

Key Questions for PCQ Review Consultation

Andrew Richardson

- 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?***

Four weaknesses I think the current challenges have revealed about our denomination:

First, and most obvious, it has highlighted that the risk of running large and complicated enterprises outside of our core expertise of running churches is too high.

Second, digging a little deeper, the fact that we allowed ourselves to become involved with such an organization suggests we lack a shared vision of what our denomination should be doing which has made it difficult to assess with clarity which activities we should be involved in.

Third, alongside the lack of shared vision, and partly caused by it, we have lacked appropriate accountability for leaders. I believe this has partly been a practical issue of governance skill and training but has also been caused by a culture of personal loyalty put above truth telling and loyalty to a broader vision.

Fourth, at times we have had a culture of the ends justifying the means in relation to our polity. When it came to good, gospel centered initiatives, this has actually enabled some good ministry to happen, but as a culture it has allowed other damaging decisions to be made that might technically fulfil the code but go against its spirit.

Finally, one positive of the last 12 months has been the embracing of technologies that allow collaboration more cheaply and more quickly than could traditionally have been done face to face.

- 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?***

I believe that our key strategic priority as a denomination should be to develop a shared vision of what a Spiritually Mature Presbyterian Church and leader (Ministers, elders, and other ministry staff) looks like in 21st century Queensland and to use this shared vision to assess, hold accountable and provide resources and encouragement for all our churches and leaders.

In speaking of a 'Spiritually Mature' Presbyterian Church (and leader), I am trying to capture a Biblical description of the goal of church in this age and 'Maturity' seems to be one word

that is often used for the goal of both churches and individuals in the faith (eg Eph 4:13-15, Col 1:28, 4:12, James 1:4). It is trying to capture a similar concept to the idea of a 'healthy' church.

In speaking of a 'Vision' for a Spiritually healthy church I am thinking of the kind of Theological vision described by Timothy Keller in his book 'Center Church'. Using a computer analogy, Keller describes a theological vision as 'middleware', which is the software layer that sits between a specific application and the base software. Similarly, a Theological Vision sits between the doctrine we share, expressed by the Westminster Confession, and the practical day to day ministry decisions about structures and programs that individual churches pursue. It is a 'Well-Conceived vision for how to bring the gospel to bear on the particular cultural setting and historical moment' (Center Church, p17).

I believe there would be great benefit for the PCQ if we could develop such a shared vision. It would give us a more meaningful basis for decision making, resourcing and accountability than can be provided by simply a doctrinal statement.

There is a danger with developing a shared vision of Spiritually mature ministry that it overprescribes necessary elements of maturity in a way that limits the freedom of churches and leaders to do ministry according to their different gifts and contexts. In the past this has been seen in the PCQ as an insurmountable challenge. It has therefore been abandoned in favour of a minimalistic approach to denominational unity where the most important priority of the denomination is seen to be 'getting out of the way' of local churches.

The current challenges, however, present us with a unique opportunity to again attempt the task of developing a shared vision of healthy ministry that is both sufficiently detailed to be meaningful, but sufficiently broad to allow the breadth of gifts and cultures necessary for supporting spiritually mature churches across our State.

The PCQ General Assembly has the authority to develop such a shared vision if it wishes to. It is not attempting to set new doctrine or specify particular forms of worship or service, but rather provide a vision for how our doctrine might be effectively worked out and administered in our particular setting.

If the PCQ commits to developing a shared vision of spiritual maturity for churches and leaders, what might be some key elements of this Vision? I suggest the following 4 elements for consideration:

1. A commitment to Spiritual Growth of all those who are a part of our denomination.

Fundamental to the work of the church is the task of teaching, encouraging, exhorting, and spurring one another on to grow to maturity in Christ shown by growing faith, hope, love and good deeds. Ephesians 4:15-16 describes this goal, that we will grow to be the mature

body of Christ, united, speaking truth in love and growing in love as every part does its' work.

This commitment guards against the dangers of doctrinal purity without love, numerical growth without sound doctrine or love, or respectability without truth and love. None of these priorities do justice to the Biblical picture of spiritual maturity which we need to commit to as a denomination.

2. A commitment to promote Gospel mission in our denomination.

A commitment to the mission of spreading the gospel is a key part of growing in faith and good deeds. Jesus has left us the great commission to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28: 19-20) and living, as we do, in the age of Gospel mission we as a denomination should make promoting this mission in our churches a key priority.

There is always a danger that Gospel mission gets pushed to the periphery by the many other challenges and demands of church life, but it is a vital priority for every church.

3. A commitment to promote love and good deeds in our denomination.

Growing in love and good deeds, and especially in a love for those who are 'poor in the eyes of the world' (James 2:5-6) is an essential part of growing to maturity as a Christian. Encouraging love and good deeds is central to the role of Church (Heb 10:25). This task has become more complicated in a post-christian culture where some biblical teaching, especially sexual ethics is seen as cruel and immoral, and other teaching, such as generosity to the poor, has become politically contentious.

4. A commitment to equip and train all members to use their gifts in serving and leading

A key Biblical teaching about the body of Christ is that every part has a role to play. This needs to be reflected in our structures and teaching. A particular challenge facing our denomination is how to allow women to use their gifts in a more fulsome and Biblical way, as well as how we encourage the gifts and insights of different cultural and socio-economic groups.

- 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?***

If the PCQ develops a shared vision of maturity, the next task will be to encourage and assist churches and leaders to bring their ministries into line with this shared vision. There are three key steps I see in implementing the vision.

1. The development of tools that can effectively assess the Spiritual Maturity of Churches and Leaders.

Being able to assess progress towards a vision is a key part of implementing any meaningful change in our denomination. Currently the PCQ assesses some aspects of church life such as attendance and giving and number of groups. We need to assess if there are additional or different measures that might better assess the maturity of churches.

Presbyteries also need more assistance in conducting helpful visitations that better assess progress towards maturity rather than just give disgruntled people an opportunity to raise personal grievances. This could perhaps utilize some aspects of church consultation practices.

2. The development of systems that can graciously hold Churches and Leaders accountable to the agreed vision.

The key structure for accountability in the PCQ is Presbyteries. This is already part of their job description; however, they need to take this role beyond the traditional 5 yearly ordinary visitation and occasional trouble shooting special visitation.

Presbyteries should devote time to receiving regular (annual) reports from charges and leaders about how their ministries are seeking to promote maturity and how they are seeking to grow spiritually mature themselves. Some Presbyteries already do this, however if clearer measures of maturity were developed it would assist Presbyteries in having meaningful oversight of churches in their bounds.

Presbyteries should also seek to develop a 5-year plan which not only includes the plans of each individual charge but seeks to agree on opportunities for Mission in the presbytery as a whole and plans for how it might be resourced.

We should also develop, in our rules, an opportunity for ordained leaders to have assessment of their continued growth in maturity and state of their ministry in their current setting.

I believe it is also important for Presbyteries to have a sense of accountability for how they are fulfilling their role in the denomination. A more rigorous annual report to Assembly, aligned with the shared vision, would be one way to provide more accountability to Presbyteries.

3. The provision of support and resources to help Churches and Leaders grow towards the shared vision of Spiritual Maturity.

Again, Presbyteries can provide some assistance here. Fostering a sense of fellowship in the Gospel by informal times together as well as formal meetings through such practices as meals together and annual retreats.

Presbyteries will also need to become a more significant source of financial resources for church planting and revitalization. At least one Presbytery has already implemented a system for sharing of resources, and others are considering it.

Outside of Presbyteries, if QTC is onboard with the vision it will be an important resource in preparing for ministry in line with our theological vision and for providing ongoing training and encouragement for leaders.

Continued development of Spiritual Renewal Groups to assist ministers and other leaders be growing in Spiritual Maturity.

Governance training would be helpful so that all those serving on courts and committees have a basic understanding of the responsibilities of being on courts and committees and how to effectively fulfill them.

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 I have covered most of my thoughts on this question in the previous section. In general, the task of spiritual oversight and accountability should be the task of Presbyteries. Denominational committees and leaders should be focused on resourcing Presbyteries or providing practical administrative assistance for ministry in areas such as payroll services.

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

I believe the culture of our denomination, as a denomination, should be captured by the phrase 'fellowship in the Gospel'. This phrase captures both the importance of the relational side of a healthy denomination – it is made up of significant relationships that provide support, encouragement, and accountability. But they are relationships with a particular purpose – to do the work of the Gospel in growing mature churches. If we want a 'fellowship in the gospel' culture, courts and committees will need to keep in mind both the

fellowship and the Gospel Work aspects of the denomination in the way they are structured and conducted.