

STUDY LEAVE REPORT

July 2011

*Rural Parishes - dying, surviving, thriving:
doing ministry beyond the traditional 'one
parish-one ordained minister' model.*



by Rev. Stephanie Wells

for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction

In a parish somewhere in New Zealand people are facing the fact that their life with a full-time resident ordained minister¹ is coming to an end. This may be because the numbers and giving have dropped to a level where the parish is unable to afford the stipend. It may be because a suitable person cannot be found to fill the vacancy. The future without this traditional role looks uncertain, but this study leave report seeks to show that there is still life after full-time clergy.

It should be noted that this is not a definitive study of all the options available to parishes - it only gives a taste of what is happening in a few places in New Zealand and South Australia. As a nationally ordained Presbyterian minister of a rural parish, I have tried to narrow my study to rural parishes with connections to Presbyterianism. Thus most examples are Union, Co-operating or Presbyterian in New Zealand and Uniting in South Australia. Having said this, the ideas these parishes have had are applicable to many. Articles from around the world and across denominations show that the need for alternatives to ministry led by resident ordained clergy is widespread.

This report is based on research done during a 7 week study leave, which consisted of reading books and internet articles, visiting and asking questions of people involved in rural parishes throughout New Zealand and South Australia. Data also came from responses to an emailed questionnaire sent to addresses from the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ) Yearbook that looked to have non-traditional ministries, making it somewhat random in coverage. Changes were also made after presenting the draft findings to the Southern Rural Conference in Gore at the end of June.

It is my hope that this report will be used to provoke discussion locally, regionally and nationally about the future of ministry, particularly for small rural congregations. To reassure congregations who fear losing 'their minister' as to the range of options they have. To inform larger congregations of the difficulties smaller congregations face and opportunities they have to serve. To inform and challenge regional and national denominational bodies as to the options available to smaller congregations and their role in encouraging and facilitating changes. To inspire all areas of the wider church to see ministry in different ways. And finally to give hope and recognition to those congregations who are 'walking the talk.'

¹ Thanks to the following publication for the term 'resident minister' Wilson, Boyd and Fred Waine eds. (1985). *The Rural Church Perplexed: Darfield 1984; Australian-New Zealand Rural Ministry Consultation*. Rural Ministry Unit, Canterbury, NZ.

Findings

The intention to narrow the field of study to rural parishes was thwarted by the different definitions parishes had of 'rural'. Statistics New Zealand don't help much either with their ambiguous "residual areas not defined in the urban definition." Alan Hawkesworth's definition is more helpful. "Rural in New Zealand means anywhere not in a city or major centre of trade and commerce. It is somewhere where the land and climate determine the timetables and income of the people groups living there."² Despite all this I suspect many of the findings here will be helpful to urban churches as well.

The data collected shows that some of the congregations, who no longer have a traditional 'one minister-one congregation model', regard this as a temporary aberration. Others, especially those with lay-led teams, state that they would never return to their previous situation where the ordained person did everything. Some even go as far as to say that even if they could again afford full-time residential clergy they would either not do it or, alternatively, limit the role to being part of the team ministry already in place. Some congregations have gone through several of these models, others are currently looking at changing. Some have had horrendous experiences and yet their faith is dazzling. They have come to believe that if God wants ministry to continue in their area leadership gaps will be filled, building issues will be solved, etc. They can tell stories of this happening in the past and so trust it will happen again.

For the rest of this report, I have noted under a number of headings some of alternatives available to congregations when the resident minister is no longer an option.³ Some are fairly arbitrary and readers will quickly notice that some elements of each model could fit into another category. This is the nature of ministry, particularly new models - that some boundaries, between one and the other, become blurred. None of the examples should be considered prescriptive either as all congregations seemed to have adapted these models to their own needs.

It should also be observed that many of the models are beyond the single congregation to organise. A Presbytery or Regional minister obviously needs to be employed by a wider body. Arrangements such as Yoked Parishes or Local Ministry Teams with Resource Minister oversight require Presbytery or some similar regional body to set up, and often to administer. Thus, this report is not solely aimed at the congregation who wants to have some options to consider as they face ministry beyond what they have known before but also the wider church who needs to consider how they can enable these options.

I have tried to use the word 'congregation' more than 'parish' in the rest of my report as 'parish' can describe a wide variation of congregations with or without ministers and with varying levels of viability. A parish can be a cluster of autonomous congregations with one contracted ordained minister, or a group of congregations that worship separately but have a combined ruling body, or a combination of amalgamated and separate congregations, or a group of church groups covered by a number of ministers, or any number of different permeations. Therefore in this report 'congregation' stands for a faith community who regards itself as autonomous and has some workable leadership structure.

1. Replacement: by Part Time Ordained Ministry, Lay Pastor,...

² Hawkesworth, Alan (1996). *Who's Upstream Anyway?* [a Study Leave Report held at the PCANZ Archives in Dunedin].

³ The headings are based on an article by Chris Nicol called 'Models of Ministry' Mullan, Dave ed. (1998) *Fresh New ways: Emerging Models for Mission and Ministry* Colcom Press, Bay of Islands, NZ.

This model is often used when the former ordained clergy model worked well for the congregation and so this is continued in whatever form they can now afford. Even congregations who go on to some of the other models mentioned below tend to try this one first. The goal is to have one person who is the ministry leader so part-time formally ordained clergy, or lay appointments are made. Alternatively, local members of the congregation are trained, or already have the skills, to fill the 'minister' gap. Locally Ordained Ministers (in the Presbyterian system) or non-stipendiary priests (in the Anglican system), or even Lay Preachers (in the Methodist tradition) are some of the systems used. The person chosen may be paid or be a volunteer but the key to this model is that the previous one minister-one congregation model does not change.

A variation of this model is the one where a congregation uses its own people resources and visiting preachers for a finite period of time (anything from 6 months to 5 years). The savings from the 'vacancy' enables the congregation to hire 'a minister' (though the definition of what constitutes one seems to be fluid) for a short period, until the money runs out again. This model only works if the problem is simply a lack of money and not a shortage of people willing to come to the locality.

A number of ordained ministers have found that part-time work, of being a 'worker-priest' in the manner of the apostle Paul, is very liberating. They work part-time in the parish and meanwhile have a part-time job in some other field. Some clergy contend that this way of working grounds their theology and makes them able to minister in two spheres. However others have argued that such positions require people to do two full-time jobs unless they are disciplined in how much time is spent in each role.

However, in rural areas the part-time employment of ordained clergy suffers from the perceived lack of other employment options for the minister or their spouse to top up their income. Thus few apply for the 50% or 33% jobs advertised. The impact of part-time employment upon church and government retirement plans can also make it less attractive. Congregations that have tried part-time employment have also discovered that a 50% package can cost up to 70% because of the expenses that cannot be broken in half such as housing and administration.

Lay pastors have also been seen as a cheaper alternative for congregations. To put it in marketing terms, when full-time ordained clergy have priced themselves out of certain markets some congregations look to the cheaper option of someone who is not bound to the remuneration scales of the denomination. A range of pastors can be gained through this process; some with experience and theological learning, some simply with a conviction this is God's leading; some with ties to the area, others hired from elsewhere. Despite the diversity, some lay appointments have been excellent. However others have suffered from misunderstandings due to unspoken denominational expectations. For example, in the Presbyterian tradition the elders have ultimate authority while the expectation of pastors from other traditions is that he/she has that authority. The denomination overseeing the parish may also struggle to provide the lay person with appropriate collegial care and supervision.

Another difficulty for Presbyterians is the three-month clause. Presbytery is only able to allow lay appointments for terms of three months. While appointments can be extended, this is not guaranteed and congregations who know this model is not a temporary solution find it very frustrating to have to repeatedly ask for permission to continue employing someone. It also makes the lay pastor's tenure risky and many would not contemplate employment under these circumstances. There is evidence that some parishes quietly avoid bringing their lay employee to the attention of Presbytery and thus a de-facto long-term position seems to evolve. While polity purists may be horrified, the reality is these parishes are doing what works for them.

The Locally Ordained Minister model has been of great benefit to some parishes but assumes there is someone local with the gifts and availability to take on this role. The designation has

also assisted those who feel called to ministry but are ineligible under the PCANZ system to serve God and their people. There are signs that some people may regard it as a back-door into ministry and a way to get a sort of 'half-minister' into their parish. Perhaps, instead fighting such thinking Presbyterians need to become a little more relaxed in their interpretation. There are already other models that might be helpful such as the Methodist concept of Home Missioners and the Amorangi ministry stream of the PCANZ.

2. Ecumenical Ministry

As most rural churches know, denomination is not often a significant factor in their area. Most Christians there are used to working together on community projects and so, when a congregation has a need, the others step in. Thus, it seems an obvious option in such places, that when one or more congregations start struggling to find clergy, to consider combining churches of different denominations. In fact, we still have the results of a number of these historic decisions in Union and Cooperating Parishes around New Zealand. Unfortunately this type of amalgamation is rare now, due to denominational freezes and the difficulties such combinations have had in the past, with having more than one hierarchy to consider. However, at a grass-roots level, Christians do what needs to be done. For example, some so-called Presbyterian congregations have faithful church attendees from a wide variety of affiliations. Christians today seem to go where they fit in, with very little reference to the label of the church. Also, some full-time ordained clergy have been brought up in different faiths, been trained by different denominations or even non-denominational tertiary institutions. They, too, find it hard to remain 'pure'.

In some areas, congregations without their own minister contract the clergy of another denomination to take a ministry role in their church. Thus, a Brethren pastor may be paid to preach once a month in the local Presbyterian church and provide emergency pastoral care, or vice versa. Certainly many local Christian-outreach programmes such as youth groups, children's holiday programmes, welfare programmes and rest home support have long been carried out by all or most of the denominations in the area. These may be officially ecumenical with formal trust agreements or run under the auspices of one denomination with all the churches expected to contribute. As with many combined church functions, these tend to develop due to necessity rather than from a planned strategy and can have less than ideal structures.

Such combinations of denominations can be very energising as the strengths of each can be melded into a ministry style that fits their particular community. The practical reasoning behind ecumenical ministry appeals to many people, while others see it as a grass-roots expression of the theological argument that we are all one in Christ. The danger is that the community church model will become so attractive that all denominational ties will be severed. This is particularly likely when the demands of the denomination cannot be met by the local congregation and they do not feel supported in their endeavour to be Christ in the community. This is increased when a number of church attendees have no denominational affiliations or come from congregational-style church backgrounds. In these cases, the congregation often finds it easier to disassociate itself from its parent body either formally or by quietly disappearing from regional and national scrutiny.

3. Cluster/Yoked Ministry

This model is where two or more congregations join together to provide enough funding for a minister (although this can include paid and unpaid, ordained and lay, part-time and full-time options, and even more than one 'minister'). It can also be known as a network. The combination can be a permanent one where all the constituent parts become one parish, but congregations can also stay as separate entities and pay an agreed percentage of the ministry costs.

Such combinations usually have finite terms, unless a formal amalgamation into one parish has been chosen. The term can be anything from 2 to 5 years and calls into question the old expectation that an ordained minister is called to a parish for an indeterminate time. At the end of the contracted time, it should not be assumed that the contract will be rolled over. Rather, it should be seen as an opportunity for the congregations to re-negotiate their status and monetary commitment.

One of the dangers seen in this model is that the congregations will expect see their paid leaders for the percentage of the time paid for. For example, if a church pays 50% of the stipend it will be expected that the 'minister' will be taking Sunday worship every 2 Sundays and spending a fortnight in their area every month. This legalistic response undermines the benefits of combined activities and the need for focussing on particular areas of the cluster at different times. A clear explanation of the goals of such a structure at the beginning of the venture and some good leadership would lessen the pressure on clergy to conform to unrealistic expectations and the anger and hurt of affected congregations.

One interesting finding is where the church groupings have one main congregation which joins with one, or more, smaller congregations called a satellite structure.⁴ This grouping is often the one that has the most difficulties as the big congregation feels they are losing 'their' minister when they lead worship elsewhere. They also feel they are propping up the smaller one(s) financially. This leads to resentment and some people lowering their giving because it's only 'to help the lame ducks'. However, what has been found is that if that parish or cluster ever dissolves the big congregation finds itself unviable without the contributions of the smaller congregations. The smaller congregation(s) in their turn can feel patronised or ignored by the big congregation and their sacrificial givers who have kept the place running until then will start pulling out. Without some excellent team building at the beginning of such arrangements, congregations in this particular variation of the model tend to struggle more than any other.

The cluster/yoked model assumes the congregations are fairly close geographically to make the travel of the contracted minister(s) reasonable. What is considered reasonable can vary widely as the distances travelled in Canada and Australia can attest. In the South we also have to consider the safety of travel during the winter months. However, as one minister said, it makes more sense for one person to travel long distances than all the members of various congregations.

This model is fairly easy to set up and can also be seen as stepping stone to further developments. It may lead to more co-operation as the parishes get used to working together and eventually to total amalgamation. It may also lead to the development of lay-led teams with the contracted minister acting more as a resource minister. This last development is being trialled in South Australia and could be called a hybrid cluster.

4. Mission Areas and Faith Communities

⁴ This label and the subsequent argument came mainly from a survey by Christian Research Association for the Uniting Church in Australia Presbytery/Synod of South Australia and recorded in Hughes, Philip and Audra Kunciunas (2008). *Rural Churches in the Uniting Church of South Australia: Models for Ministry*.

This model recognises that some congregations will become unviable under current denominational regulations, even when some of the other models discussed in this report are considered. However this does not mean all ministries have to cease. In the Cariboo Parish, in Canada, clergy go into this area as missionaries. Their stipends and other costs are paid for by grants, fundraising, some national church funds and contributions from the small number of church members in similar ways to overseas mission work. In the Cariboo model house churches are organised to meet most nights of the week over an extensive area. Some groups even meet in old church buildings. The missionary/minister initially leads these groups while training up, and eventually turning over the work to, home-grown leaders. Churches in Victoria, Australia have also trialled this idea.

The idea of this model is to return to self-sufficient faith communities where people provide their own facilities. Rev. David Webber of the Cariboo Parish has narrowed down the essentials of a faith community to those based on Acts 2:42⁵. To him a group is a 'church' if it is one that shares the teaching of the apostles (or gospel), has fellowship together, breaks bread together (shares communion), and prays. While pastoral care seems to be missing the fellowship element can be expanded beyond the sharing of meals to cover this aspect. The main difficulty with this is communion (or the eucharist), as in some denominations only an ordained person can administer this. This leaves the group with a number of choices. They ignore the requirements and take communion without proper oversight. They can have an ordained person travelling to all the groups, which can be tiring and expensive, if the expectation is to have communion every week (as in the Cariboo). Alternatively, communion can be held very rarely, such as the quarterly tradition of many Presbyterians in New Zealand. Another idea is to use the reserved communion scheme where a 'proper' communion service is held in one place and the elements are sent to all the other groups to be shared as if they are part of that original service.

The concept of small communities of faith with contact from visiting clergy is an echo from the past of most colonised countries. In New Zealand, as in Australia and Canada, the 19th century saw clergy travelling vast distances to baptise, marry and give the sacraments to settler groups gathered in houses and pubs, tents and sheds. Many of our current stock of church buildings in rural areas were built by a few local families who decided they wanted to set up a witness to their faith in that place. The reality was that, even with a building, clergy did not come round every week in those days and rural people were used to holding their own worship on Sunday or using their daily devotions to continue their faith.

There are ordained clergy today doing something similar to this old-style circuit preaching. They take the Sunday service at a number of churches in their area in rotation. Some congregations only meet on these Sundays - others use this Sunday to give their lay worship leaders a break. All other ministry is usually done by the community as the minister has moved on, although some will come in to do funerals.

⁵ Acts 2: 42 "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." [NRSV]

Dave Mullan also suggests simplifying the requirements of 'church' so that groups he calls Ecclesion⁶ are formed. He suggests these are small groups who meet for about two hours on a Sunday to worship, eat, fellowship and do any necessary church business together. Elements of doing business on Sunday are probably done in many churches already. For example, one church organised the sorting of church library books to be held during morning tea after the Sunday service. The important difference in the Ecclesion model is that Sunday is the only time the group is expected to get together. There are no Council meetings, prayer or bible study groups. Sunday is the only commitment. This idea does tend to assume that the faith community can't, or doesn't want to, get together at other times. This is not always the case.

One of the most important factors in these new ways of being a faith community is how their denomination reacts to it. Denominations need to be able to release groups to do this, not to put barriers in their way. For example, the expectation that National Assessment (annual fees to the national church body) be paid could be waived for a period. However I would argue that this should not mean they have to leave the denomination. Their national and regional denominational bodies will need to still support them with money, information and preferably with some specific oversight so they are not left on their own. Abandoning a congregation that is deemed no longer viable is a betrayal of the people of faith left, of the contribution of their ancestors and a loss to the wider denomination. Most organisations are not good at down-sizing. The Church is no different. We enjoy starting new faith ventures and growing them but don't seem to have the structures to go the other way, even when the congregation is now the size and style of a beginning ministry. This needs to change.

5. Complementary Ministry

This model is similar to the cluster idea but is where two or more congregations agree to work together in a more informal way. [Note: this may still mean they have lay leadership structures]. At its most basic, it is a group of churches with similar interests networking and sharing resources. In these days this is no longer constrained by geography as the internet, texting, emails, teleconferencing, Skype and the like have made coming together a global experience. However, this model assumes a slightly more formal arrangement where, for example, the talents of each of the 'ministers' of the participating churches are used where they are needed in a complementary way. While the exchange may be assumed to be equal where pastoral skills are swapped for preaching skills, for example, it may not be so clear. Neither may the exchange be confined to people in the 'minister' role. For example, a person with musical expertise from one church may run a combined carol service or visit another church to model a different style of Sunday music. The small youth groups of each congregation may go on camp together. In the process the fired-up games-orientated leader of one group and the quiet listening one of the other get to use their gifts with those who need them in each other's group and with each other. The options are only limited by the congregation's imagination.

Ministry, whether paid or unpaid, lay or ordained, team or sole-charge, can be lonely, especially in rural areas. The ability to have even one other church leadership team that is committed to you and your congregation would be a godsend. The ability to use gifts that are not needed in your present position could also allow leaders and potential leaders to grow and show talents they have never had the opportunity to explore in their home church. It is also a reality that one person does not have all the skills and talents needed by a congregation. The ability to look to another congregation for help but with the knowledge they will need your expertise at some later time makes each less beholden, more equal.

⁶ Mullan, David S. (1990). *Ecclesion: The Small Church with a Vision*. College Communications, Manurewa.

While some of this could be done at a regional level, commitment is the key. Add to that the ability to choose who you commit to, and the likelihood such groups will last is heightened. Obviously one of the difficulties is when leaders, especially paid staff, move on. With such arrangements based on personal goodwill and the balancing of needs with talents, even one person missing can cause the whole concept to be reviewed. However, the increase in confidence in a congregation that has felt useful beyond its borders may well be worth the risk.

6. Resourcing Congregation

This is a variation of the Complementary Ministry model where one large congregation uses its resources to support surrounding congregations. They are often in provincial towns surrounded by rural congregations that are struggling to provide ministry. They have talented individuals and the assets of a large group that can be of great assistance to congregations with much fewer people.

While this may initially seem like a mission outreach, particularly from the large congregation, both groups bring much to the table. When the large congregation provides preachers for the smaller congregations they are also giving opportunities for trainee preachers to try out in a much less intimidating environment. When youth groups from the large congregation spend a week in the smaller congregation taking a school holiday programme they win too. They get to experience mission work without the costs of overseas travel, they get try out ideas with a much smaller group of children than their home church, and they get a chance to sample some rural hospitality.

Such a ministry is a big commitment from the larger congregation but may also have the added benefit of discovering potential leaders who may not arise in the larger environment. It also recognises that no congregation, particularly of a Presbyterian tradition, exists in isolation. We are all part of the body of Christ, and if our neighbouring congregation is hurting we need to be part of their remedy.

7. Block Ministry

In this model an ordained clergy person, usually, comes in for a block of time to work with a parish. After, say, three months is up, they move on and the parish returns to its previous Local Ministry Team or similar model. While elements of this can be found in other models, it is the block nature of it that is important and the fact that it is intentional. This is not a stop-gap measure to continue ministry while a 'real minister' is sought or a way of avoiding denominational rules about tenure of lay pastors. The person is approached to fulfil a particular purpose. It may be to give the congregation a break from doing all the ministry tasks and to model some new practices to the leadership. It may be to provide for a new vision or a time of discernment. Whatever it is, the need and time frame are clearly stated. Of course this doesn't preclude changes as the time progresses but the key ingredient in this concept is that this ministry is more like a contract than a call or long-term job.

Interim Ministry is one example where specially trained people, lay and ordained, come into a parish with the intention of preparing them for the next step in their ministry life. Some useful work in this line has also been done by overseas ministers coming for short periods on a working holiday and opening the local community to possibilities they had never considered. In some cases, the block ministry is a time to heal parish hurts by contracting a pastoral person to visit. The seemingly simple act of giving the hard working 'laos' time out when they are in a permanent lay-lead ministry should also not be under-valued either. This concept could, furthermore, be one way of training new lay ministry teams. A short intensive time with a live-in minister who then leaves, allowing the team to take responsibility for their own ministry could work well.

The advantage of this model for the 'block minister' is that they have clear areas they are to concentrate on for a finite time. This simplifies their job immensely. The advantage for the parish is that the 'block minister' can bring in exciting new ideas but when they leave, if they have not won the hearts and minds of the congregation, the ideas can be quietly dropped without any hard feelings.

A variation of this model is where a clergy person does block ministry as a full-time job. This could be as a consultant where they have to contact likely congregations and organise enough work to provide a full-time income. Alternatively, a scheme of sharing a minister could be set up. For example, four congregations could contract to have a 'block minister' for three months each and the person rotates around them thus providing a full-time living for themselves. This style of ministry would tend to only suit those clergy without families and the sort of personality that likes going from place to place. In the second alternative, there is also the dilemma for the congregations of providing accommodation and other ministry resources for only three months of the year and what you do with them for the rest the time. However, it could be a way of providing oversight to lay-lead teams where their congregations are too far apart to use the resource minister model.

A number of congregations in New Zealand have successfully used interim ministry and overseas ministers to move from one style of ministry to another. Still others are continuing to benefit from the respite and training afforded by, often retired, ministers' short periods with their lay leadership. For many congregations, this is a valuable method of continuing ministry in their area.

8. Ministers Within Presbytery

These are positions set up by the body overseeing Presbyterian congregations. Congregations of other denominations can have similar systems. Their goal is provide expert ministry assistance across the congregations in the region covered by the Presbytery, or similar body. The people employed are not necessarily ordained ministers but have specialised skills. Common fields are youth and children's work as this is seen as an area many congregations need assistance in. In South Australia, before they become one big presbytery, they had Presbytery Ministers who were called by the various presbyteries to care specifically for the clergy, especially those in the often remote parts of the state. New Zealand's old system of Regional Mission Enablers was a similar idea. Such appointments are an excellent way of providing support to smaller, more vulnerable, congregations both increasing the chance of their survival and growth, and providing reasons for them to stay within the denominational fold. In my later discussion about Resource/Resourcing Ministers or Ministry Enablers their employment by Presbytery seems a natural fit in to this model.

9. New Ministry/Fresh Expressions

This is a model that many churches get excited about; the development of new ministries that take God to the people. For parishes that are facing losing their resident, full-time clergy, this may seem something only a big church can do, but a crisis might be just the time to reconsider. The defining part of this model is that the intention is not to do something that will bring people 'to church' but to start a new congregation. This may be a café church that uses the church buildings or an actual café. It might be breakfast church at a local hall, the church hall, or someone's house. It could be movie nights at the local picture theatre, someone's living room or using the church's technology.

The risky part for small churches is that such a new initiative requires some of the few leaders of the current congregation to be released to start this new thing. Add to that the possibility that this is something that might not work and probably won't bring enough money to correct the problem of no clergy. This is a gamble for a very brave group.

On the plus side, the excitement of starting something new can bring some of the previous disaffected members back. They may even want to help lead the new venture as it is the perceived lack of relevance of the church that has upset them before. The likelihood is that the new congregation will grow from those who would probably not have gone to the 'old church' anyway. In fact, it must be clear that this new venture is not to win souls for the old church but for the Kingdom of God. The people who show interest in this new direction must not get any hint that this is a ploy to get them to 'real church' later. This, whatever it is, needs to be church too.

Leadership is the main difficulty with this model, as it has been seen to be the professional's job to start new churches. However there is the problem of who pays the leaders, as a new congregation never has enough money. As we've noted, many of the old ones don't either. I good example of solving this problem is the Re-development Units started by the Dunedin Presbytery. In this scenario the minister is supported, at least partially, by the Presbytery as a way to start up a new ministry. One example is a dying congregation using its building to start something completely new – Blue Lagoon, a casual breakfast church. While some of the members of the old congregation still attend, they used a completely different format of worship and changed the church space to reflect it. This is a new wine skin for the new wine that is attracted to it.

Another new ministry example is the Bay of Islands' church complex which has been deliberately built to include accommodation for tourists and those needing respite-care. In addition to the units, the new 'church' building has been designed to be multi-purpose so that a wide number of community uses are possible. They also designed this section of the buildings on a domestic level so that, if necessary, the worship space can be converted into a home too. The accommodation provides income but is also a new mission to those who need a quiet place of retreat. They rarely, if ever, will join the current congregation as they are usually from other towns. Despite this, a this ministry has provided housing for the homeless, care for those who desperately needed it, and affordable accommodation for church leaders to recharge. All, are surely, signs of the kingdom of God.

Similarly, one South Australian congregation sold their church and used the proceeds to build a church/conference facility at a nearby church camp. They get to use it on Sunday mornings and the camp gets to hire it out to groups for the rest of the week. It seems to be a win-win situation. The congregation has no maintenance issues and the camp has better facilities. There is also an incentive for campers to take Sunday worship so that the congregation doesn't have to. Obviously these types of new developments can only be done when the congregation has the money, as well as the energy, to embark on such projects.

Still another new ministry development is the sharing of church resources by more than one congregation. This is an area that often happens in an unplanned way with a different group asking to use the church building for a separate worship service. Often these groups are from a different religious or cultural tradition from the home congregation and want to worship in their own way and in their own language. While some overlapping may occur, essentially one or more congregations rent the building from the other.

Potentially this sharing could be more planned where a congregation with a church building offers to share with another faith group that is developing in the town - or the offer could be made to a congregation that no longer has an adequate building, as we have seen in the wake of the Christchurch earthquake. This could also be an opportunity to recognise that the youth group, or Mums and Bubs group, that uses the facilities but never comes to Sunday worship could become a congregation in its own right.

10. Local/Lay Ministry Team

This is the model that became the focus of my study and produced the longest section of this report. It needs to be noted that this is not the best solution for every congregation but it certainly answers the needs of many. It is a recognition that the Reformation call for the 'priesthood of all believers' means just that. While the Local Ministry Team model of the PCANZ is described as the 'corporate minister' a broader definition is possible. Some LMTs simply fill the previous full-time ordained clergy space and the rest of the congregation is unaffected. Other places use it as an opportunity to encourage every member to find and use their ministry gifts.

Leadership of a congregation by lay people has been strongly promoted since at least the eighties⁷. In 2002 the PCANZ in their General Assembly affirmed "the ministry of the laos (the whole people of God) as the core of ministry within the Presbyterian Church, and the equipping of the 'laos' for ministry as a priority for the Church." Unfortunately these good ideas and noble aspirations have not progressed much further. Many parishes with a resident ordained minister model see the Local Ministry Team (LMT) as a sign of failure or at best a temporary measure while a 'real' minister is sought. Those parishes that have adopted the LMT model in turn can feel disenfranchised from their denomination. The term 'vacant' to describe the parish when there is no ordained minister is one grievance. Another is the lack of recognition by national or regional bodies, when they send their edicts from on high, that there are different models of ministry. To constantly be sent information for 'the minister' or conversely not to be included on mailing lists because the information usually goes to 'the minister' might seem like small issues but it can be deeply irritating and also be seen as a sign that the wider church does not care.

Despite LMT's being seen as a 'poor-man's minister' in some circles, there is actually quite a range of scholarship suggesting this model of people-led congregations is a more biblical interpretation of church structure than any of our current ones. In the Presbyterian system, rule by the elders is supposed to be the norm with the ordained minister, the teaching elder, simply being in the parish to share his or her expertise of preaching and administering the sacraments. Somewhere over the last century, we have slipped into a model of the paid professional clergy doing all the work because that's what they are trained to do. This has left congregations with the sole role of fundraising to pay the stipend. Like most crises perhaps the current shortage of ordained ministers is an opportunity to reconsider the role of the laos⁸ in the promoting of ministry in their community.

While both the PCANZ and the Uniting Church of Australia Synod of South Australia have guidelines for Local Ministry Teams⁹, most congregations have developed something that works for them rather than adhering to a set pattern. This flexibility has meant they have more relevance to their particular situation and are more easily able to adapt to changing circumstances. However most have found that this fluid structure has tended to confound their various ruling bodies at times, as they often don't 'fit' into the normal ministry model.

⁷ See Bibliography for some of the books and articles written since then.

⁸ I've used 'laos' rather than 'laity' because it carries less of the 'us and them' baggage that comes from many years of 'laity and clergy' usage.

⁹ In South Australia they were initially called 'Lay Ministry Teams'. They have recently started calling them 'Ministry Teams' to help diffuse the lay/ordained split.

In New Zealand, Local Ministry Teams seem to be set up in a rather ad hoc sort of way. The congregations may or may not have had a facilitator with knowledge of this model. Most congregations and even the denominational group overseeing them do not have experience in the setting up of such teams. This has contributed to wide variations in set-up structure and continuing support. However the Anglicans have been doing much more work on this system and seem to have developed a fairly standard process which other denominations may find helpful.

Dave Mullan,¹⁰ who has spent many years studying and writing on this topic, suggests the following formal process be used, which is similar to the one used in South Australia. However after studying many LMT set-ups I would suggest that the following plan be used as a template rather than a rigid rulebook in order to produce a structure that fits the context and is flexible enough to change as needed.

Firstly, when it has been decided to set up a LMT, as a consequence of a recommendation from the Settlement Board (PCANZ) or from the Bishop, or through a request from the Parish Council, or similar, a group or individual should be appointed to lead the process. This could be the Bishop's chaplain, or a Presbytery Commission. This person, or group, should ideally have no ties to the congregation and be unlikely to have any afterwards, thus enabling hard decisions to be made. As Mullan points out, it is worth spending quality time on this initial part, even though there will be pressure to 'sort everything out' quickly. This new way will require many changes in thinking on what 'church' means and does, as well as a time for grieving for lost visions.

Once the congregation has decided to follow the LMT model and the over-seeing denominational body has agreed, the team of leaders needs to be chosen. A time of education about the function of a LMT has been shown to be important although the discussions prior to deciding on this path may be seen to be sufficient. Then two contrasting processes seem to be used to put a LMT into practice.

The first one requires a time of prayer, perhaps for a week or more, before nominations are called for members of the team. In setting up the new structure and choosing the members of the team, a key factor noted in all methods was the need for prayer. Some congregations have simply elected people to quickly-suggested roles or asked for volunteers. Unfortunately this has been found to be less likely to provide a lasting solution.

After a time of reflection, all members of the congregation are asked to suggest someone, based on their discernment of God's call on their lives. All nominations are written and handed privately to a denominational representative, often the one facilitating the process. These nominations are checked for eligibility to weed out any obvious problems like criminal convictions, etc. Those with the most nominations are then approached and asked whether they would be willing to join the team. Often this is the time when the commitment expected and the support offered would be clarified. All those approached are able to decline but usually those who respond negatively are asked to spend some time praying about it before confirming their refusal. When a sufficient number of people have accepted (and this number varies tremendously) the group gets together to work out what roles are needed and could be covered by the members selected. Sometimes this means that some needed role is not filled, as there is no one in the team that can do it. In such cases, the role is simply left vacant. While it requires some courage to leave that element missing, congregations have found that God has always soon shown some way of meeting that need.

¹⁰ Mullan, Dave (2003). *The Calvary Won't Be Coming: Strategies for Local Shared Ministry by Volunteer Teams in Small Congregation*. ColCom Press, Bay of Islands, NZ

The second method is similar but starts by the congregation deciding what roles it needs its LMT to cover before they, too, prayerfully nominate people for each specific position. Again, everyone in the congregation is considered eligible. Again, the nominations are given to an outside person who checks them and then approaches the highest polling candidate in each role. Many times the knowledge that the congregation has perceived a call from God is enough to convince people to accept.

Both ways of setting up a team have plusses and minuses. The method used needs to be negotiated well before the choosing process was started as it needs to be very clearly explained to the entire congregation. While not everyone in the congregation will use the opportunity for the prayerful discernment offered, many will. It brings God into the equation, which in a church situation, must be a good idea. It emphasises the conviction that members of a LMT are as called to ministry as anyone else, which is why an election is less than ideal. It also provides the team member with confirmation that God is calling them through the work of the Holy Spirit on the hearts and minds of their peers.

The decision as to whether the congregation has a role in deciding the actual 'portfolios' is also something to be negotiated early. While this allows everyone to have a say in what is important it can also force LMT members to fit into positions that have quite specific expectations. One option here may be to only decide roles to the level of headings, such as Worship or Pastoral Care, and leave the person selected to work out how this is done. Another option is to make it clear that the position mooted is only in the nature of a convenor of a group of other people who will help provide this service. Obviously such variations depend on the numbers in the congregation and the ministries needed to be covered.

Before people are called, with whatever process, the terms of their tenure need to have been worked out. While those nominating need to be encouraged not dismiss people on their perceived lack of time, etc. expectations of the time commitment expected do need to be known by the person facilitating the process so that this information can be given to potential team members. They need to have some idea of the hours per week expected, the length of service required, the level of remuneration as well as the level of support available from the congregation's denomination. These factors, as much as God's call, will influence people's assessment of whether they can make this commitment.

Some denominations will have criteria already but some may well need to be decided by the congregation beforehand. For example, it may be assumed that all members of the LMT will be unpaid volunteers but some people cannot afford this. They should neither be penalised nor forced to refuse to help due to their finances: while some LMT members will want to gift the cost of their involvement this should be their choice not an expectation. Therefore, some range of re-imbursement options should have been decided.

Training options for the LMT should also have been thought of before the call process. Obviously they will have to be flexible to fit the needs of each individual and their role, but some possibilities need to have been explored as well as ways of funding the training. Again, members of LMT should not be expected to fund the training themselves. They also need to be given access to the many training opportunities through denominational email and mail out lists. Ordained ministers have clear guidelines. It only seems fair that the laos involved in leadership roles have equal opportunities.

This is where the setting up of a separate church office structure can help. While a specified physical space for this is best simply having a specific email and mailing address that never changes would be helpful. Thus, when the LMT member responsible for Administration moves on, the contact details for the person filling the role do not need to change. This makes it much easier for the wider church to keep in contact because the details never change. Poor communication with the regional and national church bodies is cited as one of the negatives of being LMT. A fixed church contact would help.

After the LMT has been chosen, they then need to be commissioned with as much pomp and ceremony as possible. Dave Mullan suggests that the Bishop or their denominational equivalent preside. Such an action clearly shows the members of the LMT and the congregation that they are valued. It gives the LMT 'mana'¹¹ which they will need as they try to act as 'the minister' to some who will not understand this new role. The presence of such a high-powered representative of their denomination also tells other parishes and their leaders that this model of ministry is appreciated and should be treated with respect. In addition, by attending such an event this congregation and its LMT becomes known at the higher levels of the denomination, which will aid later decisions that may affect this group. Also, by making this event similar to an induction service (Presbyterian), the Church is clearly showing that these people are a 'corporate minister' - that between them all, they have the abilities to fulfil the ministry needs of this congregation.

Despite saying that, it is important that the differences between the ordained minister and the LMT are clear. None of the members of the LMT should feel pressured to become 'the minister'. Only one or two will be able to administer the sacraments. Only one or two will be willing to lead funerals. Some will not be preachers. Some may do a lot of public work, while some may concentrate on praying. One or two may even be able to serve the wider church. In addition, each member of a LMT is on that team for a finite period. Yes, they are called but not for a lifetime as an ordained minister conceivably may be. Neither is the loss of one team member the ending of the entire team's work.

When it is time to review the progress of the LMT structure, whether at the end of the set period or due to unforeseen changes, it is important that all members of the team have the ability to change roles or step down. Some congregations have a staged rotation process in place to ensure that institutional knowledge is not lost but people still get a break from what could be a 'life-sentence'. Others use the opportunity to completely re-evaluate the roles needed and those filling them. For some on the LMT, this is an opportunity to exercise another gift, for some to be given more responsibility, for some less. It also allows new people to come on board while others step down. In deciding the next move, some congregations go back to the original system of choosing the LMT, while others use a truncated version of it. But it seems reasonable that the congregation should have some way of having input into the next few years of leadership and that an opportunity is given to listen to God's opinion too. There should also be an opportunity to re-commission the newly developed team with due ceremony and to recognise the work of previous members. Particularly with volunteers recognition is vital.

Most LMT models assume that the congregation's ruling body continues as a separate identity. Thus, if there is a Parish Council or Session and Managers already, they remain. The LMT only takes on 'the minister' role. This leaves the Council as the goal-setting arm and the LMT as the ones that implement the Council's wishes. In smaller congregations, there are often not enough people to provide two sets of leaders and so the entire congregation could be asked to take on the Council role. An alternative is for the LMT to take on a wider administration role that covers finance and property and releases the remaining Council to providing the vision. Such a structure sounds very like the role of Elders in a traditional Presbyterian structure. While not all members of the LMT need to have a presence on the Council, at least one should be there, just as if they were 'the minister'. However, it has been found that when the LMT is a majority on the Council, they are in the same position as when the CEO has a controlling interest on the Board of a company. The danger then is that the vision will be limited and the wider picture is missed.

Despite all that has been written above, leadership by the laos needs to be allowed the flexibility to fit the particular situation of their congregation. Any structure set up must be

¹¹ 'mana' – a Maori word meaning something like power, prestige and pride, but it is both conferred and earned.

relevant and useable. Therefore each congregation must be encouraged to consider carefully what will work in the initial set-up stage and to constantly assess whether it is still working. Our world is constantly changing. Nothing is permanent. Not even our ways of doing ministry or of being church.

11. Resource Minister

Over and over again, I have seen in this study the necessity for oversight for LMTs. I have read about the need, gathered anecdotes from both laos who have needed it and those that have benefited from it, as well as those who have provided it both informally and formally. Ordained ministers in the PCANZ have to have compulsory supervision. They are members of Presbytery as of right. Surely lay ministry team members need the benefit of professional and collegial support even more. It could be argued that some of the other models could also benefit from the presence of a 'persistent friend'¹².

The best model for oversight I have discovered is the Resource (or Resourcing) Minister, otherwise known as a Ministry Enabler. The Southland experiment, the work in Anglican contexts, as well as my study of the concept in the Uniting Church of South Australia convinces me that this is a model with great possibilities. Briefly, it is a person chosen by the Presbytery, or other overseeing body "to resource, enable and empower the ministry of the laos"¹³ in a LMT structure. The person can be lay or ordained but must be capable of providing for the needs of the congregations. Congregations contract to use this scheme for a set time and pay a proportion of the cost. Two to five years seems to be the norm. Different formulas for setting costs seem to be used but the best are based on a set percentage of the congregation's income.

In both the South Australia and Southland examples, a group of congregations, called a network or cluster, are gathered together to commit to employing a full or part-time Resource¹⁴ Minister (RM). Their role is not to do all the work but to teach and guide the LMTs so they and their congregation are able to do everything needed for ministry in their community. The cluster allows the employment of someone who can focus simply on being a RM [although this argument does not hold up for a part-timer who may have other employment]. The grouping of similar congregations also provides opportunities for combined training and support, as well as informal sharing of resources.

By having over-sight through one person, congregations can quickly access information about training options because the RM, knowing the situation, will be able to organise the relevant help or point them in the right direction. In the same way LMT members can receive resources for next week's funeral or next month's Pentecost Sunday service. Books, DVDs and so on can be shared from the RM's own resources or from knowledge gained from their travels around different congregations. Local experts in various fields can also be sourced from these experiences. The RM becomes a one-stop shop.

The RM could also provide supervision. There should be regular supervision for the team as a whole, where new LMTs and new members of LMTs need to become part of a cohesive whole, but it should also be available for individual team members. Some things cannot be discussed

¹² Thanks to Loren Mead for this useful word. He uses it for the role of the judicatory (Presbytery, etc) oversight but I think it perfectly describes the work of a Resource Minister as their representative. Mead, Loren B. (1994). *Transforming Congregations for the Future*. The Alban Institute, New York.

¹³ from remit 12.056 which was agreed to at the PCANZ General Assembly in 2002.

¹⁴ South Australia have started calling them 'Resourcing Minister' to highlight the dynamic element of their role. They are not there to do all the preaching, etc but to enable others.

in a team, whether it is some personal issues that impacts their work or friction between individuals which cannot be aired in a team meeting.

This supervision is in addition to the RM regularly leading team meetings. These meetings need to cover more than practical aspects. It is a chance for in-depth prayer and bible study, team building and the RM asking hard questions about the LMT's work. It's a time for providing training and resources that fit that particular LMT's needs. While the content might change to mirror each team's growth, most seem to be held within a monthly to six-weekly cycle.

It is important that the percentage of the cost of the RM paid by the congregation is not seen as an indication of how much time they will be in the congregation's geographical area. Like contributions to a stipend, the minister is not expected to spend the most time with the good spenders. In a group of congregations, some will need more attention than others at various times and this should be able to be done, regardless of cost. This argument goes against some parishioners' thinking, that the RM should be hired on a simple contract system where hourly rates are recorded and charged for. This may work in the business world but the church is not supposed to be in a competitive environment. By paying what each one is able to, rather than what they need, stronger congregations are able to help their weaker neighbours. The reality is they will probably be the ones in need at some later stage.

In the South Australian experience they have found that the right person needs to be employed as RM. They can be lay or ordained but need to have the flexibility to be able to work with the different responses congregations have to ministry in their area. Even though they may all be small and rural, each will have its own flavour and that needs to be respected. They have also found, and this is confirmed by some of my reading, that being resident in one of the cluster congregations can be a problem. The congregation starts believing the RM is 'their minister' and the RM starts fielding extra requests for help. It seems that the RM role as enabler and encourager is best done at a distance.

Despite this finding, some ordained ministers are starting to introduce the Resourcing Ministry model while they are still in the traditional resident clergy role. This can be because they recognise they may be the last minister in that place and the congregation needs to be prepared for life without clergy. But increasingly it is simply because this type of ministry, where the 'laos' are 'the ministers' and the ordained clergy is the enabler, makes more sense in a world where the Christendom way of doing church is no longer relevant.

12. Other Options

Congregations can use any of the alternatives mentioned above to survive or even thrive but some brave congregations make a deliberate decision to die. For example, a church with a declining elderly congregation may deliberately share their resources with another local church, one that has attracted their own children and grand-children; a church moreover of a different religious tradition. Such bravery in letting go of their own dreams for their church as one person put it, "may be great for God's kingdom but it's not so good for the denomination," and leaves them, and their denomination's hierarchy with a dilemma – how to die well?

While closing down a church building and its congregation is not often contemplated easily, it is important that this option too is considered at any time when the future life of the church is discussed. In reality most congregations fight this idea and the thought of closure can be the impetus to try some of the alternative models already discussed. However, choosing how and when the church closes and making considered judgements as to what happens to any assets is surely much better than being forced to do this at a later stage. It is in these situations that our concept of what church is may be challenged.

Conclusion

Some of the options mentioned in this study will enable a congregation to survive until “the cavalry comes” as Dave Mullan puts it, and the old model of a resident ordained minister can be re-instated. Others hold out the promise of thriving but include risk and often some major changes. Some cannot be achieved by one parish but through the commitment of the wider church to supporting smaller congregations. Most of these options, though, are greatly helped by early intervention. Some require major capital to set up. Nearly all need considerable amounts of energy and time to produce the change needed. These cannot be found when the congregation is tired and dispirited. However it is important to realise that size and geography should not be used as an indicator of future viability or ability to take risks. I have been privileged in this study to meet congregations who are defying the odds, trusting in God’s provision and daring amazing things. And many of them have been considered at risk or even unviable under their denomination’s regulations.

This study was a chance to find some answers to the question nobody seems to want to say out loud – “Can congregations survive without a resident ordained minister?” My answer is a resounding – “Yes!” and often they don’t want to go back to the old ways of doing things. When the people have the power they don’t want to give it back. In fact, as this study shows, they are finding they have a multiplicity of options.

Thanks need to go to all those who spent the time responding to my questions, both oral and written, and in many cases also hosting me in their homes and churches. You were all very gracious and I regret any mistakes of interpretation in this report of your situation. Any such errors are entirely mine.

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Jan and Ian Trengove (Resourcing Minister for Uniting Church of South Australia)
Rob and Heather Stoner (Minister of Berri and Bamera, SA and keynote speaker at the Rural Conference in Gore noted below)
Alan Dutton (Rural and Regional Mission Officer for the Uniting Church in South Australia)
Geoff and Marilyn Ellery (Minister of Walkerville, Adelaide)
Participants of the ‘Refresh’ conference held in Robe, SA (May, 2011)
Participants of the Rural Conference in Gore, NZ (June, 2011)
The New Zealand and Australian congregations of Limestone Plains, Maheno-Otepopo, Mossburn, Otatau, Riverton, Lucindale, Berri and Bamera.
Respondents to the questionnaire sent to random member parishes of the PCANZ

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David Webber – keynote speaker at The Rural Conference in Balclutha 2009

Rob Stoner – keynote speaker at the Rural Conference in Gore 2011