The Eldership:
Yesterday, Today and Forever?

An examination of the traditional Presbyterian polity and its ongoing relevance and practicability for local churches in twenty-first century New Zealand.

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Preface
When the Rev John Pringle married Miss Clara Chirnside in 1890, he gave her a fine gold ring set with rubies and diamonds. She treasured it for sixty years and on her death it passed to her daughter Vera, my grandmother. Vera gave it to me in 1972 and since then I have worn it every day. It is especially precious because it is a physical connection with my ancestors. Over the years though it has become worn and uncomfortable, and a new section has had to be inserted. It is still recognisable as the same configuration of gems worn by a nineteenth century lady of the manse. But it no longer carries the hallmark to testify to its origins. It is a taonga ¹ - a treasure – but some might say no longer authentic to its history.

The eldership too is a taonga – but one that has needed adjustment over the centuries. Whether it is still authentic to its tradition – and how much more adjustment will be needed to make it fit our post-modern world – is the question I decided to address in a Masters level research paper in 2003. My decision to embark on an exploration of the Presbyterian eldership coincided with a sea change in the local and national Presbyterian Church scene. The PCANZ had embarked on a wide-ranging project to rewrite the Book Of Order, its policy

¹ Taonga - something highly prized, valuables, treasure e.g. huia feathers. H W Orsman, ed., The Dictionary of New Zealand English (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1997). Page 813
manual. A review of the definitions and duties of eldership was a priority. At the same time the congregation I had served as minister for nine years, was conventionally governed by a wise but ageing eldership who were struggling to cope with the increasing complexity of a busy regional church. Recruitment of leaders for the various teams of the ‘Session Council’, established ten years before, and of enough new elders to replace those who relocated or retired, was becoming problematical. For those still active, the burden of leadership was becoming unbearable: pastoral visiting, vestry duties for multiple services, and up to three monthly meetings, on top of fulltime work, care of grandchildren or other community work. Our attempts to incorporate new insights into spiritual giftings tended to conflict with a system that traditionally assigned responsibility, but limited authority, to the ministry personnel of the church. By 2003 it was clear that something needed to change.

Yet in Howick we are deeply committed to the theology and practice of Presbyterianism As a daughter and great granddaughter of Presbyterian ministers I regard the eldership as a precious gift that shares leadership and enables each person in the church family to receive intentional pastoral care. Granted, the inertia and duplications of collegial decision-making can be frustrating but the ‘flat hierarchy’ of church courts improves the prospects for safety and protection in a world where rogue ministers are becoming an embarrassing liability.

I decided to investigate the roots and branches of our Presbyterian polity, to discover whether it is in fact, as my ancestors and teachers claimed, the authentically biblical and eminently transferable model. There were some
constraints to my explorations. I did not just want to defend the Presbyterian view, yet it seemed counterproductive to spend a lot of time on other historical polities. The governance of the ecumenical ‘Cooperating Venture’, a creative attempt to adapt the eldership, was also excluded. The objectives I settled on were an examination of Biblical and historical material on the eldership in the context of a review of 21st century social change, and a qualitative survey of contemporary New Zealand Presbyterian churches. I hoped this exercise in Practical Theology would unearth possibilities for reconfiguring ‘the eldership,’ as gifted by Scripture and Tradition, to fit with a post-modern church and society. Along the way I hoped to discover some practical clues for reconfiguring the eldership in Howick Presbyterian Church. I am grateful for the support I received from my family, my congregation and from the School of Ministry at Knox College.
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Introduction
Presbyterian Polity and Practicability

The Bible portrays God as a God of order, and a concern for orderly governance of human relationships is eminently biblical. The leadership tradition of eldership has been known in a generic sense since Old Testament times, and the New Testament church clearly relied on a plurality of presbyters for leadership. For the last four hundred years churches in the Reformed tradition of Protestantism have relied on an analogous non-hierarchical polity to govern local and regional church bodies.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand is a denomination whose provenance lies in sixteenth century Scotland, where the leaders of the Reformation adopted a church government that represented a ‘Copernican change’ from the monarchical leadership that had been exercised in state and church theretofore. In contrast to the Protestant Christians of England, who simply adapted the Catholic model of episcopacy, the Church of Scotland based their polity on a conciliar principle where courts or councils take the place of individual religious leaders. A hierarchy of these courts exercised governance in

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3 Myriad Biblical examples are found, eg Genesis 18: 13 - 24, and Acts 14: 23
widening circles of local, regional and national responsibility. The lowest of these, the Kirk Session, was largely comprised of non-clergy ‘elders’ enjoying considerable power and initiative.  

When Scots settlers emigrated to the young colony of New Zealand in the mid-nineteenth century, it was this ‘Presbyterian’ polity they brought to guide them in the establishment of a Biblical and Reformed ecclesiology.  

The Scotland from which they sailed was vastly different from the New Zealand of today.  

A changing society prompts contemporary Kiwi Presbyterians to question the relevance of their polity, and its reliance on the historic system of elders to govern the church. Both in New Zealand and elsewhere, churches that follow a conciliar polity based on eldership, increasingly experience tensions and frustrations.  

These can be partly explained by massive changes in ‘post-modern’ Western society – mobility, individualism and the “new voluntarism”.  

As ‘new occasions teach new duties’, the constraints of a post-modern world necessitate a re-evaluation of the place of the eldership paradigm in the Presbyterian denomination. The abiding motto of the Reformation movement was “Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda” – a willingness for the church to go on being

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7 ‘Presbyterian’ = governed by elders, from presbuteros Greek for elder.
8 A largely rural populace, with an agrarian economy and few city centres, previously divided in to geographical parishes by the civil and religious leadership.
9 “While the structures of Presbyterianism have served it well, in recent decades a number of points of tension have arisen in relation to organisation, not just matters of theology or ethics.” John Roxborogh, "Persistent Presbyterianism? Lay Leadership and the Future of Christianity in the West," in *Future of Christianity in the West Conference*, (Otago University: School of Ministry, 2002). Page 6.
reformed under the direction of Word and Spirit.\footnote{See Foreword to Joan S Gray and Joyce C Tucker, *Presbyterian Polity for Church Officers* (Louisville: Geneva, 1986). Page xiii.} As Presbyterian churches in contemporary New Zealand confront the interface between church and community, they are wrestling with these issues.

In the present study, a qualitative cross section of some of the practical experiences, frustrations and tentative solutions of some New Zealand congregations, provided pointers for fruitful theological reflection and practical application. Six interconnected features - Call and Covenant, Councils and Collegiality, and Constraints and Courage - are offered as precious dimensions of the polity to be conserved, if the taonga of ‘the eldership’ as gifted by Scripture and Tradition is to be reconfigured to fit with a post-modern church and society.
Chapter 1
The Eldership in Scripture and Early Christian Tradition

The people of God are called to “go to all the world” with the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The testimony of Scripture is that every Christian has a responsibility to implement this God-given mission as a member of Christ’s Body, and a participant in the ‘Priesthood of all Believers.’ The New Testament promises the Holy Spirit’s equipping for each believer to contribute their individual gifts to the corporate life of the people of God. Nevertheless the Bible also clearly testifies that some men and women work in particular ways within this harmony of activities. The Reformed churches identify in Scripture certain permanent ministries, responsible for specific tasks of leadership. Presbyterians find their vocation of eldership, (from the Greek presbuteros), in both Old and New Testaments. The eldership is seen as a gift from God for the leadership of the church, with special responsibility for general pastoral oversight of an extended but localised Christian community.

From the very beginning of the fellowship of believers in Jesus, patterns of organisation and leadership emerged. Ordinary believers certainly had significant roles in teaching (I Peter 3.15) and ‘charismatic’ worship; Paul’s organic metaphor

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12 Matthew 28: 20
13 A term coined by Luther from I Peter 2: 5
14 See Faith and Order Commission, Baptism Eucharist and Ministry (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), Section M5
16 Presbuteros and the Hebrew zagen, are terms of respect derived from the word ‘beard’, Kevin Giles, Patterns of Ministry among the First Christians (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1989). Page 72
17 Ibid. Page 94
assumes a spirit-gifted part for every single member of the Body.\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless he recognised the importance of stability alongside the charismatic life of the church, and urged the Corinthian church to ensure that their corporate life was decently ordered.\textsuperscript{19} New Testament scholars largely agree that there existed a plurality of leaders in the local church, and that a loose form of governmental unity was achieved by a ‘conciliar’ structure (rule by councils).\textsuperscript{20}

From this starting point three main systems of governance – Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregational – emerged, and down through history adherents of each model have used Scripture “to justify the superiority of its organisational pattern.”\textsuperscript{21} The abiding view of the Reformed Church is that its Presbyterian polity, marked by a significant dependence on lay leadership, is eminently biblical.\textsuperscript{22} Today some sources still claim the eldership to be a unique “divinely-revealed concept” of leadership.\textsuperscript{23} Others accept that Scripture gives solid evidence for collegial leadership but does not point to one single church order.\textsuperscript{24} What presbyters did, how they were selected and what authority they held, is a matter of vigorous debate, even within the Reformed family of churches.\textsuperscript{25} Giles notes that New Testament comments about presbyters are “infrequent and cursory”, and that consequently the literature on early Christian ecclesiology exhibits

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{18} I Corinthians 12: 14 - 31
\textsuperscript{19} I Corinthians 14: 40
\textsuperscript{20} Hall, Page 5
\textsuperscript{22} Roxborough, 2002 Page 6
\textsuperscript{25} Vischer, ed., \textit{The Ministry of the Elders in the Reformed Churches}. Page 10, 22
\end{footnotes}
“an ongoing debate as to whether or not all churches in the apostolic age had leaders called presbyters, about the function of Christian presbyters when they are mentioned, and about the relationship between presbyters and bishops. Only on one point do we find well nigh universal agreement; that Christian presbyters came into the church from Judaism.”

The office of the eldership is almost certainly a form of community leadership dating back to the Jewish patriarchs. Prophets may have been erratic, judges temporary, kings unreliable, and priests phony, but the elders remained, even through captivity, a credible and enduring leadership. Elders were not just respected older people, but the city fathers, the wise men of the community, who were understood to have a corporate function rather than being wise as individuals. In the synagogues of Jesus’ day, the elders taught scripture and exercised corporate oversight, alongside the ‘special ministers’ who managed worship, and collected tithes. A “utilitarian committee,” comprising the older men of the community, also ruled Greek cities, and Hellenistic Jewish communities too deferred to an eldership. The early church adopted this “ready-made form of Presbyterian government” as being both theologically and culturally appropriate. There is an intriguing suggestion by Powell, that seniority in faith rather than chronological age, was the criterion for leadership in the faith community.

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26 Giles. Page 72 and Vischer Ministry page 104  
27 Bailey. Page 29, 31  
29 The archesunagogus supervised the liturgy and the hazzan looked after details such as handing over the scrolls, Giles pages 74 – 76.  
32 Powell. Page 290 – 328 He also suggests that the model for the Christian Presbyterate was not synagogue eldership but the Mosaic presbyters of the Pentateuch; the typology was not of a new synagogue but of a new ekklesia, a new Israel. Page 304
presbyters (elders) assisted by a second officer, the deacon, provided a two-fold servant leadership modeled on that of Christ himself.\textsuperscript{33}

Within a century or so, authority had been lodged in a president of this college of rulers, and the bishop or pastor became the top layer of a three-fold hierarchical system reflecting the secular rule of the time.\textsuperscript{34} Some scholars find evidence for the three-fold order in the late first-century Pastoral Epistles, suggesting it was the result of an evolutionary development.\textsuperscript{35} Others take the view that structures were combined into different forms in different contemporaneous communities.\textsuperscript{36} Presbyterians have historically regarded the development of episcopacy with suspicion, and some scholars even dub the ‘prelatic’ polities as “aberrant forms.”\textsuperscript{37} The interchangeability of \textit{episkopos} and \textit{presbuteros} in the biblical texts is used by Reformed churches to support the view that ministry in the New Testament and early church was a non-hierarchical form based on collegiality and consensus.\textsuperscript{38} In a context where charismatic and institutional leadership operated side by side, the elders were “a pastoral council with authority to determine issues of importance.” \textsuperscript{39}


\textsuperscript{34} The three offices are bishop, presbyter and deacon.

\textsuperscript{35} ‘The elementary lay leadership of the Jewish churches is evolving into religious office…the clergy have arrived.” D H Battley, “Sharing the Priestly Task: The Theology and Organisation of Sharing Ministry between Laity and Clergy in the Anglican Church in New Zealand” (D Min, San Francisco Theological Seminary, 1986). Page 98, 100. Giles (1989) argues that the \textit{archesunagogus} and the \textit{hazzan} correspond with the bishop and deacon.


\textsuperscript{37} Hall. 1994 Page 4

\textsuperscript{38} Interchangeability is asserted by Lightfoot (1873, page 93) and others, but Giles disagrees, seeing eldership as a status of honour, and episcopacy as a function of local church leadership. See Kevin Giles, \textit{What on Earth Is the Church?} (North Blackburn: Harper Collins Dove, 1995). Page 150.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. Page 188
A number of unifying factors can be identified in the New Testament references to the office of elder: an element of permanency, respect and recognition, authorisation by prayer and/or laying of hands, and in some cases payment and privilege. Elders were the “normative leaders”, operating under apostolic authority and utilising the gifts of the spirit. This assumption of a collegial leadership underlies the system of government accepted by the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand to be ‘agreeable to the Word of God” and applied to its parishes, councils and assemblies in the “Book of Order.” It is not the purpose of the present study to further debate the various Biblical paradigms, but simply to take as the point of departure that New Zealand Presbyterians currently follow an order they believe is “not inconsistent with biblical precedents and theology,” an order in essence bequeathed to them by the church Reformers of sixteenth century Europe.

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40 Giles, *Patterns of Ministry among the First Christians*. Page 17
42 The Book of Order has had multiple incarnations but citations will be to the 2003 version.
Chapter 2
The Eldership and the Reformation

Presbyterianism takes the view that the early church made no hierarchical distinction between those who ‘laboured in the word and doctrine’ (I Tim 5: 17) and other members of the Body of Christ. With the development of episcopacy and the fourth century Christianisation of Roman society, huge changes were set in motion. By the high Middle Ages, church leaders were celibate priests, who exercised sacerdotal privilege, lived in enclosed communities and wore distinctive dress. The church had reappropriated the priestly hierarchy of the Jewish temple, and ordinary believers were no longer involved in the management of the church.

In the sixteenth century, the reformer John Calvin undertook a major repristination of church leadership in Geneva. His contribution was partly in reaction to the doctrinal shortcomings and corrupt structures of the Mediaeval church – and partly stemming from a desire to recover scriptural truth and an apostolic church order. Presbyterians consider Calvin to have “restored the eldership to its proper place”.

The sixteenth century Reformers were deeply influenced by the Renaissance culture of their day, and the intellectual upheaval that epitomised that era. John Calvin knew about Copernicus and “borrowed heavily from Renaissance humanists to create a philosophy that was both grounded in scripture and

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44 Mackenzie. Page 17, 20
45 Ibid Page 20
46 Ibid
conversant with new developments around it." Churchmen like Luther, Zwingli and Calvin were not against structures that included a designated ministry, but vigorously opposed a sacerdotal view of leadership. An important rediscovery for them was the concept of the priesthood of all believers (I Pet 2:5), which accentuated the call of every believer to serve God. The Mediaeval church believed that the imposition of a bishop’s hands effected an ontological change, giving ordained clergy an indelible priestly character. The Reformers however saw that every believer has a priestly role and that there are no intrinsic differences between clergy and lay, only a difference in function. John Calvin’s contribution to this shift in thinking was to identify from Scripture the "cardinal principle of Presbyterian polity", the elder as governor, and to develop a conciliar oversight as opposed to a ruling hierarchy of individuals. In 1559 he published in his famous Institutes:

> From the beginning, therefore, each church had its senate [in French, consistoire], composed of pious, grave, and venerable men, in whom was lodged the power of correcting faults….experience shows that this arrangement was not confined to one age, and therefore we are to regard the office of government as necessary for all ages.

This senate or council was made up of presbyter-elders (French anciens), a permanent ecclesiastical office quite separate from civil polity. Both pastors and elders were presbyters in the biblical sense, but they had distinct functions; pastors were ordained to preach and administer the sacraments, while elders were

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48 Described at the Council of Trent as “vicarious identity with Christ”, and “the power and prerogatives of the immortal god”, quoted in Giles, *Patterns of Ministry among the First Christians*. Page 194
49 Hebrews 10: 19 – 22; see Beasley-Murray. Page 124
50 Peel. Page 242
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commissioned to provide governance and discipline along with the pastors. This radical departure from episcopacy was a collegial form of guidance that sought to avoid individual and arbitrary decisions. In 1543 Calvin had mined the New Testament texts to define four distinct offices in his ecclesiological polity: pastors, teachers, elders and deacons. The local pastors and theological teachers were clergy who were equal without any hierarchy of bishops, the elders were lay governors elected from amongst the magistrates, and the deacons were responsible for practical caring ministries. This has been called Calvin's fourfold ministry; the categories were most likely gleaned from Martin Bucer's 'Kirchenpfleger' polity in Strasbourg. The polity was later implemented in Reformed congregations in France and Scotland.

A major point of Calvin’s Protestant revision was the use of elders for church discipline, a recrudescence which had a profound impact on the norms of Reformed tradition. The changes, enabled lay people to be involved in the pastoral care of the congregation, and the church to develop a new sense of accountability. The practice of discipline by elders may appear intrusive, but compared with the harsh penitential practices of the Roman church, was arguably

53 Ibid Page 40
54 J H Smylie, A Brief History of the Presbyterians (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996). Page 24, and Philip Benedict, Christ's Churches Purely Reformed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Page 87 In selecting out these four Calvin was influenced by the hermeneutical assumptions of his time, that signs and wonders such as prophecy were confined to the apostolic age (cf Inst 4,3,4)  
55 The Kirchenpfleger was an ecclesiastical college with four offices, set up by the City council in Strasbourg under Bucer's influence in 1540. REH Uprichard, "The Eldership in Martin Bucer and John Calvin," Evangelical quarterly LXI, no. 1 (1989).Pages 26 – 32. In the Institutes, 4, 3, 4 – 9, Calvin cites Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12. 
56 de Koster. Page 227
57 Vischer 1992. Page 35; Calvin saw the eldership as divinely prescribed, though one English Presbyterian suggests that elders owed their existence not to Scripture or doctrine but to the practical need for church discipline; "only when the office had been found necessary (was) its institution looked for in Scripture," Ross, 1949 quoted in Peel., 2002. Page 251
gracious and pastoral; “far from being legalistic and crippling it was intended to be life giving and spiritually wholesome.”  

Knox’s Order of Discipline claimed:

As the Word of God is the life and soul of this church, so this godly order and discipline is as it were sinew in the body which knits and joins the members together with decent order and comeliness: it is a bridle …a spur…….the father’s rod ever in a readiness to chastise gently the faults committed and to cause them afterward to live in more godly fear and reverence. Finally it is an order left by God into his church whereby men learn to frame their wills and doings according to the law of God by instructing and admonishing one another yea and by correcting and punishing all obstinate rebels and contemners of the same.

Thus accountability was one of the core values driving the development of the presbyterian system in Geneva and Scotland. Kirkpatrick interpreted this to mean “the polity of the reformed church is built on sin!” The Reformers perceived the Catholic rulers (bishops and cardinals) to be untrustworthy sinners; ergo a collective bishop was needed, a committee “less likely to be arrogant and arbitrary” than a self-serving individual. But there was a theological rationale as well, a discomfort with different grades of being Christian. The idea of the consistory/presbytery was a group of equal ministers and laymen acting together as the “corporate bishop” governing the church.

A second core principle then was the incorporation into the governance of the church of ordinary believers with secular jobs, and regular family and community

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59 Hall 1994. Page 11
61 Ibid.
62 The collective bishop’s activities include ordaining ministers, approving calls, dissolving pastoral ties, planting churches, dissolving or merge churches, providing care and oversight of congregations, selecting and preparing ordinands, sending commissioners to higher governing bodies, receiving and vote on proposed amendments, hearing appeals and resolving conflicts. (personal knowledge)
responsibilities. Elders who engaged in various everyday occupations were selected from the midst of the congregation, so that the government of the church was intimately related to daily life. Before long the gap between pastor and people widened as books became available, and Protestant ministers became more biblically literate and pastorally competent. But Reformed churches also had an “opposite vector”, the role played by lay elders and deacons in church administration, to effect a "uniquely participatory and even Proto-democratic" polity.

A third central principle is that of call: Beasley-Murray includes it in the oldest and most universally held tenets of Reformed teaching. In Reformed polity it is the call that makes the minister not the ordination. Calvin made a helpful distinction between the inner secret and the outward formal call, the first being the individual's testimony of vocation and the latter the church’s confirmation and authorisation of that. Both elders and pastors were understood to receive a specific and personal divine call; this was formally recognised in ordination, at first only of pastors but within a few years elders too were ordained. Thus clergy were not distinguished by an ontological change as with 'apostolic succession', but

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63 Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002). Page 370 lists merchants, cordiners, baxters, smiths, skinners and cutlers, while Benedict 2002 notes that "in the Scottish rural parish of Stow, one tenth of the elders were village craftsmen, another tenth millers, while the great majority of the body was composed of working farmers." Page 456-7
65 Benedict. 2002, Page 451
67 Ibid. 1993. Page 130
rather differentiated by function. Accordingly the Reformed heritage of eldership is a non-hierarchical team of leaders, often with a single chief leader for the sake of order; all are presbyters with oversight but the pastor has a special calling, obligation and privilege of service among peers. 70

Fourthly, the functional distinction between the teaching and the ruling elder, is a core concept described in Calvin’s Institutes, where he cited evidence from key New Testament passages on leadership:

In the Epistle to Timothy, also, he mentions two kinds of presbyters, some who labour in the word, and others who do not perform the office of preaching, but rule well (1 Tim. 5:17). By this latter class there is no doubt he means those who were appointed to the inspection of manners, and the whole use of the keys. 71

John Knox in establishing this “presbyterian” polity in Scotland in 1559, 72 recognised that ministers were elders in a different sense from the laymen who were appointed to assist in administration and discipline. Ministers were devoted to preaching, pastoring, teaching and building a congregation of witnesses. 73 The elders had regular jobs but were responsible for the proper conduct of the congregation’s affairs. They were not authorised to administer the sacraments but as spiritual leaders and representatives of the people had a vote of equal value with that of the minister. This strand of historic polity is known as the Lay Theory; regional oversight was through superintendents in a kind of "congregationalism

70 Bailey. Page 26
tio Christianae religionis.;Reprint, with new introd. Originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846. (IV, xi, 1). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc. 1 Cor. 12:28 and Rom. 12: 8 are also cited
72 These included far reaching changes but were not quite presbyterian; the First Book of Discipline decreed three offices, pastors, seniors, and deacons. Elders were laymen elected for 1 year, and oversight of parishes was by a superintendent. Vischer, ed., The Ministry of the Elders in the Reformed Churches.1992. Page 57
73 Mackenzie. 1945. Page 20
tempered by episcopacy and Erastianism." 74 In 1578, a second strand was formed; Melville’s expanded polity provided for elders to represent the congregation in all courts of the church. 75 Under this Presbyter theory, the status of elders was raised and like pastors (teaching elders), they were ordained to serve for life. 76 Provision was made for four types of ascending assemblies – Session, synod, national assembly and international. 77 Knox and Melville’s reforms, utilising the presbyterian system of ministry, were in widespread use in Scotland before the turn of the sixteenth century. 78 In 1644 The Westminster Form of Church Government written by English Puritans and adopted by the Scots church, wove the strands together and became the definitive document for Presbyterian polity. 79 Parishes were geographically divided into quarters for communion visitation and in the nineteenth century the jurisdiction of the elders districts extended to cover poor relief, education and support of overseas missionaries. 80 It is clear that in Reformed churches the pastors or ministers never stand alone. They are part of a collegium of elders who share in the governance of the congregation; this ubiquitous office is seen as "the distinguishing sign of the reformed tradition". 81

74 D M Murray, The Recent Debate on the Eldership in the Church of Scotland (1990). Page 190
75 Elders (Teaching and Ruling) were elected for life and formed the Kirk Session. Elders together formed the presbytery, synod and assembly.
76 Though not with laying on of hands and they lost their ability to discipline ministers.
77 Melville. 7.2
78 Kirk sessions operated in some parishes from the dawn of the Reformation; in most parishes 12 - 25 lay elders met several times a week. The fact that fines were levied for absentees suggest this must have been onerous on men with farms or businesses, but it was rare for anyone to decline the honour of the status. Todd. Page 8.
79 See Hall. Page 260 – 278 and Uprichard. Page 36f
Not all Presbyterians agree with Calvin’s conviction that Presbyterian government was divinely prescribed (*ius divinum*). In 1984 a monograph by Thomas Torrance contended that the office of elder was a fourth century invention having no biblical antecedents, and found “no clear evidence in the New Testament for what we call elders let alone the theory that there are two kinds of presbyter.” However in 1989 Uprichard critiqued this view by demonstrating how Bucer and Calvin had reappraised the biblical texts and discovered the distinctly presbyterian view of a two-fold eldership. He rejected Torrance’s thesis that the church fathers invented the eldership, but acknowledged there were significant ambiguities in Calvin’s polity, which may have later contributed to a clericalisation in Protestant Europe.

As time went on the differences in practice and theology between Catholic and Protestant did become blurred; “in both kinds of churches the clergy were a class apart; in both their special status was based on divine initiative, (mediated in different ways) and in both certain duties were reserved to them.” John Milton’s epithet that “new presbyter is but old priest writ large” suggested Puritan ministers “wielded inordinate power” and opponents of Presbyterianism in England depicted it as a new form of clericalism where bishops would simply be replaced with thousands of “parish popes”. Still, the constraints were considerable; teaching elders were “beholden to parishioners for their jobs”, were called by and accountable to presbyteries, and had to cooperate with the elders who

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82 IV.3.1 and 8
84 Uprichard.1989
86 Ministers were beholden to parishioners for their jobs, were subject to selection before a call and accountability after, and presbyteries took complaints seriously, so ministers had to cooperate with the elders who outnumbered them on the session. Todd. Page 451
87 Ibid. Page 452
outnumbered them on Session. Such clericalisation as did take place in effect included the ruling elders, who were authorised to catechise, counsel, visit, conduct prayer meetings and even hear confessions. The Second Book of Discipline had made the office a semi-clerical, lifelong appointment, and Sessions, though subject to congregational election, became virtually self-perpetuating. Like ministers, the elders were reviled, abused and assaulted, but "the payoff - status, power and demonstrable piety -seems to have kept most elders on task most of the time".

Calvin did not interpret the New Testament woodenly but with an openness that left room for future consideration and development. He did not insist on a Geneva model in other places, and Knox and Melville in Scotland adapted the polity of rule by elders to their own context. Presbyterianism held brief sway in sixteenth century Puritan England but was eventually eclipsed by Episcopacy. Nevertheless Reformed churches thrived in Wales, Switzerland, France, and Holland, and missions to Canada, the United States, South Africa, and Australasia ensured that this simple biblical polity spread throughout the world.

88 Ibid. p 369 In Ayr in 1636 the elders led a revolt when the minister knelt for the communion; they also wielded the power of the purse, withholding stipend and prohibiting acts of charity.
89 Ibid. Page 371
90 Ibid. Page 373
92 See Hall. Pages 219 and 233
Chapter 3
Eldership in the New World

The arrival of thousands of Free Church Scottish settlers in New Zealand in the mid-nineteenth century brought Presbyterianism to the South Pacific. These resolute pioneers did not subscribe to a high view of the ministry:

The real rock on which the church was founded was the gravitas of the elders,...settler Presbyterianism was strongly lay in ethos, with a considerable amount of lay preaching, and was centred on the matriarchs and patriarchs in their family homes.... this home based settler Presbyterianism was much closer to the land and to the realities of early colonial society than the more traditional Calvinist doctrine and high churchmanship of the ministers.\(^\text{94}\)

Although the elders of the settler churches brought with them the disciplinary measures of their Scots experience \(^\text{95}\), this aspect of governance gradually decreased in frequency so that “by the end of the century elders rarely exercised such authority...crime was left to the police and sin to the individual conscience.”\(^\text{96}\)

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Presbyterians in the USA had noticed a shift towards egalitarianism, and debated the office of the elder in order to define it more clearly. In 1831 a pivotal essay by Samuel Miller of Princeton argued for a ruling eldership, to prevent the growth of a clerical caste and the danger of unbridled democracy.\(^\text{97}\) His vision of the eldership was beatific:

The design of appointing persons to the office of ruling elder is not to pay them a compliment; not to give them an opportunity of figuring as speakers in judicatories; not to create the pageants of ecclesiastical ceremony; but to secure able faithful and truly devoted counsellors and rulers of the church; to obtain wise and efficient guides, who shall not only go along with the

\(^{94}\) Dennis McEldowney, ed., Presbyterians in Aotearoa 1840 - 1990 (Wellington: Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 1990). Page 31. He also notes there a complaint sent back to the Free Church, objecting to an Auckland minister appropriating to himself the rank of “Captain of the ship.”

\(^{95}\) Records of transgressors included “Drunkards and fornicators”.Ibid. Page 32

\(^{96}\) Ibid. Page 49

\(^{97}\) Gray and Tucker. Page 41
Miller vigorously opposed the use of the term lay for elders – calling the practice “erroneous if not mischievous” - and argued that ruling elders are as much clergy as the teaching elders. 99 His colleague Charles Hodge argued that elders, though important, were only representatives of the people and need not be ordained, nor required to validate church courts.100 An influential Southern theologian, James Thornwell, supported Miller’s view, (the Scots church’s ‘Presbyter Theory,’ a high view of elders as outlined in the Second Book of Discipline).101 In the end the American church opted for Hodge’s representational view, corresponding with the ‘Lay Theory’ of Knox’s Scots Confession.102 The Book of Order adopted by the Presbyterian Church in NZ clearly favoured the Presbyter view; elders are ordained for life, have jurisdiction over the nominations to leadership, and can overrule the non-voting Moderator in Session.103 The New Zealand church adopted some hard-won principles from its mother denominations (e.g. the right to choose a minister) and also implemented the Scottish system of elders’ visitation districts, which has been followed for a hundred years. 104

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98 Samuel Miller, The Ruling Elder(The Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, 1832, accessed June 2003); available from www.reformed.org/books/ruling_elder. Page 57
99 Ibid. Page 50
100 In 1879 the US church decided that a court was not constitutionally valid without the presence of at least one elder, Gray and Tucker 1986, page 43
101 Smylie. Page 86
102 Murray. Page 189. Smylie notes that Hodge dubbed Thornwell a “hyper hyper HYPER high Presbyterian” while Thornwell said Hodge was a “no no NO Presbyterian,” (Page 73). For an insight into the Two Theories, see Coleman’s Matrix in Appendix Four.
104 Described in Bailey. Page 74
Ecclesiology in the twentieth century was marked by a worldwide shift towards more egalitarian leadership, and the concept of ministry belonging to the “whole people of God”. The term ‘laity’ was widely agreed to be an unbiblical distinction and the ‘Priesthood of all Believers’ was happily reappropriated. A growing and lively membership sought new ways of being the church; as lay participation increased the Session widened its activities and began to oversee more aspects of congregational life. Presbyterian elders were drawn from a wider pool and became more involved in leadership. A major challenge in polity came in 1970 with the vision of the Plan for Union of five Protestant churches. The Plan opted for a ‘lowest common denominator’ polity that removed ‘ordination for life’ of elders, and was widely perceived to undermine a Reformed view of biblical leadership. Church History Professor Ian Breward opined that “talk of downgrading is unfair, for many of the functions of the eldership …are carried over into the Plan.” He reasoned that in any case Presbyterian government was “hardly of the substance of the faith.” Perhaps the majority differed, for the Plan was defeated, though the ongoing legacy of the initiative was the formation of

[105 Vatican 2 (1962 –5). Catholic theologians like Kung, Donovan and Schillebeeckx and the WCC consultation at Lima (1982) had laid a good foundation for this rethinking, though Presbyterians have noted with concern that the office of the elders is scarcely mentioned in WCC texts. Vischer, ed., The Ministry of the Elders in the Reformed Churches. Pages 89, 93
107 Veitch in McEldowney, ed. Page 146
108 Women had been eligible for eldership from 1953; more recent additions were special interest groups like the Maori Synod (Te Aka Puaho) Pacific Island Synod and Asian Council, as well as nominated youth representatives in church courts. McEldowney ibid.
109 In that year Heidemann wrote optimistically of the possibility of “reformed bishops and catholic elders” Heidemann. Page 7
110 Ian Breward, Unity and Reunion (Dunedin: Ian Breward, 1972). Page 21
111 Ibid p 26, but other evangelicals disagreed. In 1972 one wrote “Be a Presbyterian: vote No to Union!” Alex Chisholm, “The Presbyterian Eldership and the Plan for Union,” Evangelical Presbyterian XXII, no. 2 (1972).]
Cooperative Ventures.\textsuperscript{112} Democratisation has acted as a source of congregational stability and in some cases independence from the national body.\textsuperscript{113} Sessions and Parish Councils are now major decision-making bodies and “ministry training” for the whole people of God has become a priority.\textsuperscript{114} Biblical principles that have undergirded these adjustments in polity include Servant Leadership (Luke 22: 26) Body Ministry (1 Cor 12: 27), team-based structures (Eph 4: 10ff) and “upside down triangles” (I Peter 5: 3), all of which have now became part of the ‘DNA’ of the church.\textsuperscript{115}

Over the centuries, the office of elder in New Zealand and elsewhere, has been modified; “from generation to generation new stimuli and insights have become important, and a variety of models have evolved.”\textsuperscript{116} In churches in England the rise of the evangelical wing and charismatic renewal stirred lay leadership initiatives.\textsuperscript{117} In one United Reform Church, where elders had seen themselves as "just a committee" to discuss matters with the pastor and “help him in his ministry”, renewal brought a new appreciation of the role of elders within the congregation.\textsuperscript{118} Some English Episcopal churches even instituted eldership as a

\textsuperscript{112} Cooperative Ventures are formed under regulations gazetted in 1960 for the union of Presbyterian, Methodist and/or Anglican congregations. One third of parishes in the PCANZ are CV’s.
\textsuperscript{113} Veitch in McEldowney, ed. Page 146
\textsuperscript{114} The Parish Council is the governing body of a Cooperative Venture; its members are treated as elders for the purpose of participation in Presbyterian regional and national courts.
\textsuperscript{115} The upside down triangle is a reversal of traditional hierarchy; instead of the national church being the top of the pyramid, it is the base which resources the real mission out in parishes.
\textsuperscript{116} Vischer, ed., The Ministry of the Elders in the Reformed Churches. Page 73. Henderson’s 1974 research into current practices of eldership in reformed churches found the “picture was exceedingly varied.” ibid Page 20
\textsuperscript{117} Chris Skilton, Leadership Teams: Clergy and Lay Leadership in the Local Church, Grove Pastoral Series (Cambridge, UK: Grove Books Limited, 1999). Page 5
\textsuperscript{118} The URC is a twentieth century union of the English Welsh and Scots Congregational Churches, the Presbyterian Church of England and the Reformed Association of the Churches of Christ. These elders “embarked on home visits, study groups and prayer services with a new
means of recognising leadership gifts in the congregation, though such experiments in the New Zealand context have not been extensive.  

In 1990 the Swiss Federation of Protestant churches hosted an international consultation of pastors, elders and theologians, to discuss the significance of the eldership for the church today. The Reformed churches had criticised World Council of Churches documents, for the lack of attention to eldership, but the consultation indicated there are serious problems in the contemporary practice of eldership in the Reformed world. Views on authority and discipline have changed, and most Reformed churches utilise elements of congregationalism. Discipline is no longer exercised deliberately; instead it is entrusted to small groups and other unstructured contexts. Elders are “no longer guardians…but voluntary spiritual counsellors” Not many Presbyterians today would concur with the eloquent assertion from Prof Samuel Wilson at General Council in 1880:

*Going to the word of God to reverently learn what form of government Christ has given the church, and pressing out the very essence of all dispensations, and lifting the name right out from the sacred page with the breath of Jehovah on it, we exclaim Presbyterian!…boast they of Apostolic succession, we claim patriarchal succession! The unbroken line of Presbyterianism ….is older by millennia than the apostles…[beginning with Moses] at Horeb in the light of the burning bush….Moses was sent down to Egypt to convene the Presbytery …the elders the representatives of the people.*


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119 See Skilton, page 14 and Battley, pages 175 - 227
121 Congregationalism is where decisions in the life of the church are decided by congregational vote. “All denominations seem to be moving in the direction of congregationalism/voluntarism even when their polities remain episcopal or presbyterian” Jackson W Carroll, *As One with Authority* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). Page 59
122 Vischer 1992. Page 75
123 Ibid.
Such attempts to canonise a certain historical form of the office of elder are seen as less helpful today: cultural diversity, hermeneutical insights and ecumenical dialogue have led to new perspectives on the theology of ministry. In each of these “the Spirit has seen fit to move and bless, and in each he has found his work constricted and quenched.”

Twentieth-century Presbyterians need as never before to reassess the office and seek inspiration from a variety of historical and contemporary forms. A major impetus for this need for re-evaluation of the eldership is the sociological phenomenon of postmodernism.

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126 See next chapter for definition.
Chapter 4
The Eldership and a Changing Society

The twenty-first century is a very different world from past eras of Christendom when churches were homogeneous, and leadership needs were simple. Modern secularisation and democratisation inevitably called into question the clericalism that had characterised the church, but today even more cataclysmic forces of societal change are at work. Population shifts, changing work and gender roles, global pressures, and technological advancements all mean that more than ever before ‘new occasions teach new duties.’ The challenges of postmodernity are possibly the most disturbing of these demanding forces, and lead to a search for new forms of community in a new millennium. In January 2000 Jim Wallis of Sojourners identified some aspects of postmodern ecology in 45 Predictions for the New Millennium; he confidently prophesied that “faith will be defined more by action than doctrine”, and that “the old ecumenical structures will gradually dissolve.” Perhaps more ominously, he predicted that as pluralism replaces the challenge of secularism, “many diverse religious and spiritual traditions will have to learn to live with one another.” Carroll characterises this era as a time “when the gods of old have been neither abandoned nor replaced, but rather broken into pieces and offered to religious consumers in piecemeal form.”

128 An oft-quoted line from a hymn; source unknown.
129 The era following the Modern era of scientific empiricism.
131 Ibid.
132 Carroll. Page 22
The post-modern word is certainly one in which pluralism is a major feature. Peel, in a helpful table using Gill’s work on moral communities, makes a number of contrasts: 133

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modernism</th>
<th>Postmodernism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>homogenous</td>
<td>fragmented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society is bureaucratic and uniform</td>
<td>Society is pluralistic and diverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduces all to rational and centralised control</td>
<td>Abandons control and promotes eclectic activity even anarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Envisages single unified society</td>
<td>Envisages only diverse societies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The global citizens of a post-modern world tend to reject the absolute truth of dogma and prefer to experience truth; several more features of the era can be added by reference to Sweet, Pujic and Easum: 134

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modernism</th>
<th>Postmodernism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>scientific empiricism</td>
<td>emotion and intuition valid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words and facts</td>
<td>images and symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>either/or choices</td>
<td>both/and possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hierarchy</td>
<td>organism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bureaucracy</td>
<td>community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>control</td>
<td>permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entitlement to office</td>
<td>authentic leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>authoritative voices</td>
<td>spiritual coaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>guardians of truth</td>
<td>motivators for mission</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

133 Peel, Page 3  
This analysis of the culture of post-modern pilgrims is summed up by Leonard Sweet in the acronym EPIC: Experiential Participatory, Image-driven and Connected. He says the churches of the twenty-first century will ignore such radical social change at their peril.

In 1987 the sociologists Roof and McKinney had identified the beginnings of this tectonic shift in the religious landscape; a new religio-cultural order was in the making, where “the old religious and cultural hegemonies” were giving way to “a highly individualised spirituality” which had a significant impact on religious life. Spirituality was becoming more and more a matter of personal choice, which Roof and McKinney in the American context identified as the “new voluntarism.” They cited a number of subtle but significant factors that contributed to this expansion of the voluntary principle: the quest for self-fulfillment and the recovery of the experiential, the shift in the locus of religious authority and the demise of institutional power, and the breakdown of ascriptive loyalties. “Like three cogs turning the same wheel” these add up to an environment where religion is seen as a preference. Over the last fifteen years denominational pluralism has expanded to a point where people are unconcernedly connected with several

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135 Sweet. Ibid. Chapters 1 - 4
136 Roof and McKinney. The expansion of popular interest in the inner life was seen as healthy by some (“the pursuit of self fulfillment”) and sinister by others (“the culture of narcissism” or a “third disestablishment” between biblical norms and private faith). Page 7, 32. 33
137 The New Voluntarism developed from the ‘theological’ voluntarism that epitomised the Arminian focus of the Second Great Awakening. In contrast to Calvin’s emphasis on election and the sovereignty of God, the Reformer Arminius stressed free will, unlimited grace and individual response. The non-conformist churches often favour Arminianism because it endorses a more aggressive evangelistic thrust. Roof and McKinney. Page 66
churches, or are ‘mental members’ of one that they never attend.\textsuperscript{140} A parallel pattern is ‘believing without belonging’ where those “who left the institutional church in droves” have not become convinced atheists but continue an eclectic spiritual quest. \textsuperscript{141} These spiritual seekers are concerned with style over substance, but they are also pragmatic: pilgrims seeking a faith that helps them live here and now, and truths that connect with their experience.\textsuperscript{142} Paradoxically alongside this pervasive individualism is a growing hunger for connectedness, and a framework of neighborliness, social conscience and spiritual values. \textsuperscript{143} Denominations however no longer provide the primary focus for this connection; the church has moved to the periphery of society.\textsuperscript{144} Research undertaken in the Presbyterian Church (USA) found today’s religious consumers express a strong loyalty to their particular congregation but resist the label ‘Presbyterian’. \textsuperscript{145} Undoubtedly this religious eclecticism impacts on attempts to recruit leaders for a traditional polity, and militates against the ability of national entities of mainline churches to survive. \textsuperscript{146} The distinctives of ecclesiastical history have become a

\textsuperscript{140} “The children may belong to the soccer team in one church, the parents attend a weeknight support group in another and the whole family find their places for Sunday morning worship at a third church.” B Shelley and M Shelley, \textit{Consumer Church} (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1992). Pages 153 – 156. For mental membership (disaffiliated in practice but still claiming allegiance in census questions) see Stone. Page 125


\textsuperscript{142} Buchanan. Page 54. Twenty first century faith gatherers yearn for reality they can experience, disdain the linear reasoning of the sermon, and insist that songs use the ‘me’ language of the heart. Kirkpatrick and Hopper. Page 93


\textsuperscript{144} Carroll. Page 24

\textsuperscript{145} Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks. Page 83

\textsuperscript{146} Although beyond the purview of the present study, this dynamic is of critical importance in the Reformed tradition where connections beyond the local church are integral to ecclesiological polity. Key contributing factors are technological adaptability, decentralisation, and collaborative decision-making; see NT Ammerman, "S.B.C. Moderates and the Making of a Postmodern Denomination," \textit{Christian Century} 110, no. 26 (1993). Pages 896–7
matter of opinion; denominational loyalty has given way to the rhetoric of happen – “I just happen to be a Presbyterian.” 147 In the UK too, the Reformed church is experiencing an identity crisis of belief and polity; "more and more people believe what they like rather than follow a party line".148 The New Zealand scene may be twenty years behind, but is clearly moving in the same direction; Ward cites individualism, privatism, pluralism, relativism and anti-institutionalism as key features of twenty-first century Kiwi spirituality. 149

The impact of postmodernism on NZ Presbyterian churches has been felt in a number of ways. The mega-church phenomenon, aimed at attracting the unchurched, has led to the dropping of ecclesiastical traditions, and a preference for a populist entertainment style.150 The decline in theological consensus means polity becomes more important for unity; the PCANZ is currently preparing a book of “guiding confessions” to replace its Subordinate Standards, and ordination vows that will focus on the polity of the church.151 A third factor is the Increase in women clergy, eligible for ordination since 1964, who signify a “transformation in Protestant leadership" which challenges hierarchy and patriarchy in the church.152

The quantum leap in understanding of personality – style, temperament and gifting – has enabled church members and leaders to better understand their preferred ways of operating and optimal contexts for service. 153 Fifthly congregations are becoming increasingly individualistic, with an offhand attitude to traditional

147 Roof and McKinney. Page 66
148 Peel. Page 2
149 Ward. Pages 21 - 23
150 Buchanan. Page 47 See also Carroll. Page 28 - “intensification of voluntarism means supporters have to be wooed...we have tiptoe through the tithers.” Page 28
151 This overrule of individual conscience could be said to be unPresbyterian, (see Coalter 1992 page 288) but the New Zealand church has done it on several matters.
152 Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks. Page 111. If present trends continue, women may well become a majority among Presbyterian ministers in the twenty-first century.
153 Myers-Briggs, Enneagram and Network are well known examples.
Presbyterian customs like quarterly visitation, communion cards, infant baptism, communicant membership and even attendance at Presbytery.

Of maximum import for the eldership is debate on the role of the laity and the meaning of ordination, with which the New Zealand Presbyterian church has been grappling for some years. Some have seen barriers to sacramental leadership as artificial, and in 1989 watershed regulations were passed to allow Elder Administration of the Sacraments, though not without passionate objection from ministers who subscribe to the ‘lay theory’.  

A further widening was approved in 2002 when four Pathways to Ordination were identified, this time with objectors deploiring a clericalisation of the eldership.  

For some people these changes are merely “shifting a problematic boundary rather than addressing the issue of its validity”, since not all who seek responsibility and recognition in the exercise of spiritual gifts want to be ordained as clergy.  

Increasingly, it seems, the traditional frameworks for support and deployment of those who feel called to serve as lay leaders, are not responsive enough to the needs of a changing society.  

Postmodern pluralism then is the “chief theological and cultural issue of our time” because it assumes that commonality transcends real difference. In ecclesiological terms, the deep cynicism towards institutions and a widespread

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155 Personal knowledge; see also Lange who in 1986 suspected “sacramentalist and ecumenist motives”, as well as a degree of clerical territoriality. Lange. Page 9  
156 Roxborogh, "Persistent Presbyterianism? Lay Leadership and the Future of Christianity in the West." Page 7  
157 Ibid.  
158 R E Koenig, "Research and Reformation; the Presbyterian’s Self Scrutiny," Christian Century 110, no. 26 (1993). Page 901
inclination towards eclecticism is a powerful challenge to those who wish to adhere to a distinctive polity. The results of the post-modern avalanche of diversity on the churches of the third millennium are myriad; the impact on Presbyterian faith communities, whose polity was fashioned in the sixteenth century, is potentially overwhelming.
Chapter 5
The Eldership and Contemporary Practice in New Zealand

The archetypical Presbyterian parish in New Zealand, (and in fact, worldwide) is described by John Roxborogh, teacher of Presbyterian studies in Dunedin:

A typical Presbyterian arrangement ..[is a church] led by a “teaching elder” who as “minister of Word and Sacrament” moderates a session .....of “ruling elders” chosen from among the members of the congregation. Both are formally, if not in practice, of equal status in the courts of the church. Both are ordained, nominally at least for life, though only the “ministers” are set apart by laying on of hands by the Presbytery – a regional body composed of equal numbers of ministers and elders from other parishes in the area. Elders are ordained by the congregation by prayer and given a “right hand of fellowship”. Both are required to assent to the government, worship, discipline of the church, and are required to give some form of assent to essential Christian teaching...[in New Zealand] the Westminster Confession of Faith.\textsuperscript{159}

The New Zealand experience of eldership in a changing society is reflected in a Scots theologian’s comment in 1990: “a group of elders elected for life represent a permanent authority which may become unresponsive to change in a rapidly changing world”.\textsuperscript{160} This opinion was tested in the present study by measuring tensions and frustrations in a qualitative survey administered to leaders of a selection of twenty medium to large parishes of the PCANZ in August 2003.\textsuperscript{161} The questions asked were intended to discover the present status of the practice of leadership by elders in a selection of New Zealand Presbyterian churches. Issues such as size of session, duties of elders and scope of authority, methods of recruitment and retirement, and factors affecting willingness to serve, were

\textsuperscript{159} Roxborogh, "Persistent Presbyterianism? Lay Leadership and the Future of Christianity in the West." Page 5
\textsuperscript{160} Murray.1990 Page 191
\textsuperscript{161} See Appendix One for questionnaire and Appendix Two for data. The selection was made subjectively and aimed to identify parishes where creative changes had been attempted.
canvassed in open questions. A section of the research questionnaire, seeking modifications of the traditional eldership model that local churches have found particularly effective for spiritual leadership and decision making, was identified by the researcher as an area where information was of special interest.

The seventeen leaders who responded on behalf of their parishes were all from New Zealand Presbyterian congregations with the majority of members being pakeha, and in most the leadership group comprised a “college of elders” in some form.\(^\text{162}\) In all cases the minister provided the survey data, and in many instances extra material was helpfully included. A number of themes could be identified as common to the experience of Presbyterian parishes striving to adapt the traditional Presbyterian polity in a changing society. The fundamental issue of whether “an authoritarian eldership composed of persons who are elected for life inhibits necessary change in the congregation” expressed itself in the inter-twined contexts of the role of elders, the size of session and the lines of accountability in a parish.\(^\text{163}\)

The meaning of the Greek *presbuteros* (literally “bearded ones”, metaphorically “the fathers of the community”) could predispose congregations towards electing patriarchs to the eldership. However the survey results suggested that congregations agree with Powell’s thesis that seniority in faith rather than age is

\(^{162}\) The two exceptions were: one parish where a parish council had been operating for thirty years, and one where an experimental congregation of students is led by non-elders under the guidance of a minister. The data from the former is included as it aligns easily with the traditionally-led congregations. The second is such an unusual scenario, its input was omitted, though there are accountability issues it raises for the future.

what the Biblical leaders had in mind; elderships exhibited a mix of gender, age and race.\textsuperscript{164}

Sessions ranged from 8 – 35 elders, in churches with active memberships between 100 and 450. The size of session was alluded to a number of times as being a drawback of the traditional system, especially in large parishes where following the conventional model requires Session to be about ten percent of the size of the congregation. This ratio allows each elder to have a “district” of ten communicant members for whom they are pastorally responsible, as well as the children of those families and ten or so non-members who are also under the church’s pastoral care.\textsuperscript{165} The model of parish organisation from which this practice derives was the “Glasgow experiment” of 1818 where the enterprising and practical pastor Thomas Chalmers organised his parish into “defined and manageable units of territory”, where the elders provided spiritual leadership and education, and the deacons administered poor relief.\textsuperscript{166} New Zealand’s parishes adopted this pastoral concept of each elder having a flock for which they were responsible; it is a comprehensive system that has often inspired admiration from those of other denominations who cannot mobilise their lay leaders so effectively.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{164} Half had a majority of males, and half had a majority over 60 years old, but all had at least one elder under forty, and four had more than one.

\textsuperscript{165} A communicant member is a baptised person who has made a public profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who has been recognised by the elders of the local church as having a current relationship with their congregation through worship, stewardship, and/or fellowship. The Pastoral Care Register includes anyone on the church’s database, and often equates to the newsletter distribution list.

\textsuperscript{166} Roxborough, \textit{Thomas Chalmers: Enthusiast for Mission}. Page 108

\textsuperscript{167} Personal knowledge; clearly the same envy is felt in Scotland, see Torrance. Page 503
However most of the parishes surveyed had relinquished the expectations that the elders would do all the pastoral care and contact.\textsuperscript{168} Comments included:

- “Pastoral care is hit and miss; some elders more diligent than others” [Response 1]
- “The traditional pastoral visiting structure collapsed some years ago” [3]
- “Elders districts no longer work” [9]

Increasing openness to the ministry of the Whole People of God means the elders of today are expected to exercise more responsibility in the church, at a time when their every day work is also being recognised as a valid Christian service.\textsuperscript{169} Roxborogh describes the tension: “When volunteer time is at a premium, and both parents usually work, choices need to be made. What for some is an affirmation of gifting and calling, is for others an imposition of unwelcome responsibility.” \textsuperscript{170}

Many of the respondents mentioned busyness and time pressure as affecting recruitment, retention and deployment of lay leadership. In addition the size of session needed to operate the traditional model in a large church can make building a consensus difficult and time consuming; one parish reported:

> A logjam effect at each session meeting. By the time we had reviewed the decisions of the previous meeting, checked on whether they had been carried out, dealt with any crisis that had arisen during the month, planned details of what was going to happen in the coming month and checked on what was happening in the various areas of activity in the parish …… we had absolutely no time or energy left for even medium range planning or governance. In reality the minister was held responsible for all that, particularly if it didn’t happen And we were losing our best elders as the whole process was killing them.[Response 5]

\textsuperscript{168} Only five (2,3,13,14,15) answered yes to the question about elders and intentional pastoral care. The remainder identified teams of pastorally gifted elders, non-elder visitors and home group leaders, and/or employed staff as mechanisms for delivering pastoral care.


\textsuperscript{170} Roxborogh, “Persistent Presbyterianism? Lay Leadership and the Future of Christianity in the West.” Page 6
About half of the Sessions surveyed were of the size that could be dubbed the ‘traditional’ model (i.e. 10 – 15% of membership), while the remainder had ‘slimmed’ Session to 2½ – 6%, by focussing on leadership and relinquishing pastoral care to those who were identified as called to, and gifted for, this task.\(^{171}\)

A majority of respondents are now using an understanding of spiritual giftings in their deployment of elders.\(^{172}\) Gordon Miller, a highly regarded commentator on the local church scene, supports this focus:

\[
\text{In the past we have tended to treat leadership as a kind of prize that we give people for faithfulness and good character regardless of gifting, often ending up with large cumbersome teams of unsuitable people. But this model no longer works; in fact it is the worst.}^{173}\]

The vexed issue of the role of the elder was a common theme. The fact that elders are ‘ordained for life’ implies a call based on abiding qualities of character, rather than gifts and skills that may be needed at a particular time in the life of a church.\(^{174}\) In post-modern society the idea of lifelong ordination for eldership - or anything else – may be unrealistic.\(^{175}\) This especially applies to younger people, who find the idea of ordination for life bizarre and restricting.\(^{176}\) Parishes surveyed had almost all had refusals from people the Session had prayerfully identified as potential elders. Many of these cited time demands, but other factors – reluctance to commit, preference for own choice of activity, intimidation by role expectation - were also significant:

\(^{171}\) 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 15; some larger Sessions had also identified pastorally gifted elders.

\(^{172}\) E.g. using the high profile Willow Creek resource ‘Network’ - though one minister confessed to not knowing what Network is!

\(^{173}\) Gordon Miller, Growing Great Kiwi Churches, Affirm Booklet 16 (Tauranga: AFFIRM publications, 2002). P 36

\(^{174}\) A ruling elder, like a minister of Word and Sacrament, is ordained once only, and thence available to the whole church, needing only to be inducted if they relocate and are identified by a session as called to leadership in the new context.

\(^{175}\) Roxborogh, "Persistent Presbyterianism? Lay Leadership and the Future of Christianity in the West." ibid

\(^{176}\) Personal knowledge; see also Special Commission anent Review and Reform, A Church without Walls (Church of Scotland, 2001). "Whole life commitment is an impediment.” Page 27
“young people don’t like the term or the concept” [Response 10]
“don’t want to be Presbyterian for ever” [13]
“implied it was breadth of responsibility” [12]
“some prefer to limit context of leadership, this can mean they are sidewalk superintendents” [13]
“happy with current level of involvement” [1]
“want to serve in another area” [15]
“lack of self-confidence re role” [1]
“can’t do task justice – gifting” [15]

The issue of retirement also contributed to frustrations with operating under a Presbyterian polity. Because elders are ordained for life, their keen sense of call may foster a reluctance to retire except when prompted by health factors. Nearly all respondents indicated that elders made their own decision about retirement, the exception being where a term of three or six years had been implemented. Two congregations indicated that an annual or three-yearly review of each elder’s involvement had streamlined assessing the timeliness of stepping aside from active eldership. Some utilised the concept of elder emeritus. At the other end of the spectrum several parishes grappled with the difficulty in recruitment by using the associate elder status, or a task force of youth leaders who added perspective and gifts that bridged the gap to the eldership.

What elders actually ‘do’ is only broadly defined in the Book of Order, except in a few specific cases where Session is assigned an authority that may fall to the clergy under another polity. However the survey found that very few Sessions still undertake these tasks themselves. Only one or two parishes still use the elders to decide Christian education programmes, or to choose worship leaders,

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177 eg 13, 16
178 2 and 4
179 eg 9 and 12
180 eg 8, 10, 11, 13
181 eg choice of organist, Sunday School curriculum, candidates for baptism/membership
and less than half reserve the serving of communion to the elders. Nevertheless the nomination of new elders (to be voted on by the congregation), and decisions about baptism/membership were still virtually always the task of Session. Many omitted an answer the question about discipline of members, despite its traditional importance in Presbyterian polity.

The delegation of specific tasks, like visitation, educational programmes or ‘worship-leading’, to lay teams or an executive leadership group, is permissible under the Book of Order. All the parishes surveyed now use a small (formal or informal) executive for mundane matters, and for urgent decisions or sensitive matters. Some had found this change required a deep trust and transparency in communication that took time to embed. One minister reported:

> It tested our relationships. There were concerns about ...power and ....secrecy. The adjustment was difficult.....lingering concerns about the effectiveness of the system and about power and control. The elders now acknowledge they had difficulty letting go of some issues and trusting other people. The [new] role for elders largely failed because leading people is harder than discussing issues in meetings – it is more demanding ....the elders meeting did change —[but] the natural pull was always back to business; meetings were just as frequent and just as long. Overall I think it was the right move, perhaps 75% successful but it was difficult for the elders emotionally. Response 15]

And another observed:

> Some elders felt unless they asked the question and heard the answer, they would not be satisfied. This confirmed that we had a structure based on mistrust...and differing understandings about the nature and role of eldership. [Response 4]

Clearly there is a crying need for change. One minister reframed Dr Murray’s summary:

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The permanency of this approach [Elders for Life] has recognised problems…. the body of elders becomes too large for efficient functioning….there is no mechanism for accountability or reappointment by the congregation. Neither is there a natural process for stepping down when the need arises….it can prevent a church from shaping its leadership team to ensure it has the appropriate skill set needed for its life and mission in a fast changing society. [Response 4]183

The New Zealand church is not alone in its experience of changing times. In the early nineties the PCUSA engaged in a “thorough exercise in denominational self-scrutiny.” 184 Each of these tensions was observed in the context of the “gordian knot” of issues that torment mainstream Protestantism.185 Characterising their predicament as “dark night of the presbyterian soul” the authors suggested a revitalised theology could bind the diverse Presbyterian communion in “identity, common purpose, vitality and flexibility.” 186

The Church of Scotland too struggles with a diverse polity; theologian DM Murray describes the historic lay/presbyter argument as an ongoing debate.187 Recent reports attest that the tension between the different views has never been resolved, but the Panel on Doctrine leans towards the ‘lay representational’ model as being more flexible and capable of addressing contemporary issues.188 Clearly there are worldwide parallels to the tensions that affect the implementation of Presbyterianism in New Zealand. However Kirkpatrick in a perceptive summary of

183 Cf Murray. 1990 Page 191
184 Response 3
185 Koenig. Page 902
186 Ibid. However this seems unlikely in the light of a 1990 study that showed the PCUSA is in fact two interdependent but distinguishable denominations. Coalter, Mulder, and Weeks. Page 324; Weeks and Fogelmann found the two strands are the “local congregation” church and the “governing body” church. The relationship between these two and the two strands of elder theory would bear further study.
187 Murray. Page 191. In the Lay Theory the elder was seen as an elected representative not set apart for life. The Presbyter Theory sees the eldership as a scriptural office to which one is ordained for life, and uses the teaching and ruling elder distinction. See Appendix Four.
188 Ibid.
“What Unites Presbyterians” describes the Presbyterian model as having decided advantages despite its unwieldiness. Ministers operate under strict constraints alongside the diverse perspectives, insights, and world views of others in the church.\textsuperscript{189} A presbyterian governance enables congregations to collaborate in decisions that fulfill the mission of the church. Statistics show that participation in the Presbyterian movement is keeping pace with world population growth and suggest that by the year 2010, 52 million believers will be governed by this historic polity.\textsuperscript{190} However twentieth century secularisation and twenty-first century pluralism pose a significant challenge to its traditional structures of rule by elders.

\textsuperscript{189} They can’t baptise on their own, allocate use of church property, add to or subtract from the membership, fire the organist or employ a secretary; as moderator of a session that has these powers they can exercise a degree of leadership - but are actually free only to choose the hymns and preach the sermon!! Kirkpatrick and Hopper. Page 132

\textsuperscript{190} Special Commission anent Review and Reform. Page 30
Chapter 6
The Eldership and the Challenge to Change

Twentieth century developments in New Testament studies hardly touched the well-trodden ground of ecclesiology; scholars tended to accept the conventional wisdom that the various models of the church are incompatible, and seem not to have genuinely engaged with the challenge to integrate thinking for the future.\(^{191}\) Nonetheless it seems that in an increasingly pluralistic twenty-first century, the church is being urged by both its adherents and its detractors to abandon traditional structures, develop multiple forms, and engage in dialogue with other traditions.\(^{192}\) The international collegium of Reformed churches, the World Alliance, acknowledged in 1992 that "each church has to face the question as to how, and through which structures, it wants to give expression to the essence and mission of the church." \(^{193}\) The "wondrous plant" of reformed spirituality has a diversity of branches, but insistence on orthopraxy may have created a closed system where creativity is stifled and the Spirit is quenched. \(^{194}\) In New Zealand the limitations of the system are demonstrated in tensions and frustrations described by Kiwi Presbyterians; in the present study they revolve around the traditional concept of ordination, the role of the elders, the size of session and issues of recruitment and retirement.

\(^{192}\) Heidemann. Page 8
Otto Pesch takes the story of Little Red Riding Hood as a metaphor for a visionary pastoral strategy, that enables the church to escape being swallowed up by the “legalism of confessional restraint “and emerge free from its “suffocating power”. The analogy suggests that hope will only prevail if the greedy “wolf” of tradition dies – and the old ways are abolished. If so, ecclesiological reform must be radical, and the old structures be replaced by new wineskins (Luke 5. 38), lest minor changes become an ”inoculation against the possibility of radical reform.”

Shelley identified the balance between upholding the integrity of the faith community, and responding to the call to mission, as the tension between memories, ”the influences of the past” and dreams, ”the pressure of the present.” The church, he said, must not cling to its tradition so tightly that it misses opportunities to make contact for Christ in the world. Ultimately all traditions of leadership derive their authority from the presence of the living Christ, whose voice has guided the church in every age to make adjustments that enable it to operate more effectively in its context.

This of course is the root meaning of the word Reformation, and the heart of the Protestant Reformation was the willingness to abandon accepted orthodoxy in favour of a new understanding. This “habit of the mind” attested by the principle 

*Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* - the church reformed, always requiring to

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197 Shelley and Shelley. Page 71
198 Ibid.
199 Campbell. Page 256. For example, in a society of classes, the church became hierarchical and bishops became princes, in a professionally organised society church leaders are seen as qualified therapists, and in a media dominated society, leaders may be forced to assume the personable and spontaneous style of TV celebrities. See Dulles. Page 162
be reformed. 200 The Spirit–led church is open to new revelation, and to fresh
expression of old truths, so that new insights are not feared, but thoughtfully
examined, considered and possibly integrated into fresh theological
formulations.201 Calvin reformulated Luther’s work in this way, shaping it into a
form of his own, and acknowledging that within general rules and theological
principles, such as order, equality, and accountability, church polity would always
be flexible in nature. 202 The Reformers themselves would not want today’s church
to “enshrine in tomb-like rigidity their own historically-bound perspectives” 203 The
Scots social reformer Thomas Chalmers, a formative influence on New Zealand
Presbyterianism, was ruthless about tradition if it got in the way; it was remoulded
or perhaps ignored in favour of freedom for the gospel to function effectively.204 He
looked to the Spirit of God, rather than traditional polity, for assurance:

We may just as well think that a system of aqueducts will irrigate and
fertilise the country without rain, as think that any human economy will
Christianise a parish without the living water of the Spirit…. Still, it is right to
have a parochial constitution, just as it is right to have aqueducts.205

Contemporaneous with those who advocate radical reform in Presbyterian polity,
are some who see a changing society as a threat rather than an opportunity. 206
The inertia in a congregation is seen to be of protective value, and the voices of
the past, valuable links with its corporate identity.207 To see a return of
postmoderns to the values of their forebears may just be a matter of patience, they

200 The term “habit of the mind” used by the Presbyterian theologian Gerrish in Buchanan. Page 48
Kirkpatrick and Hopper. Page 21. Examples are Feminist Theology, Liberation Theology and
Pastoral Psychology.
201 Key principles named in M J Coalter, J M Mulder, and L B Weeks, The Organisational
Revolution: Presbyterians and American Denominationalism, The Presbyterian Presence: The
Lange. Page 10
203 Ibid. Quote from Chalmers’ memoirs on page 112
204 See for example the conservative take on eldership in both Hall.and de Koster.
205 Gunstone. Page 67
believe, like that of immigrants who watch their children reject the ways of the old
country, then see their grandchildren develop a renewed appreciation of the old
language and culture. Buchanan ably articulates this conservationist perspective:

“[As] our best thinkers research, analyze, evaluate and write thoughtful
tomes on our [Presbyterian] plight, a library shelf full of books assures
me that what I am doing is irrelevant, that the future is grim….In the
best traditions of academic scholarship they force us to question the
old assumptions…. to ask whether God might be doing a new thing in
our time…. [but] my proposal is that traditional religion is important…it
responds creatively and positively to the questions that are being
asked by the culture; questions of meaning and purpose, questions of
vocation and values and hope.”

Defenders of this view observe that tradition is not static or inert, but a living thing
that sustains community by reminding us who we are, and that is received with
“discovery, surprise, nuance, interrogation and (above all) struggle.” Winston
Churchill once claimed that a sign of great society is “the diligence with which it
passes culture from one generation to the next”, and that not to pass on such a
heritage leaves a generation without definition or direction. However it seems
the ‘dirty word’ is not tradition but traditionalism, an unthinking defence of the past,
a ‘values rigidity’ that holds back the future. A helpful distinction is that
“traditionalism is the dead faith of living people, but tradition is the living faith of the
dead, …a means for interpreting contemporary experiences.”

208 Zikmund, "The Values and Limits of Representation and Pluralism in the Church." Page 347
209 Buchanan. Page xi
211 Quoted by Greg Fleming, "A Civil Society," ed. Howick Presbyterian Church Cafe@eleven
Service (Auckland: Maxim Institute).
212 Pelikan in Shelley and Shelley, p 72, see also Leith in Stephen W Plunkett, This We Believe:
Eight Truths Presbyterians Affirm (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2002). Page 8
The exercise of updating, clarifying, and reinterpreting tradition in the light of new understanding is described by Old Testament scholar Patricia Willey as “inner exegesis.” Using Deutero-Isaiah’s call to remember the former things, alongside the injunction to forget them, she avers that “the test of orthodoxy is in the creative relationship between past and present.” It seems the twenty-first century Presbyterian church is engaged in such a process of inner exegesis, which for all the risks and dangers involved, is an authentic call to reinterpret the Reformed tradition. To do so with integrity will mean attending to “the three tenses of success” - letting the past guide the future, while the future instructs the present.

It will also entail “the twin criteria of theological adequacy” - internal fidelity to scripture, and external credibility in the light of current knowledge. There are precedents for this exegetical vocation: the twentieth-century decision to begin ordaining women required such a response, as did the experimentation with Cooperating Ventures. In both, the New Zealand Presbyterian church needed to creatively steer the course “between a concern for doctrine/polity which can be hard and legalistic, and a liberalism that undervalues the reformed and catholic heritage.”

The Louisville Presbyterians’ "thorough exercise in denominational self-scrutiny" concluded in 1992 that “the Presbyterian community is capable of rethinking our

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213 Inner exegesis is where a Biblical writer responds dialogically to earlier texts. Patricia Willey, "Sing to God a New Song: Using the Past to Construct a Future," Reformed World 46, no. 1 (1996).Page 40
214 Isaiah 46.9f and Isaiah 43.18f. Ibid. Page 46
216 Peel. Page 5
217 Breward. Page 25
218 Koenig. Page 900
Christian life together…. God is not yet finished with the Presbyterian Church.” 219

Kirkpatrick then posed an intriguing question for the ecclesiological kitchen: “Is an expert chef one who always uses a recipe, or one who understands the ingredients so well a recipe is not required?”220 The present author prefers the second alternative, since in the end the Bible – and the Book of Order – are not about operational precision but about “making the life of the Christian community possible”.221
Chapter 7
The Practicability of Persisting with Presbyterianism

A spiritually alive and relationally supportive leadership group is said to be a key feature of a healthy congregation grounded on Biblical principles. However New Testament scholars have difficulty identifying a standard format for biblical leadership, and there are indications that the elders of early churches were free “to respond to visions, develop creative partnerships, and initiate indigenous worship” without being controlled by permission or procedures. Moreover the spirit of the Reformation is about a healthy tension between memories and dreams, continuity and change, order and chaos. This tension can be helpfully compared with the ‘perichoretic’ dance of the Trinity – a dynamic participative relationship characterised by intimacy, equality, gifts and love. A sober assessment of postmodern social change suggests that viable leadership models for the twenty first century church will need to emulate such a dance. Persisting with Presbyterianism in the contemporary world will require a much more organic structure that features authenticity over entitlement, permission over control and motivation for mission over traditional authority.

Although there are aspects of the pluralistic ethos of postmodernism that Christians may want to repudiate, there are also features of the culture that can be

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222 Murray Robertson, Developing an Effective Eldership (Spreydon Baptist Church, 2003, accessed 21/2/03 2003); available from www.spreydon.org.nz/resources/effective_eldership.asp. Page 2
223 Easum and Bandy. Page 110
225 George Cladis, Leading the Team Based Church (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).Page 4
226 Easum and Bandy. Page 23
drawn on to enhance mission and connect with seekers.\textsuperscript{227} Effective churches today are largely the ones utilising team based leadership – and postmodern faith communities appear to be highly receptive to the spirit-led collaborative style that has been gifted to the church by Presbyterian tradition.\textsuperscript{228} However there are aspects of the Reformed tradition that are less acceptable in the permissive, individualistic, choice-oriented popular culture.\textsuperscript{229} Can the insights gifted by Scripture and Tradition be reappropriated for a 21\textsuperscript{st} century church? What ingredients are essential for an authentic Presbyterian polity? And can churches reconfigure the traditional recipe for those ingredients to produce an effective and credible local church leadership?

The present research proposes that there are a number of basic ingredients which may be combined in different ways to provide a palatable solution to the tensions and frustrations described in the present study, as leaders struggle to apply Reformation polity in the contemporary New Zealand Presbyterian Church.\textsuperscript{230} Different ‘recipes’ mean a diversity of ways for elders to operate, align and govern can emerge as the 21\textsuperscript{st} century church follows the Reformers’ habit of the heart – to be ever reforming, or to use the current catchphrase, transforming.\textsuperscript{231} However

\footnotesize
\begin{enumerate}
\item ibid
\item Cladis. Page1
\item A prior question might be the appropriateness of the term ‘elders’, which for many people is confusing and negative. Its ancient roots may send us to alternatives like gatekeepers, its semantic field to the versatile Greek presbyter; its contemporary equivalent may be found in the widely understood concepts of governor or trustee, and a helpful term from tangata whenua may be “kaitiaki = guardian caretaker manager trustee steward”. Orsman, ed. p 359 However useful these alternatives may be in reframing the task of elders, each has issues of its own, and for Presbyterians fidelity to the biblical and historical heritage counsels the retention of the name elder.
\item Transformational leadership is the theme of many leadership studies today eg Herrington.
\end{enumerate}
this may mean that one traditional ingredient becomes discretionary - the concept of elders' ordination introduced by Melville in 1578.

The source of much of the inertia besetting churches today can be identified as the notion of ‘ordination for life’ that came into Scots Presbyterianism in the sixteenth century – the “authoritarian eldership” elected for life which “inhibits necessary change in the congregation.” 232 Discussion in the literature has revolved around the notion of relinquishing the ordination of elders, and a number of arguments have been offered in its defence. 233 To renge on this symbol of the high call of collegiality would be a move in the direction of the Lay Theory, according clergy a status and honour that may discomfit egalitarian Kiwi Presbyterians. 234 Intriguingly the 2003 Task Group rewriting the PCANZ Book of Order is toying with a rich and inclusive definition of ruling elders which almost equates with the Disciples’ denominational polity of ‘elders as assistant ministers.’ 235 The paradox is that giving elders a high status can foster a sense of empowerment within the laity. For Presbyterians, ordination confers no special gift but recognises the gifts that have already been given by God and identified by the church. 236 However ordination, though a fitting recognition of the elder’s vocation, should not require a leader to be active in local church governance all their life; even clergy today move in and out of active service in response to changing life contexts. 237 Moreover ordination of elders, in recognising call and commitment, does not rule out the

233 see Appendix Three – Peel’s Table
234  See Appendix Four on Theories
235 The draft of Chapter 11 refers to the substantial duties of ruling elders as potentially including preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments (personal knowledge). For material on Disciples polity see Vischer, ed., The Ministry of the Elders in the Reformed Churches. Page 155
236 Gray and Tucker. Page 20
237 eg parental leave, overseas study, poor health, retirement, non-congregational ministry
setting apart of other people to identified ministries e.g. children’s workers, pastoral counselors, worship leaders.\(^{238}\) The ‘laying on of hands’ used always to be reserved for the ordination of clergy (and in a formal sense still is, in NZ Presbyteries), but today many churches ‘lay hands’ on a regular basis, for healing, for farewelling, for commissioning. The ecumenist motives that promoted a distinction between ordinations of ruling and teaching elders (a remnant of the lay theory) have been superseded by egalitarian culture.\(^{239}\)

Ordination for life, or as one writer describes it, “for the whole church,” does not necessarily imply serving on Session for life.\(^{240}\) The Presbyterian Church in America, in inclining towards the Lay Theory, has long operated a system of selecting governing elders from a pool of the ordained, and this method seems to be working effectively in a Kiwi context as well. \(^{241}\) Today’s thriving churches are often those which set a mission-focussed agenda, minimising control and “kicking corporate habits.” \(^{242}\) The key seems to be not ordination in itself, but a focus on the role of leadership and governance – “doing the right things” and maintaining the core values or ‘DNA’ of the church. \(^{243}\) Six staple ingredients of governance can be identified, customised and blended in each local or regional context; these will be considered in three clusters of pairs – call and covenant, councils and collegiality, and constraints and courage.

\(^{238}\) Roxborough, “Persistent Presbyterianism? Lay Leadership and the Future of Christianity in the West.” (page 7) notes the need for a framework for lay leadership other than the traditional context of eldership; possibilities include revival of the role of lay reader, use of the Taiwanese office of evangelist, or the Methodist community-facing diaconate. The notion of intern elders also been tried in NZ and in South Africa. (personal knowledge)

\(^{239}\) Even Episcopal churches must grapple with the tension between their historic instrumentalism and a democratisation of the laying on of hands.

\(^{240}\) Kirkpatrick and Hopper. Page 133

\(^{241}\) Responses 2, 4, 5, 15

\(^{242}\) Easum and Bandy. Pages 9, 12

\(^{243}\) As compared with “doing things right”, Herrington. Page 11. See also Page 127.
Call and Covenant

One of the gifts that Calvin bestowed on the emerging reformation church was a renewed understanding of the concept of call, and his helpful distinction between inner and outer call is just as relevant today as ever. All Christians have inner conversations with God, and often experience impulses or passions that drive them towards certain ministry areas. If the church is able to identify and affirm this call, then a resilient working partnership between individual and community can be developed. In the permission-giving church culture of the 21st century it may be tempting to accept anyone who has a passion and ‘let them get on with it.” The notion of external call however, provides an appropriate means of checking the alignment of call and context, and retains the responsibility of existing leaders to identify qualities of character and vision, as well as gifts and skills. It also opens up the possibility of ordination being replaced or complemented by a written covenant that expresses the interchange of gifts and grace.

Covenant is a concept deeply embedded in Presbyterianism. In the past, elders were required to sign a Formula submitting to the proper government of the PCANZ, and assenting to the Scriptures and the Westminster expressions of Reformed doctrine and polity, which many elders had never read. The new

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245 Easum and Bandy call this the genetic signature or double helix of spiritual life and spiritual calling. ibid Page 202
246 ibid Pages 162 - 169
247 Max de Pree, *Called to Serve: Creating and Nurturing the Effective Volunteer Board* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2001). Page 54. For qualities of character and relational skills, see Appendix Five – Leadership Template used by the elders of Response 13.
248 God establishes covenant out of the depths of his love grace and forbearance – in response to his loving initiative, certain human behaviours and responsibilities are specified, to serve the Lord and one another. See Cladis. Page 35
249 The Formula is Appendix H-9 Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, (accessed).
Book of Order envisages a much simpler creed or ‘focal identity statement’ to replace the historic confession, and a promise by ruling or teaching elders to comply with whatever codes and practices are in current use. Despite the fears that this will open a flood gate of liberalism, it could be a helpful move, as it will ensure recruitment of lay leaders who are aligned with the beliefs and practices of the church. The notion of a Covenant opens up wide possibilities for explicating terms of office, areas of responsibility and commitment to maintaining the core values of each local church.\textsuperscript{250} Presbyterians could learn from the emerging Catholic system, where councils have their own internal rhythm: an extensive discernment process followed by an open-ended term from three to eight years.\textsuperscript{251} Best practice in contemporary society is “participative management based on covenantal relationships”; these fit well with the church’s widening understanding of the nature of leadership and the pathways to ordination.\textsuperscript{252}

Councils and Collegiality

Shared leadership is part of the ‘DNA’ of the Presbyterian church. Any polity that assigns authority to a single person with no checks or balances cannot be described as Reformed. There will always be a place in a Presbyterian structure for relationship with other congregations and reference to a presbytery.\textsuperscript{253} But collegiality can be expressed in a huge variety of ways, not just in the traditional model of a large Session that oversees all of church life. Increasingly Sessions are devolving leadership decisions and exercise of specific ministries to smaller

\textsuperscript{250} See Appendix Six
\textsuperscript{251} Charles M and Ellen Morseth Olsen, Selecting Church Leaders (Bethesda: The Alban Institute, 2002). Page 28
\textsuperscript{252} Cladis. Page 38
\textsuperscript{253} Gray and Tucker. Page 8
Calvin's teaching/ruling elders distinction was based on a differentiation in call and gifting; today we have an awareness of many more possible specialisations. Pastoral care, for example, is often better suited to those with a gift cluster in the shepherding, mercy and encouragement area, than those who are gifted leaders, administrators or teachers. That grouping is better used in Herrington's "vision community," called to discern God's purpose for the congregation. However the leadership-gifted 'trim eldership' (ie fewer than 12 elders) described in many survey responses can only work as effective governance if there is a great deal of trust and transparency - and clearly proscribed boundaries of belief and values that "define the space within which any ministry can begin grow and evolve". The fact that "the polity of the Presbyterian Church is built on sin," is borne out by the distrust and disempowerment described in some survey responses. What if the collegial decision-making was done in an atmosphere of empowering grace rather than suspicion and fear? What if Presbyterians looked to their Renaissance heritage as much as to the Reformation fathers? If instead of the Theology of Redemption with its focus on sin and fallibility, Presbyterian polity was undergirded by the Theology of Creation – the image-bearing qualities and awesome potential of each believer?

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254 "Structures are smaller, networks are bigger": Cladis. Page 24 Response 5 described the PCANZ management structure as "based on the best of late mediaeval and renaissance political thought…..avoiding the pitfalls of emerging democratic thought….. a water tight system of checks and balances…..out of a deep suspicion of linking authority and responsibility… best illustrated by the fact that the minister is totally responsible to presbytery…. for the mission of the parish, but has absolutely no authority other than who shall preach in the pulpit".

255 "Not all elders are gifted in leadership and not all in pastoral care." Special Commission anent Review and Reform. Page 27


257 Easum and Bandy. Page 133. Barna describes early warning filters to detect bad decisions.

258 Kirkpatrick and Hopper. Page 130. For distrust see Responses 4, 5, 13 and 15.
Could the spirit of Presbyterianism - collaborative leadership - be “a new soulful dance of leadership” around a transforming vision of change?\(^{259}\)

Constraints and Courage

Thirdly twenty-first century eldership is about finding a balance between accountability and the freedom to move in response to the Spirit. The Presbyterian Church’s current reworking of the Formula may provide a degree of constraint but increasingly there are codes and protocols that provide for protection of people and of the integrity of the church.\(^{260}\) The survey found that the large majority of ministers surveyed mentioned only the Formula, although the Code of Ethics for Pastoral Care is now widely known and local churches often have protocols for ‘sexual safety’.\(^{261}\) One of the core values for church leaders, identified by the PCANZ, is accountability, and Presbyterian leaderships nationwide need to attend to this crucial dimension, which is essential not just for protection, but also for mission and ministry.\(^{262}\) Although the familiar ‘wells not fences’ analogy sees enthusiastic leaders gathering around a common vision, it seems hedges are still needed. Nowadays however they will often be “proscriptive boundaries” rather than “prescriptive mandates.”\(^{263}\) Leaders in any participative governance model need room to move, to take risks, to try new things; structures that support them must be flexible.\(^{264}\) The Presbyterian Church’s recent initiatives to assess more


\(^{260}\) Especially children and youth; PCANZ now has specific policies on this.

\(^{261}\) See www.presbyterian.org.nz/spanz/march2003/storypage18

\(^{262}\) Equipping the Leadership policy group, personal knowledge.

\(^{263}\) Limits beyond which we cannot go, rather than detailed lists of obligations, Easum and Bandy, Page 115.

rigorously the gifts and contributions leaders have to offer, and to promote regular clarification and review of shared expectations between ministers and leaders, also promise to be a useful basis for renewing motivation and reviewing performance.\(^{265}\) Some of those ordained ‘for life’ may be given the opportunity to step back, temporarily or permanently.\(^{266}\) This will take courage – but their gifts will not be lost to the church. There are many possibilities for short-term task groups or specialist ministries to utilise their skills. A relevant leadership will also risk opening up aspects of their task to those younger people for whom denominational loyalty is minimal, and the institution of eldership inappropriate.\(^{267}\) These hopeful pilgrims will thrive in a permission-giving culture, where risk, moments of chaos, even failure measure the path to mastery of new skills.\(^{268}\) A courageous leadership will venture out in that unknown territory with “a Bible in one hand and a pompom in the other.”\(^{269}\).

The results of a recipe combining these six treasured ingredients will be a renewed vitality and vision:

“I don’t think there was anything “unPresbyterian” about it - we kept our congregation fully informed with the changes, and sought their support and valued their input; looking back it was a very positive experience.”\(^{270}\)

\(^{265}\) PCANZ Resourcing for Ministry Policy Group (personal knowledge)

\(^{266}\) See Regulation 49, Book of Order 2003, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, (accessed). A recent Church of Scotland study recommends elders now serve for a term. Special Commission anent Review and Reform. Page 27

\(^{267}\) eg By “building a bridge from congregation to session with a task force of young people who brainstormed/dreamed and with Session approval began to implement - out of this many became associate elders.” Response 11

\(^{268}\) Johnstone. Page 41

\(^{269}\) Easum and Bandy. Page 192

\(^{270}\) Response 16
Conclusion

Practicable Presbyterianism

New Zealand Presbyterian polity is based on the conviction that the structures of the church should reflect God’s orderly character. From the time of the first Christian fellowships, patterns of organisation and leadership emerged. The New Testament church relied on a plurality of presbyters as leaders, although it may be that seniority in faith rather than age was the crucial determinant. A diversity of offices emerged, but Presbyterian churches worldwide take the view that ministry in the early church was a non-hierarchical form based on collegiality and consensus, a pastoral council with authority to determine issues of importance. At the time of the Reformation, Calvin and Knox advocated a recrudescence of conciliar oversight by elders to replace the conventional rule by a hierarchy of individuals. The Reformers believed accountability could be restored with the use of a collective bishop, a committee of ordinary believers sharing with the clergy in a participatory form of governance that today epitomises Presbyterian polity. The call to eldership came to be formally recognised in their ordination, and lifelong service, and a number of functional differences in office were also identified. It is significant that the early Presbyterians did not interpret the New Testament rigidly but left room for further developments in ecclesiology. Over the centuries new generations have responded to fresh insights by evolving a variety of models. Views on authority and discipline have changed, and Reformed churches often use elements of congregationalism; cultural diversity, hermeneutical insights and ecumenical dialogue have also led to new perspectives.
In the twenty-first century postmodern era, diverse religious and spiritual traditions are learning to coexist in a context of pluralism. A highly individualised spirituality means religion is a preference - and denominations no longer provide the primary identity for church. Authentic leadership is seen as a function of trust and relationality, more than entitlement and credentials. Emerging paradoxically with the consumerism of contemporary culture, there is a longing for connectedness that calls for a missional response. Churches wanting to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in this era are struggling with the impact of social change on traditional Presbyterian structures. In the increasingly pluralistic twenty-first century, the church is well advised to review traditional structures, develop multiple forms, and engage in dialogue with other traditions. In a qualitative survey of patterns of eldership in New Zealand in 2003, various tensions were identified and attempts to adapt the traditional Presbyterian polity described. Findings showed that the Presbyterian heritage has much to offer which is compatible with the postmodern age, as long as it is not applied in a static manner, but treasured as a gift that sustains community by reminding us who we are. As the living Christ guides the church in every age, authentic patterns are developed in a dynamic relationship between past and present. Six ingredients of the sixteenth century recipe can be identified as genuine features of a biblical polity, to be reconfigured in a new recipe more relevant to a contemporary church. These ingredients – call, covenant, councils, collegiality, constant and courage – are offered to Presbyterian churches seeking to reappropriate the ancient gift for our own time.
Appendices

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Appendix One

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Appendix Three
Peel’s table of Pros and Cons of ordaining elders
### The Pros and Cons of Ordination of Elders

**Peel 2002** page 253

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>FOR</strong></th>
<th><strong>AGAINST</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Widens the nature of ministry and expresses its corporate nature</td>
<td>Devalues the word ordination and the reality behind the word</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasises that work of an elder is not just a job or function</td>
<td>Creates a hierarchy within the membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has been a valued tradition within our church</td>
<td>Devalues other forms of service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links us with the World Reformed church family</td>
<td>Confers power and authority in a way which is unhelpful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflects the importance of lay authority within the church</td>
<td>Lacks unambiguous biblical warrant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confers responsible authority ie under God</td>
<td>Places too high a demand on people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains democracy in the leadership of the church</td>
<td>Causes confusion in ecumenical environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places the beginning an elder’s ministry in act of worship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Add an extra dimension which is hard to define</td>
<td></td>
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Appendix Four
Coleman’s Matrix of Honour-Participation in Church Leadership
Church Leadership described by Honour and Participation
© V F Coleman 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clergy Honour continuum</th>
<th>Non Conformist (low clergy honour high participation)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lay Theory (high participation high clergy honour)</td>
<td>Congregationalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FBD Superintendents Representation</td>
<td>Baptists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elder more like deacons, assist the minister</td>
<td>Some independents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Councils can be clergy dominated</td>
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**Clericalism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Leaderships</th>
<th>Lay Participation continuum</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Monarchy</strong> (low participation high clergy honour)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CoS Doctrine panel</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Presbyterians</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>URC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some NZ clergy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Lay Theory**

Methodism

**Presbyter Theory** (med clergy honour med participation)

Melville’s SBD

High view of all elders but T/R distinction

Councils must include elders

Disciples

NZ Pressies

**Episcopacy** (high clergy honour low participation)

Catholic

Orthodox

Anglican

some Pentecostals

Destiny Church

**Pseudo-egalitarian** (low honour and med/low participation)

Sects like Mormon /JW

Some Brethren

Gateway/Greenlane

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271 eg The Sacramental Issues Group 1989
Appendix Five
Example of Leadership Template
Appendix Six
Example of Leadership Covenant
Derived from Cladis 1999 page 160
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