

EXPLORING

**WHAT WILL WE
LOOK LIKE IN
30 YEARS?**

**PARISHES AND
PRESBYTERIES IN
AOTEAROA, NZ.**

STUDY LEAVE REPORT BY REV. RYHAN PRASAD.

INTRO:

WHAT IS GOING ON AND WHAT CHANGE COULD MAKE A DIFFERENCE

I went on Study leave in 2022 to continue my interest in preaching and to write something that might be a way forward for the leadership challenges we are facing in the PCANZ. I currently sit as co-convenor on the Leadership Sub-Committee, I have been on Presbytery Council, MSB's, Commissions etc. I think I've been exposed to a fairly wide view of the PCANZ and am faced at all levels with how more and more we are struggling with leadership in our denomination. And because I always find it life giving to consider solutions, I thought I would try and offer a possible way forward.

Now, the preaching conference I attended was about how we are currently preaching to a church in times of crisis. I hadn't considered that as the PCANZ we were in a crisis of leadership, until it hit me at the conference. - we really are. More on that later.

A Minister once told me the Presbyterian Church was like a lot of stars scattered across the country with some glowing bright, some steady and some twinkling in and out. I found that illustration quite compelling. Now however after twenty odd years in the PCANZ I would like offer my own illustration for where we are and how we look forward into the future.

I love our Presbyterian symbolic connection to the burning bush or as te aka Puaho would call it the glowing vine. This plant that burns with the Holy Spirit yet does not consume. However when I thought about our national church I couldn't help make some observations about where we are as a burning bush. First of all we don't seem to be a very united or connected vine and second we don't seem to be burning very bright. Thirdly, we seem to be ever so steadily being consumed. If our Church is the Burning Bush in this illustration then we are a dimming and scattered vine across Aotearoa.

Based on the burning bush example we are now a country where some parts of the bush are glowing brighter than others, many of branches are dim or lost their light and the bush seems like a lot of loosely connected individual plants rather than a bright burning whole.

I whakapapa back to the Waitaha people who tell of a place far up the Mata Au river, a place where they keep the fire burning - this place is called the ahi kā or home fire.

This is a fire that is guarded and kept alive at all times. As the Waitaha people retreated up the river from the conflict that came with settlement and the confiscation of land they kept these fires burning until the day came when they could travel back down the river again and release the fire anew.

So stars, burning bushes, and fires - all little bits of theology and imagery that helped me discern and cautiously

suggest a way forward for our Presbyterian Church here in Aotearoa.

And so I wonder...

What if our fire is spread too thin at present? What if some of our embers really are cold and literally burning or burnt out?

Maybe we need to bring all our embers closer together and stoke up the fire again?

Maybe we need to retreat up river and let some of the embers go?

Maybe we need to really increase the heat of our home fires in order to be able to bring light into the future?

I believe the ahi kā or home fire of the PCANZ is in need of fanning and building up.

I believe the PCANZ would benefit from really remembering and embracing who we are and become smaller and more true to our denominational story and from that renewed, strengthened and more easily governed and resourced base, build out again as a missional church.

Otherwise it seems to me that the fire that is the Presbyterian Church in Aotearoa New Zealand will continued to ebb and fade into the night.

So theres the theology, symbolism, and imagery that was playing through my mind as I thought, reflected and prayed about all this. The next part of this paper deals with what is happening in other places around the world in the Presbyterian family and then the last part will get down to the

practical working out of what stoking up the fires again could look like.

DENVER AND SAN FRANCISCO PRESBYTERY CONTEXT

While at the festival of Homiletics in the States I talked with some regional and national people in the PCUSA about how things were looking for the years ahead.

While in Denver and San Francisco I spoke with Jim Kitchener from PneuMatrix ministries¹ and Rev. David Brown from Noe Valley Presbyterian Church.

Both have experience of the big picture challenges facing the PCUSA.

I also had a fruitful conversation with Andy James from the stated clerk of the Presbytery of Atlanta who is also a member on the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly.

A general big picture take of the PCUSA situation is:

1.3 million now - members dropped 50% in 40 years

*National focus is on the Matthew 25 initiative which is an affirmation of a social justice agenda
- congregational vitality*

¹ Jim Kitchener Content- Principal at PneuMatrix and Consultant at Center for Healthy Churches

- *Addressing systemic racism*
- *addressing systemic poverty*

However there is not really a national focus on decline and the future of church.

Emphasis on the future is at a local level - encouraging Presbyteries to address this questions of the future.

There was a National church 10 year old initiative to plant 1001 new worshipping communities by 2022. This is going to be about 400 short and has challenges around sustainability and homogeneity. This initiative arose out of or was an American response to the Fresh Expressions movement in the Anglican Church.

There are roughly three different American viewpoints on the future:

- *Smaller is okay - we don't have to be who we were*
- *We are gonna be different - what do we do with that ?*
- *How do we get back to who we were - this is only a very small group i.e North Carolina - church planting is still in a christendom model - I.e. new neighbourhood - build a church !*

My conversations with the clerk of Denver Presbytery Fernandez and local ministers Ian and Clover also reinforced the bigger picture scenario and said it was on local Presbyteries to address the future in their own contexts.

It seems to me that the American context is broad and differing across the country and it seems as though their national picture is more focussed on issues of social justice around racism than about the future of the church. The issue of the future church has by and large been left up to Presbyteries to tackle in their own context if they so wish to.

Because of the context of racial justice in the United States this may seem like the more prominent issue for them to address because the Church still has a larger cultural capital and attendance than here in New Zealand.

It seems to me that this may not be the best way to approach the next 30 years in New Zealand because the issue of decline may actually speed up and increase while the national church focus lies elsewhere.

In New Zealand because we are smaller, we hopefully have more ability to share and cooperate in a way that can benefit the whole church. The question is how willing and able we are to do that across Presbyteries.

From the American context I do think there is value in a national viewpoint expressed through the General Assembly about some high level goals we wish to action. What those high level goals are become a key strategic discernment point.

SCOTTISH CONTEXT

For a context closer to our secular environment in New Zealand I talked with and read some material by Rev. Doug Gay from the Presbyterian Church in Scotland.

Doug has actually addressed the issue of decline in the Kirk in his Chalmers Lectures and his latest article Crisis in the Kirk²

² The-Kirk-in-Crisis-May-2022 - Rev. Doug Gay - Appendix 1

Interestingly both interactions I had with the American and Scottish context also reference the work of Charles Taylor.

Both Jim and Doug refer to Charles Taylors book “ A secular age” in their approach the current context.

It seems that both the USA and Scotland are grappling with the ideas that Charles Taylor highlights.

In addressing both decline and leadership issues, Scotland had begun a round of consolidation of buildings and reducing the number of parishes.

There is a recognition that they have been living beyond their means for some time. In Glasgow they are looking to go from 139 full time ministers to 89. This is being replicated through the country. They are taking the approach of creating a network of churches through the country so that the Church of Scotland is accessible to all people everywhere.

At a general assembly level they have committed to reducing their amount of parishes to 600 nationwide. There is also a plan to radically decrease the number of Presbyteries, so I was able to talk about our experience here.

In the carrying out of this approach Doug observes the following cautions.

My concern is that we have locked ourselves into a closed economy of scarcity, which is in danger of locking us into an accelerating pattern of institutional decline. In our honest and commendable attempt to face the music, we are now in danger of imposing on ourselves a cycle of cuts and restructuring which is too severe and too far-reaching and which will have irreversible consequences.

It seems to me that the learning for us in PCANZ from this, is that we need to be strategic in our consolidation and

ensure we are in a place where planning is generative and not simply cost cutting.

This does not mean we don't close parishes it means we close the right ones.

This is a strategic decision which the Church in all its Courts from Parish to GA will have to engage in and is beyond the scope of this report, though hopefully something we engage in seriously in the near future.

UNITING CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

CONTEXT

I also noted that the uniting church of Australia are also grappling with the way forward. Their Synod meeting in 2021 approved a 10 year renewal program with its Future Directions and the Synod Resourcing Framework.

The approved renewal blueprint, Future Directions for the People of God on the Way seeks to prioritise and fund:

- Rural and regional ministry*
- Ministry with people in the first third of their lives*
- Walking together with First Peoples and to the covenant with Congress*
- Stewardship of the earth*
- Working with Presbyteries to organise ourselves to promote growth within and through our congregations*

Earlier, Dr Denise Wood, reported that in the Synod discernment groups there was affirmation of the need to have the church's assets work hard for the mission of God.

She said there was concern expressed around the welfare of rural and regional congregations and the need for collaborate and transparent decision-making.

Moderator, Simon Hansford, highlighted the transformation this plan would bring to the church. "It will shift on what we focus on as a church, as it should," he said.

"By better using our property assets and income, we can resource Future Directions and continue to grow to be a Church that finds its mission in the world through Jesus Christ," the Future Directions paper says.

The future directions and synod resourcing framework goes in to great detail and is very aspirational (it can be found on the Uniting Church of Australia's web site).

The major strategic changes though are a pivot to focus on people in the first third of their lives to ensure the carrying of the faith and a commitment to having viable parishes that are fit for purpose. They also are engaging in strategic parish and building consolidation.

PCANZ CONTEXT

Thanks to the Presbytery Officers Report, the TELT report and the Mahi Tahi report we have some recent work that further highlights our situation as a national denomination.

A situation that hardly surprises anyone and in fact is widely acknowledged by all. However, to make it a bit more concrete and practical I offer this short overview of some the challenging statistics I find compelling.

Of our 400 odd churches, 150 of them have fewer than 40 at worship on a Sunday.

This is a 50% increase is smaller congregation in the last ten years.

PCANZ membership has dropped from 12.4% of Aotearoa's population to 5.% in 2018

We also have a majority age group of elderly worshippers.

PCANZ have a total membership of approximately ... people yet we hold a church building portfolio that caters to a nationwide expectation of attendance far in excess of that.

We also have huge financial challenges to earthquake proof the entirety of our property portfolio

And we seek to fill all these parishes with nationally ordained or locally ordained ministers.

We also are experiencing an ebb in the presentation of candidates for ordained ministry.

Year	2000	2020
Adults at worship	34401	18762
Children at worship	7136	2912
Christian Ed – under 13	8736	3757
Christian Ed 13-17	4085	2203

Adults at worship	During this period decline 54%
Children at worship	During this period decline 40%

Also thankyou to the work of Margaret Galt who has done statistical analysis of the changing structure of the church. This analysis has also led her to raise the issue of whether church leadership, especially Presbyteries, may need to become more intentionally about the geographic spread of

parishes that is developing over time. She has described this as an A, B and C model.

The way I see it Congregations that are seen as type A are key strategic parishes that need to be kept well resourced. Congregations the are seen as type B are ones that with the right resourcing and change may grow and flourish or continue an existing important ministry. And congregations that are seen at type C are ones that are simply existing week to week with their own slowly diminishing congregations and little no desire or activity in the missional sphere.

Sadly I believe we have far too many congregations in the C area and our culture of Presbytery Politeness and avoidance of conflict has enabled these struggling ministries to keep going in a negative direction. We as a church have been largely ineffective at recognising when a congregations season of ministry is struggling and/or over. This is hard because congregations can have such a strong sense of self that they are often too invested to see the writing on the wall. And the Presbytery is wanting to give the congregation every chance to thrive. And in doing so nothing happens until we are in the reactive change phase and then things too often become adversarial between the Parish and Presbytery.

This cannot go on. We have to work together to do better in this area.

Contrary to some people's belief we are not a congregational church. We are a national denomination with Presbyteries whose oversight is the mission and ministry of a geographical region. Parishes and Presbyteries need to work together not fight each other. We have to be able to hear hard news of when parishes are not viable and work together to imagine a new future.

I think it's important to face the reality about what the stats say and in turn discern what God is calling us into in response to all these challenges.

Drawing on the work done so far this paper proposes a potential way forward that may help address our current crisis.

“ I use the word crisis, with purpose, because this status quo or what I call the stagnation quo does not serve the Presbyterian Church well in its service to God’s call to mission and ministry in Aotearoa New Zealand. And it is a stagnation quo that will cause us by a pastoral politeness of a thousand cuts to sooner rather than later be a in a place of reactive change instead of God driven pro-active discernment.”

Reactive change leaves us with limited courses of action and often involves a mind set of reduction and saving of resources. Doug Gay refers to this is the Scottish context where things can become all about cost cutting and reducing mission and ministry. Where as pro-active change and discernment often involves thinking ahead and investing resources in a sought after and imagined future.

I know which change process I would rather be a part of. It's the God driven, pro-active one.

We already have many parishes consciously or unconsciously in the reactive phase and I write this to explore and offer a way forward.

For many of those in the reactive phase the sacrifice will most probably entail the grace to leave behind certain buildings and emotional attachments in favour of forging new

ministry relationships and bringing new energy to other buildings and church congregations.

For those still in the pro-active phase the sacrifice will consist of welcoming new people into their communities and letting go of certain established methods of ministry in favour of a new shared whole.

I also wish to highlight...

“ THAT WE AS CHURCH ARE CALLED TO BE FAITHFUL RATHER THAN SUCCESSFUL. ”

However the faithfulness we are called to show is one that shares the good news of Jesus Christ with our whanau and with our world.

Faithfulness to my mind is not “keeping the lights on” in the hope that any particular building will be full of worshipping Christians again.

In fact the Lights that are being kept on seem to be a large part of our crisis. We have approximately 419 Congregations in our denomination and we are being alerted to the fact by all our recent church reports that in the near future we will not have enough nationally ordained ministers to cover these parishes. This does not include any new or emerging leadership that will grow to take on any pioneering forms of ministry.

And we have even more buildings than we do Congregations.

And the insurance value of those buildings is around 1.5 billion.

The Church Property Trustees believe this to be a third to a half lower than needed to cover their value.

And of those self same buildings (the 650 buildings north of the Waitaki, the synod of Southland would be extra to these stats) 35% are under the PCANZ's 67% earthquake rating, 33% have not reported a rating to the CPT.

On top of this we have many parishes worshipping with small numbers of people in these big expensive buildings.

It is clear to me that rationalising of our buildings is an important step and it is good to see that the Church Property Trustees have been charged by General Assembly to begin this process alongside Presbyteries.

It seems to me this building situation also reflects our people situation. We are also about 1/3 to a half lower in participation at regional and national courts than we need. You may be able drill down on the numbers and be a bit higher in different regions but I am sure the big picture resonates with us all.

The Presbytery Officers report and to a smaller extent the TELT report look at the people resource challenge we face and look at ways to increase the supply of ministers to fill all the placements that will occur as a large cohort of ministers retire.

I agree with the Presbytery Officers report that we will always have to have good processes to allow overseas ministers to be received here in New Zealand. However this paper suggests an alternative solution to our building and leadership challenge. And by Leadership I mean NOM, LOM, Eldership and committee participation.

Because it is not only Clergy leadership that is facing a lack of supply.

Have you tried to form a Ministry Settlement Board lately? Or what about finding an Interim Moderator for a parish in

vacancy? How is it going with finding elders to be on Presbytery committees or youth and children and family ministry workers?

We are suffering from a lack of people in leadership across the board.

The beginning that was made with the re-sizing of our Presbyteries at the 2014 General Assembly has also highlighted how lacking we are with people resource to fulfil all the roles needed from MSB boards to parish commissions, moderators, Presbytery committees, student committees looking for new leadership, let alone the regular parish review.

These are important things that help us with the health and vitality of our national church and they are not being attended too well - with often the same core people doing the all the work and little if any training or equipping of new people to step into these roles.

I wonder if all the presbyteries, like my own struggle with the trade-off of wanting to do all these things well but being unable to come up with names to fill the roles needed...

I know / hope that I am preaching to the choir here.

The last challenge that I think is making things harder is that when we receive ministers in from other denominations we often do a poor job of teaching our Presbyterian identity to them and as such we have people who “rage against the machine” instead of work well within it.

Being Presbyterian means understanding change will take time because we value good process and group discernment.

It also means that we value a thought out and theological basis for how we do mission and ministry. I worry that many of our reactions to decline at varying levels in the Church have been pragmatic rather theological.

THEOLOGY OF STEWARDSHIP

There is also an issue of being good stewards of God's resources in this time. This paper has not the scope to delve deeply into this though I will highlight a few points that I think are salient to our moving forward.

Stewardship like the saints have done before us is called to resource the church for the future.

We only have the significant resources we have now due to the prophetic thinking of those who came before us.

What is the resources legacy we will leave going forward?

It could look like ensuring we have enough fit for purpose buildings going forward and enough people and financial resources to sustain those buildings and teach our leaders and people the Presbyterian story.

Or it could look like a dwindling propping up of a decaying network of buildings that depletes our resources while we hope for a miraculous revival of Christians to come through the doors.

It seems to me that the status quo leads us to the very sad later scenario.

PCANZ WAY FORWARD

Now, what if the way forward for us a denomination meant less ministers and less buildings - not more?

What if we gathered those embers together where it made geographical and ministry sense and instead of having 440 parishes around country we have say 250? (number merely used as a example of a more sustainable figure, not a concrete target)

As I mentioned earlier Scotland have started down this track with their initiative of consolidation.

Presbyteries may then have more people available to fill our ecclesial structure over a smaller number of parishes.

Maybe we need to stoke the fire back to a critical mass before we grow the fire again.

The fire of the church may need a time of consolidation and dedicated learning so we can truly be the Presbyterian Church again and not the scattered embers we have become.

Maybe we need the vitality of having more of us gather together again in fewer church buildings in order to find missional energy and passion to share the good news - instead of expending all we have to simply keep the lights on.

This is the maintenance versus mission model where many of us are being forced to worry about maintenance instead of getting excited about mission.

In our calling to be faithful maybe we are being called to gather the embers of the Church together and stoke the fire in order to weather the secular storm we are in.

I propose this way forward because any of the alternatives or the status quo serves only to water down who we are and expend our resources on avenues that will maintain a structure that is too big for the people who populate it.

I also don't see any new suggestions for a way forward that are being presented from Presbyteries at General Assembly that ensure the Presbyterian Denomination continues as a vital expression of the church here in Aotearoa New Zealand. I understand there is work going on in our Presbyteries however I don't see how that work speaks to our denomination as a whole. It would be great to get some shared sense of purpose and calling for the next 30 years around the challenge of the future to unite us and foster a sense of hope and unity within the PCANZ.

Otherwise the landscape for a way forward seems shockingly bare and increasingly more siloed around what each individual Presbytery and Parish can achieve on its own.

Getting more NOM's will not solve the challenge of all the committees, elders and mission and ministry roles being filled and run well.

The ecclesiology or structure of being Presbyterian values shared decision making and discernment through committees of people meeting together.

This structure as it stands is currently unsustainable because we have too many parishes and not enough people.

To quote the infomercial famous Tony Robbins..

“Change happens when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of change.”

I feel like the pain of staying where we are right now is immense and shared by a whole lot of people.

And the pain of change may be what what we need to move through to get to a sustainable future.

Thankfully we have a God that brings us through pain and out the other side.

Romans 8:18 says The pain that you've been feeling can't compare to the joy that is coming.

So maybe its time make this pain mean something and journey forward into something new rather than keep painfully mourning the days gone by.

One last theological reflection that came to me later in writing this report is that we may not understand the field we stand in or the water we sail in.

In Ruatoria (Rural East Coast) recently, a group of Dentists with YWAM came from overseas during their holidays to provide free dental care to the people and to share the gospel. I have heard other stories of people being sent over to Aotearoa on mission trips.

We are the mission field. We are no longer the Christian homeland from which mission is predominantly sent out. And yet our Church building presence reflects something akin to the local petrol station. One in every town...

Yet we don't have enough Presbyterians in every town to utilise these buildings effectively.

It may be that the mission and ministry of the PCANZ at this time is to survive. Maybe we are an ark in stormy secular seas in a time of exile. Maybe our biggest missional role is keep the faith alive and the home fires burning until the

secular tides ebb and the good news of the gospel is able to flow again more freely.

I think it is important we understand our context and role in it. In this way our movement forward will be more conducive to the sharing of the gospel rather than the current place we find ourselves in.

AS PEOPLE OF THE BURNING BUSH HOW DO WE KEEP THE FIRE BURNING!

Having looked at the wider picture in America and Scotland and Australia it seems to me that here in Aotearoa New Zealand we are more like Australia at the coal face of what decline and mission in a secular culture looks like.

We are likely the body that will make the changes that the other countries will look at 5 to 10 year from now. Though Scotland may be further ahead of us in action they also have arguably more time to act as they still possess a higher christian cultural foundation.

I believe a way forward, is for us to become a denomination with less buildings and parishes and more people joining together in worship around our various designated home fires.

And once those home fires are stoked and burning brightly then other new missional fires can once again be started.

Without this proactive change I fear the Presbyterian Fire will slowly burnout in Aotearoa New Zealand because we will have waited too long to make the necessary changes to be here in 30 years time.

**MAY WE GATHER THE EMBERS, STOKE
THE FIRES AND SHARE THE FLAME
ANEW!**

