is an obvious factor here, but the development of patterns of mentoring, and of minister renewal groups are hugely encouraging steps in the kind of direction we need. We need to find some way to keep this initiatives fresh, vital and not just an institutional pro-forma. Some kind of training for elders, in management for leaders of staff teams, in being a good assistant, and on-going support of marriages and spiritual lives could be good things to introduce.

A healthy denomination also has ways to act as a clearing house of wisdom and expertise so that churches are not having to reinvent the wheel or always depend on bodies outside our fellowship (GIST, YNet, MTN, QTC to some degree, are examples of things in this space). These are formats where people with more experience and investment in an area can have a platform to resource other churches, but not in a way where it becomes an exercise in empire building, where they are seeking to carve out their own domain.

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

The answer to this question depends a lot on what we think we should be preparing for over the next ten to twenty years: the best culture to take advantage of an environment where numerical growth is relatively easy and there are few challenges to Christian formation, is different from one dealing with a situation that is somewhat more difficult than we face at present, would be even more different from a situation where there is significant external pressure (Christian leaders regularly jailed and/or Christian laypeople unable to work in most professions or for large employers) combined with serious challenges to internal formation (Christians are reshaped even more profoundly by an even stronger anti-Christian culture).

A healthy denomination is looking ahead to the long-term strategic (as well as the short term tactical) challenges and opportunities coming—it is preparing for what it needs to be in

ten to twenty years time. Its focus is to thrive in the space that it genuinely has—leveraging the opportunities that exist for growth numerically and in maturity, and seeking to limit the pathways to shrinking numerically and warping spiritually. This means trying to actually, as best as we can, anticipate the future realistically. Is the Victorian LGBT legislation a sign of what is to come or is it an outlier? If it is the former, then we need to be preparing for leaders to be jailed and potentially receive crushing fines (or being silent and being fairly ineffective) and either no QTC or a very different QTC. This would suggest that we need to really focus on preparing churches to be able to flourish without professional leadership. If it is the latter, then those resources might be better invested elsewhere. A lot hangs upon discerning what is likely to happen next—a healthy denomination seeks to anticipate, not simply react.

Beyond this, these would be the basics I would probably highlight for a healthy culture:

Chartered pluralism—we have sufficient diversity in our churches and leaders to have the resources to be adaptable to changing situations. This means some willingness to not pursue a single model of ministry or leadership style even if that seems more effective right now—we need to prize the denomination’s resilience over efficiency. (Once that is secured, we should then seek efficiency.)

Chartered pluralism, to be constructive, really does need the ‘chartered’ bit. This requires us to have a clear sense of who we are—and this usually involves a grasp of our history, a recognizable culture that is bedded down and owned (some of which will be expressed formally in the code), and a sense of our own identity (this will primarily growing out of the interaction between the WCF and evangelicalism under the rule of Scripture). This gives us enough substantial things in common to enable the diversity to enhance the common good. Without something like this, we must either go for uniformity or embrace a more radical pluralism with minimal ability to work together.

A healthy culture involves the acquisition of significant social capital to enable solid partnerships across differences to occur: the enabling traits for this involves qualities such as trust, tolerance, genuine concern, forgiveness, humility, commitment to truth and the common good. I think it is hard to overstate how critical this one is. Arguably almost anything could be addressed if lacking if this is in place, and almost nothing can be addressed if this is absent. We have to have each other’s backs, and we have to clean up our messes, and these two things will be in tension. Social capital is the resource that enables us to live with that tension well.

A healthy culture faced with a changing context will evidence a willingness to do things differently by building on who we are and what we have been; not primarily reacting against the past, but nonetheless moving towards something fitted for the challenges and opportunities of now and not simply repeating forms that have been inherited for their own sake.

A healthy culture seeks to develop, maintain, nurture and utilize a well-developed body of institutional knowledge and wisdom. It is very difficult to do genuinely new things well, or to meet genuinely new challenges well. Invariably the best humans can do is to draw on past

experience to help. The benefit of a network of churches and leaders is that there can be a storehouse of corporate experience, which when it is digested, can be a storehouse of wisdom—a whole that is greater than what each leader can do on their own. A healthy denomination seeks to develop this asset and use it well, not as an iron hand on the future but as a platform for discerning good change from stupid change.

An ability to treat our leaders well—both the leaders of leaders, and the sub-leaders. Despite our Presbyterianism we have developed a leadership system closer to episcopal and free church polities—two classes of leaders, where some leaders (moderators) exercise direct authority over others (ordained assistants, specialized workers, home missionaries). We need a culture that treats both classes with honor in practical ways when conflict, trouble, sin, failure, and burnout occur, and when ministries end, and that seeks to invest some resources into both sets to help with their development and retention. When leaders are tasked with trying to forge new ground—new ministries, church plants and the like—and they fail, there should be good practices around caring for the leaders involved, and trying to either help them get back on the horse or help transition to secular work as appropriate, both with honor and care.

A fundamental concern for the people who are the church and for the unreached, that the leadership does not act for its own class interests. Much of the code is designed to uphold the rights of the leadership class even at the cost of churches. That might be the best we can do with the tools we have, but that legal framework must not shape our culture around it. Leaders exist as servants of the church, we have no other reason for existence. Churches do not exist to provide a platform for leaders. Neither churches or leaders exist simply for themselves, but to do good to the unreached by holding out the word of life to them. This is arguably the second greatest single factor in a healthy denominational culture.

Finally, we need to be grounded in a fundamental God and Christ centered ethos and orientation. We live to know God in Christ and to be known by him. Living with him and for him is our greatest good, whether our ministries or churches flourish or not, whether we are in leadership or not. To the degree that this is clearly the heartbeat of our common life, there will be something real at the center of our shared life that will give us perspective, and will resource us and our churches for the challenges and opportunities before us. The gospel, with its free justification and forgiveness puts us on the ground where this can be our life goal, and it is to this end that it saves us. Making this front and center is arguably the greatest single factor in a healthy denominational culture.