

# Key Questions for PCQ Review Consultation

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1. **What do you think a healthy Presbyterian denomination looks like in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia? For example, what services and processes, formal and informal would a healthy denomination provide to churches, ministry workers and presbyteries? What kind of culture would we have if we were a healthy denomination?**
2. **What have the current PCQ challenges revealed about the changes we as a denomination need to consider and why?**
  - **What weaknesses and strengths do we have?**
3. **If you were to set four or five strategic priorities for us as a denomination for the next five years, what would they be?**  
**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?**
  - **How might a healthy culture come about and be sustained?**

1. **What do you think a healthy Presbyterian denomination looks like in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia? For example, what services and processes, formal and informal would a healthy denomination provide to churches, ministry workers and presbyteries? What kind of culture would we have if we were a healthy denomination?**

A healthy Presbyterian denomination in 21<sup>st</sup> C Australia is dynamically rooted in the doctrinal convictions that shape it. A healthy denominational culture forms when characters, relationships, activities and structures are conformed to, accountable to, evaluated in light of and reflecting wholehearted joy in these gospel doctrines. Therefore, going forward in pursuit of a healthy Presbyterian denomination means always going back to these foundational convictions.

Our doctrinal convictions start with God himself. God creates, fashions, gathers and guards his church to his glory, despite ongoing threats from within and without. Through his covenant of grace, the Father creates a communion of redeemed children, united to Christ through his Spirit-empowered Word (gospel).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 5:17-21; WCF 25, 26.

All those in Christ are united as the universal church, sharing in new life through his death and resurrection. Christ's universal church is not yet visible in the present age but awaits perfect, visible embodiment in the new creation. In this age, the universal and invisible church naturally assumes local and visible expression where the ministry of God's Word (authoritatively shaping faith and practice) and sacraments is present.<sup>2</sup>

Christ continues his prophetic, priestly and ruling ministry through the supreme authority of Scripture. The visible local church is led by godly, appointed pastors and elders (leaders) who are given ministerial authority to faithfully interpret and preach the fullness of God's Word, administer the sacraments, exercise discipline and guard against false doctrine, for the salvation of sinners and for God's glory.<sup>3</sup>

*Biblical example and principle also show that broader assemblies of pastors and elders beyond local churches both express our broader unity in Christ and are important for protecting and promoting ministry in local churches.* For example, in the New Testament, local pastors and elders are appointed, needs supplied and binding matters deliberated amongst groups of churches as an expression of broader unity in Christ.<sup>4</sup> A desire for autonomous and completely independent local ministry undermines this unity while love for God's church drives it.

More important than specific biblical examples, however, is the knowledge of each leader's indwelling sin, vulnerability to pride, rebellion and error, and limitations in perspective. The apostle Peter, for example, was effectively denying the doctrine of God's grace by his deeds, without even realising it (Gal 2:11-21). A healthy denominational culture understands the power of sin (individually and collectively) and together draws on God's resources to counter it.<sup>5</sup>

Godly humility also acknowledges that local church leaders cannot easily do all that is required for personal growth and ministry in isolation. Ministry is also multiplied when churches combine assets, both physical and spiritual. This cooperation is as important as ever in the 21<sup>st</sup> C as our cultural context poses complex challenges for ministry.

Therefore, reflecting these foundational biblical principles, a healthy Presbyterian denomination has three key features:

- a. **Commitment to Doctrinal Convictions** – At the heart of our common task is obedience to the supreme authority of the Scriptures. We further affirm the foundational importance of doctrinal conviction by identifying with the tested reflections of historic Christian orthodoxy in the Westminster Confession of Faith (alongside the Declaratory

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<sup>2</sup> John 17:22-24; Acts 5:11, 9:31, 11:26; 1 Cor 10:32, 12:28; Eph 1:3-14, 4:11-16; WCF 25, Calvin, J. (2011). *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*. (J. T. McNeill, Ed., F. L. Battles, Trans.) Vol. 1. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 1059.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Tim 3:1-7, 5:17; Titus 1:5-9; Calvin pp. 1053-1068.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 15:1-21; 2 Cor 8:1-7; 1 Tim 5:20; WCF 31.

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 5:16-17; James 3:2; 1 John 1:8-10; WCF 6.

Statement). Through this, we benefit deeply from the wisdom of God's church over time.

Sound and tested doctrinal convictions are foundational to our ministry, unity and indeed our very integrity as God's church. The sharper our doctrine, the more enthusiastic our worship, the deeper our wisdom, love and humility, and the more insightfully we share the gospel with the lost. The vaguer or more careless our doctrine, the more open we are to the destruction of false teaching and sin, and the less effective our witness.

Therefore, a healthy Presbyterian denomination discusses theology and is clearly and thoroughly driven by sound theological thinking. It also shows a collective commitment to growth in doctrinal insight and application, sound training and testing of candidates for ministry (both through church courts and the college), discerning appointments to local ministries, and careful assessments on controversies of faith.<sup>6</sup>

- b. Cooperation** – In a healthy Presbyterian denomination, leaders, wives, ministry workers and congregations seek out opportunities to build one another up in Christ, both formally and informally.

A healthy Presbyterian denomination also welcomes opportunities for cooperative gospel ministry both in the context of local church ministry and beyond:

- Growing and planting churches
- Ongoing theological education and ministry training (ordained and non-ordained)
- Mission (and service) in various contexts e.g. overseas and rural outreach, Christian education and chaplaincy in schools and hospitals, care for the vulnerable etc
- Specialist ministry consultation and assistance
- Finance, administrative, legal and IT expertise
- Where appropriate, petitioning government with a unified voice<sup>7</sup>
- Cooperating with other denominations and networks for the purposes of gospel ministry in this region and beyond.

- c. Accountability** – a healthy Presbyterian denomination values and upholds processes, checks and balances put in place to safeguard local church communions, leaders, associated ministries, vulnerable people and doctrinal integrity against the God-defying tendency to self-interest within us all.<sup>8</sup> While friendship and parachurch networks provide valuable support, the credentialing, accountability and appeal structures of a healthy Presbyterian denomination should provide more authoritative, thorough and continuing protection.

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<sup>6</sup> Eph 4:11-16; 1 Tim 6:20-21; 2 Tim 4:34; WCF 31.

<sup>7</sup> WCF 31.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2.

- 2. What have the current PCQ challenges revealed about the changes we as a denomination need to consider and why?**
- **What weaknesses and strengths do we have?**

From my corner of PCQ, I have by no means a panoramic view. However, my general observation is that many of the healthy structures flowing from biblical doctrine and designed to serve local churches, are theoretically in place. I have been very much moved to thank God for the great variety of strengths he has given PCQ over many years.

It is also my observation that the key challenge PCQ faces is the (often subtle) undermining of the purposes of these good denominational purposes and structures in practice. Thus, I think PCQ's primary weaknesses are largely spiritual and relational rather than structural. PCQ's current upheaval provides a great opportunity to recognise weaknesses and depend all the more on God's grace.<sup>9</sup>

In light of the above features of a healthy Presbyterian denomination, I have listed categories of strengths I have observed in PCQ, which also serve as aims in nurturing a Christ-honouring culture. I have then listed some apposite weaknesses I and others have observed in PCQ.

#### **a. Valuing Denominational Ministry**

**Strengths** — A primary focus on local church ministry seems to be the current norm in PCQ. That is healthy and worth celebrating. Many whose central focus is on their local church ministry also see the importance of setting aside time to engage in considered, prayerful, sacrificial labour for wider ministry relationships and tasks. They do this while, as Calvin says, being content with their own limits and not unduly 'breaking into another man's province.'<sup>10</sup> They see this as an important way to share blessings, sufferings and imperatives in Christ, grasp gospel opportunities, safeguard churches, show Christlike concern for others, and acknowledge personal need.

**Weaknesses** — While some may have tended to neglect local church ministry in favour of denominational ministries, an opposite tendency has also developed which sees ministries outside the local church as either unimportant and not even true, gospel ministry, or merely a means to achieving personal ministry ends (e.g. resources or benefits for their own charge). Central denominational processes certainly have at times in the past been burdensome, bureaucratic and inefficient. However, the belief that denominational activities are *inevitably* about tedious bureaucracy rather than vital support of gospel ends can yield a settled tolerance of cynical self-interest, ungodly relating and the neglect of other ministries.

#### **b. Commitment to Theological Convictions**

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<sup>9</sup> James 4:8.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin p.1059

**Strengths** — I am deeply encouraged that many in PCQ persevere in biblical faithfulness, convinced it is core to their responsibility to God's church, ministry effectiveness and growth in Christ. Many strive to ensure that their ministry practice and denomination contributions are driven by sound conviction. Many are actively growing in depth of doctrinal knowledge and communication skills, seeking opportunities for ongoing learning and feedback. Many engage in theological discussions with other leaders that are characterised by careful listening, humble challenge and the desire to build up rather than show off, trip up, hide, divide or self-justify. There is also good work being done across PCQ to ensure ordination candidates and other ministry workers are rigorously taught and tested according to fitting and 'failable' criteria.

**Weaknesses** — Encouraged by the western and evangelical culture in which we live, PCQ at points shows a leaning towards unhealthy pragmatic approaches to ministry. A healthily pragmatic ministry invites creative, practical ideas but ensures they are thoroughly shaped by theological conviction. It allows God's Word to determine 'what truly works' in ministry, both for the short and long term. Unhealthy pragmatism gives too much ground to human wisdom and over-emphasises immediate response, growth in numbers, efficiency and charismatic leadership.

This unhealthy pragmatism and a variety of other factors have sometimes produced a tendency to reduce theological convictions to pools of 'essentials' of diminishing size, superficial knowledge and interaction with the supreme and subordinate standards, lack of care over teaching content particularly in areas such as women's and children's ministries, and avoidance of open theological discussion and challenge. Our current western culture predisposes us to give greater authority to personal experiences (as important as these are) than theological thinking. At its worst, pragmatism has led to diminished appropriation of gospel riches in all aspects of ministry along with insensitivity to or tolerance of (often subtle) distortions of doctrine. A shared unhealthy pragmatism inevitably impairs a denominational culture and local church ministry.

### c. Cooperation and Accountability - Nurturing Godly Character and Relationships

**Strengths** — It is clear that many leaders in PCQ are doing much to faithfully point each other to gospel riches in the face of major discouragements and challenges. There are encouraging initiatives to nurture fellowship and support that stretches beyond the many rich, friendship networks. There is also a clear desire to welcome more consultation with PCQ members, including those with expertise in various areas. Many leaders are seeking to encourage men and women to minister together according to a considered, complementarian theology.

There are many leaders who humbly confess sin, openly accept blame and transparently pursue repentance through God's grace.<sup>11</sup> There are many who show ready forgiveness and pursue Christlike generosity and patience. I have been immensely thankful for those who have spoken truthfully and with much care then patiently weathered conflict because of it.

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<sup>11</sup> James 5:16.

There is particular evidence of desire for greater mutual accountability and right fulfilment of ministry responsibilities in many corners of PCQ.

**Weaknesses** — Regenerated hearts can still be deeply deceitful, particularly when in possession of power.<sup>12</sup> Even with the best of theological convictions, sinful actions can undermine the purposes of a healthy denomination.

Although Presbyterian denominations value shared responsibility, they easily develop a *de facto* hierarchy. PCQ is no exception. Some have discouraged questioning, ensured they have only uncritical supporters inhabiting the accountability structures around them, shifted blame, withheld information without adequate justification, assumed entitlement to privileged treatment as well as exemptions from normal accountability and decision-making processes or seen no need for them, used intimidation and manipulation to cover their sin and achieve their own ends, and ridiculed others privately and publicly. Others have quietly failed to question, pursue or speak the truth due to indifference, fear, self-protective desires, a sense of helplessness or cynicism. Sometimes a good sense of loyalty to friends and co-workers has also turned a blind eye to important problems, resisted honest assessments and even undermined loyal obedience to Christ.

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

**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?**
- **How might a healthy culture come about and be sustained?**

Drawing together the comments above, here are four suggested priorities for PCQ:

**i. Pursue the Right Kind of Change —**

Given the nature of PCQ's weaknesses, change needs to be primarily cultural and involve deep, spiritual work. Some structural changes are worth making. But there may be a temptation to simply address symptoms of recent unaccountability by seeking for quick-fix structural solutions — which might just in time produce different kinds of problems. There may also be a temptation to abandon denominational activities that are either good or which could be improved (and have real value) through careful, allied attempts to move in the right direction.

Instead, I think the first (and by no means new) priority is for individuals and groups to take the lead in initiating spiritual change, clinging prayerfully to God's

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<sup>12</sup> 1 John 1:8, 10; WCF VI.

mercy and sovereignty, putting sin to death by his power, treasuring his church and pursuing personal and collective obedience in the denominational sphere. This may well entail the often lonely task of thoughtfully questioning problematic cultures in a variety of contexts. Pursuing spiritual change as a denomination is the more complex but ultimately most important task.

**ii. Hold Fast to Theological Convictions—**

- Prioritise and value the continuing development of rigorous, impartial and consistently applied training and testing of candidates through presbyteries and the Queensland Theological College, including in the Westminster Confession.
- Emphasise the value of explicitly theologically driven decision making in all Presbyterian courts; welcome careful assessments of pertinent controversies of faith while also discerning valid room for disagreement; encourage learning (formal or informal) and feedback for all those in church and associated ministries.

**iii. Encourage Cooperative Ministry Activities**

- Purposefully foster compassionate support and gospel encouragement between leaders and extending to those in more isolated areas. Ensure ministry marriages, families and other personal relationships are also actively supported.
- Openly discuss and teach complementarianism, making every effort made to thoughtfully and practically help men and women do good ministry together.
- Be clear about the gospel aims of cooperative denominational activities. Even where finances mean some cooperative ministries cannot function as previously, look for other ways to develop these.
- Actively pursue greater consultation with and participation in PCQ activities from PCQ members.

**iv. Carefully Pursue Greater Accountability**

- Pursue interactions that are full of grace and speak truth. Encourage leaders who are willing to be vulnerable rather than hide, invite searching feedback, accept blame where due and foster healthy habits of accountability.
- Ensure that faithfully meeting ministerial responsibilities at a high standard and with accountability is more important than the preferences of those who occupy the formal roles involved.

- Faithfully keep to agreed rules and processes of PCQ so as to maintain accountability. Review our rules and processes over time so as to keep them fit for our current ministry needs and the changing challenges of keeping accountability (and avoiding making changes simply to satisfy immediate self-interest).
- Consistently undertake and complete visitations (or equivalent alternative and well-designed means of review to churches), even when no obvious problems have been flagged, or when resistance to accountability and review is met. Consistently apply searching accountability questions to leaders across the board as well as providing encouragement.