



Presbytery Meeting- 16 March 2024

Proposal 7

PSC – Identifying and Responding to Struggling Congregations

That the WA Presbytery agrees:

1. To note the requirements of congregations as set out in the Basis of Union and Regulations.
2. To adopt the following characteristics to identify struggling congregations
 - i. Worship- meeting for worship less than once a month
 - ii. Sacraments-celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion infrequently and services of Baptism conducted rarely
 - iii. Discipleship- limited or no programmes are in place, other than Sunday worship, to build members up in Christian faith and life.
 - iv. Witness-the congregation is not offering activities, other than Sunday worship, to share the gospel with others
 - v. Service- the congregation is not providing services to those in need in the local community.
 - vi. Mission- the congregation does not have an up to date Mission Plan.
 - vii. Church Council- the Church Council is not meeting or is not carrying out its responsibilities as set out in the Regulations
 - viii. Congregational Meetings- are not being held twice a year or less than 8 Confirmed Members or Members in Association are in attendance.
 - ix. Support for the Wider UCA- the congregation has not elected a lay member to Presbytery, or the lay member rarely attends Presbytery, and they are making no or a declining contribution to Mission and Service giving.
 - x. Finance- congregation is struggling to meet its financial commitments and repay it's debts
 - xi. Property- property is not being maintained and/or it is under insured.
3. To adopt the following process for the Presbytery to respond to struggling congregations.
 - i. When a Presbytery Staff Member, Committee or Committees become aware that a congregation is demonstrating characteristics of being a struggling congregation, or when a congregation reports that they are struggling, this will be reported to the Presbytery Standing Committee.
 - ii. Presbytery Standing Committee will prioritise which congregations it is most urgent for the Presbytery to consult with and support taking into account the number of characteristics they are demonstrating.

- iii. Presbytery Standing Committee will request a particular Committee or Staff Member to consult with the congregation about the situation and discuss with them the best way ahead. The aim of the consultation will be to provide support to the congregation in order for them to acknowledge the situation they are facing and discern the best way ahead.
- iv. A report will be prepared from this consultation recommending what action is needed. This may include referral to Thrive to assist with mission planning, to Property Committee to deal with property issues, to CEDAL to assist with training needs, or to PRC to provide pastoral support. The report may also recommend that the congregation be dissolved, amalgamated with another congregation or re-constituted as a faith community.
- v. If needed a proposal to dissolve a congregation or to re-constitute as a faith community or to amalgamate it with another congregation, will come to a Presbytery meeting for decision.

Rationale

The Uniting Church sets out in the Basis of Union and in the Regulations its expectations of congregations.

The Basis of Union makes clear that congregations are to engage in worship, witness and service. It also sets out the five marks of a congregation- to meet regularly to hear God's Word, celebrate the sacraments, build one another up in love, share in the wider responsibilities of the church and serve the world. (Paragraph 15 (a)). It appears from the feedback at the November Presbytery meeting that many members are not aware of the requirements of a congregation as set out in the Basis of Union.

The Regulations set out that each congregation must be governed by an elected Church Council who are to "build up the congregation in faith and love, sustain members in hope, and lead the congregation into fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world". They are also to manage the financial affairs of the congregation, and manage all property for which the congregation is the responsible body. (Reg 3.1.2).

Meetings of the congregation must be held at least twice a year and at one of these meetings, financial reports and budgets for the coming year need to be presented. (Reg 3.5.1) For a valid congregational meeting, at least 8 Confirmed Members or Members in Association need to be present and voting. (Reg 3.8.5(c))

The congregation is required to elect a lay member to the Presbytery (Reg 3.3.4 (d) (i)) There is also an expectation that all congregations will make a financial contribution to the work of the wider church through Mission and Service giving.

It is clear that many of our congregations are struggling to meet these basic requirements. The role of the Presbytery in this situation is to identify such congregations and to get alongside them and help them to discern the way ahead. Various options are possible. The Presbytery may be able to provide some additional support and resourcing which enables the congregation to better meet its responsibilities. Or the congregation may

decide to re-structure- to amalgamate with another congregation, to become part of a cluster, to collaborate with ecumenical partners, or to become a faith community. Being freed of the responsibilities of a congregation may enable the church to re-focus on its ministry and mission and gain new strength. It is always possible that after a period of time a faith community may grow and strengthen to the point where it feels it can once again able to take on the responsibilities of a congregation. In this case it can request the Presbytery to once again recognise it as a congregation. In some cases there may be no alternative than that the congregation be dissolved and in this case the Presbytery can ensure pastoral care is offered to remaining members as they face this reality.

In recent years congregations who were struggling were largely left on their own to work out what to do. Without assistance from the wider church many slowly declined and finally died, sometimes without even the Presbytery knowing. The purpose of this proposal is to provide a way that the Presbytery can identify those congregations who are struggling at an earlier stage so that the Presbytery can get alongside these congregations and help them discern the way ahead. The feedback from the November Presbytery meeting clearly indicated that congregations wanted the Presbytery to be more proactive in supporting and resourcing congregations as we work through these issues together.

There are a range of means by which the Presbytery can identify struggling congregations, such as the Annual Report of the Congregation which should be provided to PRC, the Annual Financial Report which should be provided to the Presbytery Treasurer, Property Inspection Reports provided to Presbytery Property Committee, Life and Witness Reports and other information provided to PRC, Mission and Service Reports, reports from Listening Journeys, Mission Plans provided to Thrive and NCLS data. The failure of a congregation to provide any of these reports to Presbytery is in itself an indication that they are struggling.

Once a struggling congregation is identified by any of the Presbytery staff or committees, Presbytery Standing Committee will be informed. Congregations who display only one or two of the characteristics of a struggling congregation may need little assistance from the Presbytery. But those who are displaying a large number of these characteristics will be a priority for the Presbytery to contact and enter into conversation with. In these cases PSC will appoint a person to consult with the congregation and help them discern the way ahead.

Mover: Rev Bev Fabb (Deacon)

Seconded: Rev Ivan Clark