

Standing Committee re Church Structures

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 When the Task Group on Church Structures was established by resolution of the Seventh Assembly it was given terms of reference with eight specific foci. Five of the terms of reference were addressed in the report to the Eighth Assembly. Consequently the Eighth Assembly approved simpler and more flexible structures for local congregations, including the establishment of a Church Council in each congregation, alternatives to the parish and changes to the deployment of ministers.
- 1.2 The remaining terms of reference were as follows:
- The difficulties created by functions being duplicated across councils/sectors of the Uniting Church and ways of resolving these difficulties;
 - Ways of encouraging and nurturing accountability between councils of the church;
 - Implications for the allocation of resources across councils/sectors of the church, with particular reference to improved resourcing of presbyteries so they can better fulfil their responsibilities in accordance with the Basis of Union paragraph 15(c) and the Constitution Clause 26.
- 1.3 In response to these remaining terms of reference, the Task Group issued a report "Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils", and invited comment from councils and members of the church. This report was issued in late 1996, but the Assembly Standing Committee advised that at the time it was not appropriate to ask the church to respond to yet another report prior to the Eighth Assembly.
- 1.4 The report was made available to all members of the Eighth Assembly, and the Assembly resolved: (Minute 97.28.05)
- (a) to invite councils, agencies and individuals to comment on the discussion paper "Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils" with responses to be received by the General Secretary by 1 July 1998
 - (b) to authorise the Standing Committee to act on any recommendations from the Task Group on Church Structures presented after consideration of responses to the discussion paper 'Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils'.
- 1.5 Some 70 responses were received, including most synods and many presbyteries. In May 1999 the Task Group presented its final report to the Assembly Standing Committee, and was subsequently discharged. This present report arises not only from the Task Group's report,

but also from the Standing Committee's consideration of and response to that report.

- 1.6 It is important to note that in the six years since the Seventh Assembly determined of the terms of reference for the Task Group on Church Structures there have been many developments in the Church and its councils. The Eighth Assembly approved simpler and more flexible structures for congregations, and other developments have meant that the priority or urgency of some issues identified in 1994 is no longer as clear as seemed to be the case at that time. Some of the developments across the Church have impacted upon the issues addressed by the Task Group, and in other instances the work and directions taken by the Task Group has impacted upon the continuing life of the councils of the church.

2. IDENTIFICATION OF CORE FUNCTIONS

- 2.1 The Task Group recognised that to address the issues of duplication of function, accountability and resources it was necessary to be clear about which functions belonged to which councils. Careful study was made of the Basis of Union, the Constitution and the declarations of the Seventh Assembly about the respective roles of the Assembly, the synods and the presbyteries (Minute 94.24.4).
- 2.2 The Uniting Church is governed by a series of inter-related councils, each of which has its tasks and responsibilities, some of which lie exclusively with one council and others of which have facets which are exercised by more than one council. Clarity on these issues is critical to the good ordering of the Church.
- 2.3 Accordingly, the Standing Committee, on the recommendation of the Task Group, now proposes recognition of Core Functions for each council. Core functions refer to primary, central and necessary functions of church councils. Within the core functions for each council it is also proposed to make a distinction between those for which that council has exclusive responsibility (later referred to as "distinctive responsibilities") and those which are shared with other councils (later referred to as "lead roles"). Both distinctive responsibilities and lead roles are vital to the life of the church
- 2.4 Ordination, for example, is the responsibility of the presbytery. While the Synod, through its theological college, the Assembly through its Ministerial Education Commission and others may have some input, it is the presbytery, which makes the final decision about whether a candidate is to be ordained, and then conducts the ordination. No other council of the church can make a decision to ordain a minister. So, ordination is a core function of the presbytery, and one for which it has distinctive responsibility.

- 2.5 Lead roles are ones which are vital to the life of the church. Other councils may have significant involvement but designated councils are expected to take the lead in ensuring these roles are carried out. In fulfilling these important roles there is both co-operation and the recognition that designated councils take the lead for the sake of the whole church.
- 2.6 Each council may fulfil roles or responsibilities other than their core functions. But in order that each council of the church remains focussed on their core roles, it is important to note that any non-core functions, however desirable, are seen as secondary to the core functions. In their use of the resources of time, energy and finance, councils must give higher priority to core functions than to non-core functions.

CORE FUNCTIONS OF UNITING CHURCH COUNCILS

CONGREGATION

(Basis of Union 15a; Constitution 22)

Distinctive Responsibilities

To be the embodiment in one place of the one holy catholic and apostolic church, worshipping, witnessing and serving as a fellowship of the Spirit in Christ. [Reg 3.1.1(a)]
Formation of a Church Council [Reg 3.1.11-3.1.27]

Lead Roles [Regulation 3.1.1(b)]

Worship, witness and service
Nurture of people in faith hope and love
Education of members in Christian faith and discipleship
Planning equipping and resourcing for mission and evangelism
Response to community and personal needs through pastoral care, liturgies, and local community development/action
Fostering co-operation with congregations of other denominations

PRESBYTERY

(Basis of Union 15c; Constitution 26)

Distinctive Responsibilities

Pastoral and administrative oversight of congregations, Ministers of the Word, Deacons, Deaconesses, Youth Workers, Lay Pastors and Community Ministers (Regulation 3.4.4)
Ordination of Ministers of the Word and Deacons (Regulation 2.3.1)
Recognition of lay preachers (Regulation 2.8.6),
Commissioning of Youth Workers (Reg. 2.9.19)
community ministers (Regulation 2.12.13) and lay pastors (Regulation 2.7.22).

Lead Roles (Regulation 3.4.4.)

Oversight and support of congregations
Promotion of the wider aspects of the work of the Church
Development and oversight of regional mission strategies
Instruction of Church members towards a better understanding and a fuller participation in witness and service
Placement and oversight, including discipline, of Ministers of the Word, Deacons, Deaconesses, Youth Workers, Lay Pastors and Community Ministers.

SYNOD

(Basis of Union 15d; Constitution 32)

Distinctive Responsibilities

Administration and co-ordination of physical resources, including property and finance (Regulation 3.5.11)
Provision of specialist staff
Formation and dissolution of presbyteries [Regulation 3.5.12(b)]
Oversight of the Church's schools and colleges

Lead Roles (Regulations 3.5.11 and 12)

General oversight, direction and administration of the church's worship witness and service.
Development and promotion, with presbyteries, of a vision for mission.
Oversight of and liaison with presbyteries.
Response to complaints and grievances.
Provision of ministerial education and formation, including determination of applications for candidature.
Development and promotion of ecumenical relationships ministry and mission.
Support of the national and international life of the church.
Establishment of such boards and agencies as are appropriate for carrying out its responsibilities.

ASSEMBLY

(Basis of Union 15e; Constitution 38)

Distinctive Responsibilities

Determining responsibility for doctrine, worship, government and discipline (Constitution 38a)
Ecumenical relationships, including measures towards the wider union of the church (Constitution 38b)
Establishment of standards of ministerial education (Constitution 38a)
Determination of standards for the reception of ministers from other communions (Constitution 16)
International relationships (Constitution 38b)
Formation and dissolution of synods

Lead Roles (Regulation 3.6.5)

General oversight and promotion of the life and mission of the church

Education of Church members in the matters for which the Assembly has distinctive responsibility
Liaison with Aboriginal and Islander Australians
The address, by word and action, of matters of national importance
Guiding decisions on the tasks and authority to be exercised by other councils
Ensuring the provision of ministry in remote areas of Australia.

3. COMMENT RE DUPLICATION OF FUNCTIONS

3.1 The Task Group reported that much of the common perception of duplication of functions is not grounded in reality. Nevertheless, the concept of core functions as identified above will assist the church to better understand the respective functions of each council and the implications for relationships between councils. Any duplication of effort is to be avoided for it diminishes the ability of the councils to exercise their core functions in ways that serve the Gospel.

3.2 Therefore, in the section on Synods (Section 6, below) some potential areas of future co-operation, which will further enhance the ways in which one part of the church can undertake tasks on behalf of other parts of the church are identified.

3.3 During this triennium the Standing Committee has given consideration to the expression of interconciliar relationships, and has identified many present and possible ways for each council to honour its obligation to humbly and expectantly listen to and learn from other councils of the church, as required by the following sentences from paragraph 15 of the Basis of Union:

“The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ alone is supreme in his Church, and that he may speak to it through any of its councils. It is the task of every council to wait upon God’s Word, and to obey God’s will in the matters allocated to its oversight. Each Council will recognise the limits to its own authority and give heed to other councils of the Church, so that the whole body of believers may be united by mutual submission in the service of the Gospel.”

When councils accept this understanding of their relationships to each other the potential for duplication of functions is considerably diminished.

3.4 The Standing Committee also wishes to note that along with the increasing development of more flexible structures, both formal and informal, there is a greater sharing of resources – human, financial and physical – across the sectors of the Church. These expressions of sharing in our common engagement in the mission of God’s Church is to be welcomed.

4. CONSTITUTION CLAUSE 39

4.1 The document ‘Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils’ invited comment on whether it would be helpful if the Assembly gave some guidance on the circumstances in which Clause 39 of the Constitution could be applied. On the whole, the responses were not helpful in offering any consensus of approach to this issue.

4.2 Clause 39 states, “On matters which, by a two thirds majority vote, the Assembly deems vital to the life of the Church, the Assembly shall seek the concurrence of Synods and/or Presbyteries and/or Congregations as the Assembly may determine”.

4.3 Following discussions with the Church Polity Reference Committee, the Standing Committee brings proposals concerning the implementation of clause 39 by the Assembly and the Standing Committee. See proposal 12 and its accompanying comments/rationale.

5. PRESBYTERIES

5.1 Presbyteries have a very important oversight function in the church. This is envisaged by the Basis of Union, and recognised in our Constitution and Regulations. Presbyteries need to be large enough to have the critical mass necessary to fulfil the functions of pastoral oversight, mission strategy and administration envisaged in the Basis, but not so large that these functions become remote from the congregations which the presbytery serves. Under-sized presbyteries simply cannot fulfil the functions designated to them. Over-sized presbyteries fulfil the functions, but in a manner which does not foster the sense of community, collegiality and mutual accountability in the original vision of the UCA. Recognising the fine balance is a critical task for synods.

5.2 Whether all current presbyteries should be retained is a matter on which there is diversity of opinion, and it is unwise to attempt to reach a national policy on this matter. Whilst a clear majority of responses received to “Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils” supported a reconsideration of the number and size of presbyteries, the number of responses was small and the greater part of the minority were “not sure”. In any case, the responsibility for the formation and dissolution of presbyteries is a matter for synods, and it would be inappropriate for the Assembly to demand changes.

5.3 However, consideration of the number of presbyteries must be seen in the context of two related and important factors:
i. the increased load on presbyteries, and
ii. the level of resources (human and physical) available to the presbytery.

5.4 It is clear that most presbyteries are seriously under-resourced to fulfil their core functions. This has been accentuated by the large range of additional responsibilities recently placed on

presbyteries as a result of decisions taken by the Eighth Assembly concerning church structures, ministerial education and placements.

5.5 It is timely for the Assembly to request synods to review the number and composition of their presbyteries, and to offer guidance to synods as exercise their responsibility in this matter.

5.6 The Assembly suggests neither a minimum nor maximum size for presbyteries, either geographical or numerical of congregations or placements. The Standing Committee believes a criterion as proposed earlier by the Task Group (in Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Presbyteries) might prove too restrictive in some rural contexts and in some areas of urban poverty or areas with high levels of multi-faith/multicultural communities.

5.7 The following factors are relevant to the discussion on the number and size of presbyteries:

- The Synods of New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia have not changed the number of their presbyteries since they were established provisionally two years or so prior to the inauguration of the UCA in June 1977. Yet during that time there have been huge changes in both church and society.
- The past twenty-five years has seen a considerable shrinking in the membership of the Uniting Church, the number of pastoral charges, and the level of financial resources.
- The reduction in the number of ministers in placement has in many instances reduced the level of skilled and visionary leadership available to presbyteries.
- Other denominations have larger districts/dioceses/regions, and for the UCA to have presbyteries with similar bounds could assist local and regional ecumenical co-operation.
- Across the UCA there are some creative alternative models being developed within and between presbyteries, with an increasing use of the opportunities for flexibility provided in the regulations. (see below)

5.8 It is therefore proposed that the Assembly recommend to Synods that they review the number and size of their presbyteries with a view to ensuring that each presbytery has the physical and human resources to be able to fulfil the many important pastoral administrative and missional functions now required of presbyteries.

5.9 It is suggested further this review each synod be guided by the above paragraphs, Section 6 of the report "Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils". Synods would also benefit from noting the following creative initiatives taken in some presbyteries:

- At least two presbyteries [North Queensland and Grampians (Vic)] have received approval of their respective Synod – under Regulation 3.4.7 - to meet

less frequently than quarterly. In North Queensland many functions of presbytery are fulfilled in three zones. In Grampians there are two Regional Councils.

- The Presbytery of The Darling [NSW], which has only four ministers in placement, has referred all its powers to the Commission of the Western Division, established by the Synod of NSW. Membership of the Commission includes persons from outside the Presbytery as well as all members of the Presbytery.
- Pilgrim Presbytery [Northern Synod] has delegated much of its authority to committees. Their assessment is that "when most of the work is referred to committees, the presbytery meetings can be well focused and this provides for times of fellowship, learning and sharing".
- Three adjacent Victorian presbyteries [Bourke, Maroondah and Western Port] have co-operated to appoint regional development workers. Instead of appointing one per presbytery they have determined a model by which three persons of different areas of expertise will be available to work across the three presbyteries in a co-ordinated way.
- Two adjacent South Australian presbyteries [Eyre and Frome] share one full time presbytery minister
- Eyre and Frome presbyteries [SA] have a day, "That Day in February" when the presbytery meets not for business but to experience learning, collegiality and accountability.
- In Tasmania three presbyteries were combined into one [Presbytery of Tasmania] which at its first – and only – meeting referred all its powers to the Synod of Tasmania. The one meeting acts as both Synod and Presbytery.
- Many presbyteries cross State boundaries, especially along the Murray [Vic/NSW] and Tweed [NSW/Qld] Rivers. A large part of Western Australia – the Kimberley region is part of the Northern Synod.
- Calvary Presbytery [Qld] is a non-geographical presbytery, providing oversight of all Congress activities and congregations across the whole of Queensland.

The above examples serve as a reminder that in determining the number and size of presbyteries which will be appropriate for the ministry and mission context the UCA faces as it enters the twenty-first century there are many possibilities and considerations extending beyond geography, social and cultural patterns, time-honoured boundaries and traditional ways of "being presbytery".

6. SYNODS

6.1 In 'Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils' the Task Group observed that "the number and size of synods is not a matter requiring change at this time". The Standing Committee concurs, although it accepts that

the role of the Assembly in relation to each of the synods should be one of continual review, and the Assembly or its Standing Committee should be willing to take initiatives in this matter if circumstances warrant.

6.2 Since the Task Group began its work following the Seventh Assembly in 1994, there has been an increase in more intentional formal and informal sharing and consultation across synod boundaries. The Assembly must continue to foster networking between synods. At the same time, synods must increasingly consider the impact any of their decisions taken unilaterally may have on other synods and on the total mission of the Uniting Church. The Standing Committee believes, however, that it is unnecessary to bring proposals along these lines.

6.3 In terms of making the best use of limited resources (and in particular in making resources available to presbyteries) it must be asked which particular core functions of synods can be done only by people resident within that particular area and which could perhaps be undertaken by one synod of behalf of an/other synod(s). We note that within both the public and private sectors, national call centres are being established in a variety of towns, and that information on banking or travel, for example, can be supplied by a staff person seated anywhere in the world. Could some or all of the property, legal, investment and accounting functions currently undertaken by Synod staff and committees be similarly provided? The management of the superannuation arrangements for the Victorian synod lay staff by the Queensland Synod is an excellent example of sharing this kind of expertise within the Church.

6.4 As synods network – both formally and informally – and as initiated by the Assembly or by the synods the following questions could stimulate discussion and action:

i. What are the particular strengths or gifts of each Synod?

How can we celebrate these distinctive gifts and emphases and seek to utilise them for the whole church rather than duplicate (or attempt to duplicate) them in another synod? Can specialist synod staff be shared with other synods in creative ways?

ii. What more can a “strongly resourced” synod do to support and help (numerically) weaker ones?

iii. Can we do more to foster co-operative ventures arising from the Rural Ministry networks, EMU, Lay Preachers’ Synod and National Conferences, the MEC, UCAF and other gatherings of lay people?

iv. Given the dwindling number of candidates for the Ordained and Specified ministries, do we need to revisit the decision to keep six training colleges for ministers despite the important function they play in the theological education for numbers of lay people?

v. Should our Synods continue to be largely based on state government boundaries, or should we explore more crossing of state boundaries? (Examples of the crossing of state boundaries already existing are Tweed Heads (Qld-NSW), Barham-Wakool (NSW-Vic), Murrayville-Pinaroo (Vic-SA) Kimberly region (in WA State, but Northern Synod).

6.5 Synods and presbyteries are encouraged to intentionally explore the possibilities of exercising some of their core functions in co-operation. The synods of Victoria and Tasmania have just one Placements Committee for the two Synods. A joint Placements Committee may not be appropriate for other synods, but there may be other possibilities worth exploring.

6.6 Some have suggested that even with the deletion of the parish we are still over-governed, and that there is a case for not retaining both the presbytery and the synod. However, it is not suggested that the Assembly undertake any consideration of that suggestion at this time. It is important to note in this regard that, unlike the deletion of the parish, deletion of the synod from our structure would be a departure from the structure outlined in the Basis of Union.

7. THE ASSEMBLY

7.1 In ‘Roles, Relationships and Resourcing of Church Councils’ the Task Group proposed that the role and responsibilities of the Assembly needed to be reviewed. It was also proposed that it would be helpful if the Assembly (in session) indicated whether there were core functions of that council additional to those nominated in the report.

7.2 Since the publication of the document the Assembly has been the subject of a major review of both its functions and its internal structure. This review was commissioned by the Assembly Standing Committee, which reported to the Eighth Assembly that the review was in progress. Over several meetings of the Assembly Standing Committee since the Eighth Assembly the report of the review has been carefully considered, and structural changes implemented in an amended form. Throughout this major review of the Assembly, the Consultant (Rev Dr Ian Allsop), the Review Group (Chairperson: Rev Dr Charles Biggs), the Assembly Review Implementation Group (ARIC) and the Assembly Standing Committee were each guided by the statement of core functions developed by the Task Group.

7.3 In light of this restructure of the Assembly, Standing Committee takes the view that no further review of the functions of the Assembly is warranted at this time.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES

- 8.1 The work of the Task Group on Church Structures has highlighted the fact that, on the whole, presbyteries remain the most under-resourced councils of the church, yet are being expected to do more and more.
- 8.2 An increase in resources to presbyteries is necessary, and in some cases may necessitate a synod or the Assembly foregoing a non-core function in order to free up resources for one or more presbyteries. In this regard it is important to offer flexibility in the way resources are provided. In some cases it may be through enhanced communication facilities, in others through a sharing of personnel and in others through the provision of staff on a fee for service basis
- 8.3 The task of evaluating if there are non-core functions which should be continued belongs to each council, but each council needs to regularly examine its stewardship of resources, and in so doing to think beyond itself. Synods in particular need to ensure that there is ongoing consultation with their presbyteries to determine the best use of limited resources.
- 8.4 In this regard presbyteries are reminded that they have direct representation in the membership of both synod and the Assembly and are in a position to both influence decisions of these other councils and to interpret to each the decisions of the other/s. Those who serve on a council as representative of another council have a bridge-building role which also includes trust-building.

Allan Thompson
ASC member

Gregor Henderson
General secretary