

Report: Synod Research on Elders

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Summary of the Report

Nine interviews with elders and seven interviews with nationally ordained ministers revealed that training materials for elders would be welcomed. The interviewees identified a number of areas where training is desired.

One suggested topic for training appeared in some form in almost every interview. Perhaps it could best be called “The Future Church in Aotearoa New Zealand.” It involves helping congregation members to come to grips with today’s culture. Participants mentioned a desire for training in understanding the culture of Gen X and Gen Y, facilitating change in the congregation, helping congregation members understand and welcome changes in music, listening skills to use with the younger generation, how to be church in the 21st century, who is God in the 21st century, and reading the Bible in the 21st century.

A few topics were mentioned in five to eight of the interviews:

- The role of elder
- Conflict management
- Grief
- Listening Skills
- Visitation

Additional topics were mentioned in three or four interviews:

- Communication
- Communicating my faith
- Decision making
- Leading worship
- Prayer
- Small groups
- Spiritual gifts
- The Presbyterian form of government
- Vacancies

All of these topics will be described more fully in the report.

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Part I: Overview and Introduction

The Interviews

In October and November of 2007, I interviewed groups of elders at nine Presbyterian churches in Otago and Southland. The number of elders present for the interviews ranged from five to seventeen. In eight of the nine churches, well over half of the total elders in the congregation were present in the interview.

I also interviewed seven nationally ordained ministers, both men and women, associated with these congregations. They ranged in age from mid-thirties to early sixties.

The congregations were chosen by Bruce Fraser to represent a variety of churches. They ranged from small to large. Some congregations were known to be liberal, others known to be evangelical, with some seeming to be in the middle. Five congregations were urban or suburban, located in Invercargill, Dunedin or the suburbs of Dunedin. Four were in smaller towns, and two of those draw members from large rural areas. Some of the congregations were the result of mergers, and one was a union parish. Six of the congregations had ministers and three did not. I am not naming the congregations in this report in the hopes that readers of the report will remain open to the ideas expressed without identifying those ideas with specific congregations.

I took notes on the interviews. My husband sat in on eight of the interviews with elders and took notes as well, so I was able to draw on his impressions and his notes as well as my own. The interviews with the elders ranged from one hour to one and a half hours. The interviews with the ministers ranged from one hour to one and one-quarter hours. In most cases, I prayed with the elders before and after the interviews for God's guidance for this research project and for God's presence in their congregational life. All groups seemed to appreciate this inclusion of God into the interview process.

I am very grateful for the people who gave their time for these interviews. As readers will see in this report, they expressed many honest thoughts and feelings. Their deep hopes and desires

for the Church of Jesus Christ in Aotearoa New Zealand were evident. Their faithful and creative service was inspiring and exemplary to me personally.

The Questions for the Interviews

A list of questions was generated by Bruce Fraser and John Roxborough. All elders and ministers received a copy of the questions in advance of the interview and then again at the time of the interview. At the beginning of the interviews with elders, I collected the names and contact information of all elders present in case there is a follow-up study. I then asked the elders to read over the questions and begin talking about whatever question interested them. Therefore the discussions were free flowing and not highly structured. Over the course of each interview, most of the questions were addressed, although they were not discussed sequentially. As elders and ministers talked, I often added follow-up questions to draw out more information on the topic they were addressing.

The list of questions was:

- What are the issues you face as an eldership/council?
- What help do you need in addressing these?
- What training do you need to address these?
- What training have you had to fulfill your role of elder/council member?
- What do you understand to be the role of elder/council member?
- How do you understand eldership in your context?
- How do you see the future of eldership in your context?
- What do you understand by the terms teaching elder and ruling elder in terms of the demands on leadership in your context?
- How do you understand the culture of our times and the significance of that culture to the role of elder and the teaching of the Gospel?

During the fourth of the 16 interviews, the elders told me they were watching the DVD from the Church of Scotland, *Caring for God's People*. These elders watched one segment of the DVD in each meeting and then discussed it in small groups. Beginning with that interview, I began to ask an additional question in each interview: "If you could pick five to ten topics to be covered on a DVD for elders, what topics would you choose?" This question generated

many ideas, which I summarized on page one. I have compiled a comprehensive list of responses to that question beginning on page 28.

My Biases

No interviewer is completely objective. I did my best to listen openly and objectively in the interviews, but I know I brought my own biases to the listening and to the writing of this report. Some of them come from my experience in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I am a U.S. citizen, attended seminary in the United States, and served for seven years as an associate pastor in a Presbyterian church in Seattle, Washington. My membership is in Seattle Presbytery. At the time of these interviews, I had been in New Zealand four months.

In the PCUSA, the role of elder is somewhat different than in the PCANZ. Elders in the PCUSA are not charged with the role of visitation; that role resides with the deacons. An additional difference is that elders in the PCUSA are ordained for life but serve on session in three years terms. After two consecutive terms, an elder must step down from session for at least one year.

In addition, I bring to this report my own conviction of the centrality of the Holy Spirit and prayer for congregational leadership in our time. To me, the heart of Christian leadership is to seek to listen prayerfully to the Spirit both individually and in community to receive guidance and strength for ministry. I believe this is particularly significant in our time of rapid change.

These issues undoubtedly have an influence in this report. I have consciously tried to keep those influences to a minimum.

Part II: Summary of the Interviews

Issues Faced by Elders:

The aging of church members and leaders

The most common issue faced by the elders related to the aging of church members and/or leaders. Older elders in several churches talked about their sadness that they don't connect as well with the younger generations as they would like. One elder at a thriving church with many children and youth said, "There seems to be an age gap between myself and my own children, so that I suspect that when I visit younger folks, I face a real gap in culture." At another church, an elder talked about the gap he experiences with both his children and grandchildren: "I'm just not on their wavelength." Another elder at that same church wondered how to relate to younger people who have totally different expectations regarding music in church. She expressed her desire to respect people who have different expectations for church music but also asked, "How are we going to explain to young people what we get out of our music?" She believes the cultural difference she experiences with young people isn't just music, but is conceptual and involves the vocabulary used to describe faith. She added, "Young people have a sense of spirituality but it's not the same as ours." This sentiment was echoed almost word for word by an elder in a different congregation.

Several elders at different churches talked about their pain that their own children or grandchildren aren't going to church or Sunday school. Several expressed their sadness that church was a way of life in the past, but now there are so many other options for Sundays. One elder talked about the fact that the two world wars and the depression made church so relevant because there was something to pray for. "People were living each day with the possibility of tragedy." But he noted that today there is no sense of urgency about prayer because life is focused on consumption and attaining a certain lifestyle. An elder at another church wondered, "How do we reach younger people? Why do other churches get younger people and we don't?" He noted that young people seem to attend particular churches because of the music and because other young people are present. Music was a common topic, and the term "music gap" was used by one elder who noted, "While you're meeting one group's needs in music, you're not meeting another groups needs."

One group of elders talked about their challenge in helping older members flex with the times. One elder reflected, “Our congregation are mostly elderly and they come along here and worship. They’re old school and have fixed ideas. We need help to keep up with modern times, to bring the modern world into the old world. However, if we push the modern world too far, we offend them and they don’t want it, but we also need to provide a place for young people. It’s okay to be a church that looks after the elderly, but the children in our community aren’t getting any teaching about Jesus. The Bible in schools has just faded away.”

One of the ministers echoed some of these concerns. He noted that people in his congregation tend to live on the spiritual capital of the past. They ask, “Why aren’t we getting people like we did in the past?” He observed that they still embrace an attractional model – put on a good service on Sunday morning and people will come. Instead, he believes that the challenge for elders is to begin to grasp what it means to be a missional church in this postmodern, post-Christendom time. He said, “This time is characterized by discontinuous change, change that you can’t expect. No one knows the way ahead; we’re all struggling. Bruggemann’s image of exile may be helpful. Together we find a way forward.” He believes no one really knows what form of leadership is appropriate for our rapidly changing time. However, the minister is supposed to know!”

Another minister from a smaller town agrees that the challenge for the church here is “how to become young again.” He observed that Gen X/Y and seniors are “different planets – they revolve in different directions.” He believes the older members of his congregation need to understand the values of Gen X and Y. He notes that many people want things to stay the way they were. Some of the older members in his congregation agree that change is needed, but they hope that things can stay the same during the rest of their lifetimes: “Don’t bother with changing things until after I die.” This is compounded, the minister says, by the fact that their town has an older demographic than the New Zealand average. Another minister, in talking about the challenge of relating across generations, said, “I sometimes feel we’re talking *past* each other.”

Another minister talked about the people in her congregation: “Some of them are tired. Some of our young people have moved on. Older members are becoming senile or deaf. Some

elders are moving away to retire elsewhere. A lot of older members are seeing their children and grandchildren not attending church and they want to go back to a time when church attendance was automatic.” Many of the elders talked about their desire that things could be the way they used to be, yet at the same time they acknowledged that they need openness to change. They talked about how hard that is to achieve on a practical level.

This generation gap spills over into the need for younger elders. An elder in one congregation and a minister in another talked about the fact that they have a hard time recruiting elders who are younger, and cited this need as one of the central issues they are facing as a congregation. This reality was reinforced by the discussion at another church, which had one elder who was conspicuously younger than the other elders with whom she serves. She talked about feeling lost as an elder, wondering why in the world she was here and what she could possibly contribute.

Changes in culture

Another very common topic was the changes in the culture that are impacting congregational life. Many elders talked about their perception that the church has become irrelevant and is no longer valued. One of the elders mentioned his sadness that his grandchildren aren’t attending Sunday School “because they have so many other things to do.” He told about an instance where his grandchildren came with him to church to honor his birthday. One of them expressed surprise that the people at church weren’t “as stuffy as I thought they’d be.” The grandfather noted that his grandchildren’s perception of mainline churches is that they don’t accept differences or diversity, that churches want “cookie-cutter Christians.” He believes younger people will come back to church when they meet real people who accept them where they are and who are dealing with real-life issues.

Another elder noted additional changes that are affecting the church. The elderly don’t want to go out. People are so busy. Sunday is now a day with multiple options including shopping, working, and sports. For some people, Sunday is the only day off, and they feel a tension between family time, church, and simply sleeping in. The custody of children raises further scheduling challenges. This elder believes that people ask themselves, why would I come to

church? What's in it for me? He believes our time is characterized by narcissism and our culture truly is post-Christendom.

At another church, the elders talked about the ways the consumer society has gotten in the way of the role of church in society. The modern world consumes and people are "armor plated. There is no sense of needing God." These elders wondered, How do we keep these consumers in the church when they aren't personally feeling a sense of crisis? Many of them do show up during times of crisis. What are ways to include them on a long-term basis before or after a crisis happens?

The changes in expectations for Sunday was a common topic in numerous interviews. "The erosion of Sunday" was the way people in two separate interviews phrased it. "People are doing other things on Sunday," one elder said. An elder in another congregation said that the change in Sunday has had a significant impact on his congregation: "So many people have sport activities on Sundays: hockey, bowls, and other sports. Sport has taken hold on Sundays." And he noted that more people now work on Sundays.

The issue of people being busy and the impact on congregational life was also mentioned in several interviews. One of the ministers used the phrase "time poor" to describe both the members and elders in her congregation. She said, "Elders and ministers face some of the same issues, for example, how best to provide appropriate pastoral care for people who are time-poor. How do you offer authentic pastoral care that is welcome and can enhance people's lives?" Another minister talked about the fact that people in his congregation want to be involved but find it difficult to make time for involvement: "People long for connection but everybody is so busy." How do we make church and the spiritual life so important that people carve out time for it?

One of the older elders at a church with many young people in the congregation said he is overwhelmed with all the changes in the culture and also in the church: new technology, new forms of communication, and shifts in the role of elder from pastoral to governance/vision/strategy. He wondered, "Can I keep up?"

One group of elders at an urban church talked about growing issue of geographic spread in the congregation. It reflects a change in church culture from a neighborhood church to a “gathered” church. People now often drive across town to get to church. Many of them used to live in the neighborhood, then moved to another part of town, but wanted to continue to attend the same church. The elders remember when people attended their neighborhood church, which made pastoral care and fellowship simpler. One elders said, “The challenge in fellowship arises because you can’t invite folks on our street to afternoon tea. Therefore, we hope pastoral reorganization can get people in the suburbs meeting each other.”

One of the ministers noted that we are often told by worldwide experts that the younger generations respond to a model of belonging before believing. But, he said, Kiwis are not joiners, particularly now with the breakdown of family life, the economic necessity for both husband and wife to work, and the shops open all weekend. He noted that most clubs in New Zealand are struggling to get members. So the believing-before-belonging model doesn’t seem to work well here. And he noted that the problem with belonging before believing is that without a sharp focus on the gospel, it can be too comfortable. He went on to say that the challenge is to relate to the culture without being captured by it.

Demographics in the community

In two rural churches, people talked about the impact of changes in the community. In one of them the elders reported that they are short on numbers and people who are willing to serve. One elder there said, “We are losing more and more people. People are selling and leaving. We lost 20% of our population in the last census.” As Queenstown and Wanaka become more expensive, many of the homes in this community are being bought as holiday homes, increasing the housing values overall, but decreasing the number of year-round residents, and greatly changing the nature of the community.

The minister from another rural church talked about the changes in her area from a stable farming community to more transient tourists. She asked, “How do you react to tourists clogging up your roads?” She said that she and the elders are working on a welcome packet for tourists, and beginning a pilot worship service that targets tourists.

This same minister went on to talk about the impact on people in her congregation when they hear the media emphasis on the decline of the church. She said, “They are also impacted by the big church mentality, that we have only 30, so something is wrong with us. I resent being told that small churches aren’t worthy. It’s a subtle thing. Even the census in June is a challenge for us because it’s often snowy then and our attendance is unnaturally low. ‘Oh we’re not very big, are we?’ people say.” She believes people in smaller churches need permission to be different, to be small. She continued, “We are ambiguous about being different. We pride ourselves on doing things our way, but we feel a little defensive about being different than the city folks.”

Worship leading

In three congregations – two rural and one urban – there was discussion about the challenges of involving more lay people in worship leading. In the urban congregation, the minister discussed his challenge in finding people to help with worship leadership. In one of the rural congregations, the elders said that they have a hard time attracting nationally ordained ministers, so they have had to take on more than a pastoral care role. They have learned how to lead church services and funerals. On Sundays, they often have a guest minister who preaches the sermon, or sometimes an elder within the congregation will preach. But they organize and lead the rest of the Sunday services themselves.

Conflict

Two groups of elders spent a lot of time in the interview talking about the challenge of managing conflict. In one case, the congregation does not have a minister. Some months ago, the elders made a decision about the use of a small building on the church grounds, and one person in the congregation was upset about the decision and complained to different individual elders many times. One elder described it like this: “People who have an agenda come to us one by one to try to divide us.” These elders talked quite a bit about the second guessing they have done since they made the decision. One of them asked, “How do we self-evaluate when the broadside comes?” and another one said, “We’re torn. We’re leaders in the church but we’re also friends. We have to make decisions, and some of them are hard.” One

of them said it would have been so helpful to have some training materials that affirmed that conflict is normal and challenging to deal with.

At the other church, a decision was recently made to merge two congregations. A small number of people who didn't like the decision blamed the session. One elder reflected, "It's inevitable – you can't please everyone. It's like a grieving process. How do we help people grieve without blaming? Do we have an open forum to express pain?" Another elder said, "You can only listen to people in their pain." Another one said, "We need to get people to turn their eyes on Jesus. Right now they're inward looking. It's not about what building we worship in, we get together because we love God and want to be together to worship God. Some people find it easy to become bitter and angry. We can only pray for them and show them by example that we're going forward, trying to be happy, trying to express acceptance. But there are some people who feel they haven't been listened to."

It was clear in the interviews with both of these groups of elders that the pain of dealing with conflict was taking up a great deal of their emotional and spiritual energy. They felt blindsided by the extent of the criticism and longed for some way to normalize the fact that conflict happens, even when people have the best of intentions and have made prayerful decisions.

Fatigue of elders and volunteers

In two of the interviews, elders talked about fatigue. One elder said, "Some of us feel stale. I feel stale. I'm bored and ready for a new challenge." He mentioned how hard it is for him to get himself motivated to visit someone when he feels so tired. In the same interview, another elder said, "I'm just too tired to do things new ways." Several elders in that congregation talked about the need for sabbaticals for elders, and they talked about how hard it is to recruit new elders when it appears that "there's no end in sight" in the role of elder. Another elder at that church said that he had spent his career teaching at the university and had taken his work sabbaticals overseas every six years or so. He said those times overseas, away from his elder duties, gave him freshness to be able to come back and dive back into his duties. He wondered if something similar could be adopted for elders who don't have an automatic sabbatical built into their lives because of professional sabbaticals.

At another church the elders talked about the challenge of feeling like there are not enough resources to do things. One elder said, “It’s tiring to hold these different things in tension: the different aspects of our role as elders, the challenge of translating vision to the congregation, and trying to lead the congregation and bring them along with the vision. This is a particular challenge with a vacant pulpit like we have now.” Another elder at that church said, “We are running out of capacity to champion new projects. Most of us work 50 hours per week and are heavily involved in ministry ourselves. We don’t have time to ‘run with ideas.’ We have a capacity problem. In the past the vision was the minister’s vision, but now that rests with elders.”

Recruitment

The challenge of recruiting younger elders was mentioned earlier in the context of discussing aging congregations. The challenge of recruiting elders when there’s “no end in sight” was mentioned in the context of elder fatigue. Several other groups of elders talked about the challenge of recruiting new elders. In one congregation, the elders were concerned because the church is perceived as female: “Our biggest problem is encouraging men to become involved in church to the point where they become elders. We need to change the perception of eldership and of the church in general. Right now church appears to be a ladies affair. We would like for men to walk in and feel at ease.”

In two other churches, discussion centered around the challenge of recruiting elders with specific skills and gifts and with vision for the various ministry areas of the congregation. One elder said, “One challenge for us is finding and recruiting elders. Connected to this is that we need specific skill sets for various elder roles, so we’re not just recruiting for some kind of general character or faith criterion.” A minister at another church talked about the challenge of figuring out where the congregation is headed and then recruiting people to be leaders in the ministry areas where the congregation would like to head.

Another minister commented, “We have people who are doing the work of elders, but don’t *want* to be elders. Why is this? A sense that elders are supposed to be holy? Or perhaps it’s just a time thing, that they are too busy already. But in our case, the elders don’t meet very

often so it wouldn't be a lot more time. I wonder whether the lifetime commitment freaks people out. I wonder if we need to rethink the way we talk about that – we're all called to a lifetime of Christian service."

Mission

In one interview with elders, there was significant discussion about how to help people who are on welfare or are addicts. One elder said, "When you get your hands dirty, you can get hurt." These elders had helped people in need who then took advantage of the help. They wondered how to assume the best but not be too naïve, how to care without being too involved, and how to set boundaries. Because one of the situations involved letting someone in need live in the manse, they discussed what they had learned about tenancy agreements. They acknowledged that often their interaction with some of these people ends up poorly, but they affirmed that they were trying to be a consistent witness. One elder said, "Caring is messy" because it involves humans and emotions.

Christian discipleship

Two ministers from very different churches talked at length about what might be called "basic discipleship" or "Christian living." One of the ministers said that the most urgent training needs in her congregation center around the basics of Christian living: prayer and learning to read the Bible in a way that is appropriate for our time. She said, "Practicing prayer and developing people's relationship with Christ is the most important need right now both for elders and for congregation members."

Another minister echoed these sentiments: "One challenge is passive involvement by members. We've made church members show up and pay up, but we haven't made disciples." He went on to discuss the sacred-secular dualism that has long been a problem in the way Christians live. He sees an increasing problem with people living that way, separating out what they do at church from the rest of their lives. He went on to discuss a related problem. He said sometimes elders bring their own professional areas of competence into their leadership role at church, and they expect to be able to use those skills at church without any adaptation from the business setting to the church setting. He said they lack the tools to

engage in theological or biblical reflection about the implications of the Christian faith on business practices.

The Role of Elders

Pastoral visitation and changes in the role of elder

All of the congregations where I conducted interviews had made adjustments to the traditional session model where all elders engage in parish visitation. In several of the congregations, some of the elders serve with other lay people on a team that engages in pastoral visitation, while other elders serve on a parish council that exercises governance, along with the minister if there is one. The parish council may be composed all of elders or of a mix of elders and other people in the congregation. In one church the pastoral committee, which engages in visitation, is composed exclusively of elders, as is the parish council, which is composed of two elder representatives from each committee. One of the churches, which has been long-term without a minister, has three teams – pastoral, worship, and administration – with some elders and some other congregation members on each of the three teams. In some of the churches, elders are assigned to specific ministry areas such as children’s ministries, youth ministries, preaching, and worship leading, and these designated elders may or may not attend parish council meetings.

Many of the pastors and elders I interviewed mentioned the changes in the role of elder over time. One man had been ordained an elder in 1970, and he said that in the years since his ordination, “The perception of the elder has changed. Our duty used to be to take communion cards every three months.”

Two ministers described the changes they have seen in their fathers, both of whom were ordained as elders as young men and continue in church leadership today. One minister said, “The role of elder has changed significantly. My father is a good example. He has been an elder since he was in his 20s. Originally he did visiting and felt so uncomfortable because he didn’t know how to do it. He had no training and had no idea how to talk about spiritual things with people. He has grown in his role as an elder, particularly conflict resolution. He has become quite perceptive and is able to say in meetings, ‘This is where we are going.’”

This man helped manage a church split by listening to people, helping to find a way forward and helping people continue to talk to each other even when they disagreed. He exemplifies a shift from pastoral care to governance and strategic visionary influence.

A second minister described a similar pattern: “My dad was an elder early in life and I watched him participate in church governance and get frustrated. But he always did his visiting. Now he’s having to do a lot more leadership, such as preaching and leading services. He has grown more articulate about his faith, even though he is basically a pastoral person. His generation listens to people but wouldn’t initiate spiritual conversations.”

In several congregations some of the elders expressed uneasiness about the shift in the role of elder from pastoral to governance. One elder was concerned that session meetings had become shorter to accommodate people’s busy schedules, which means they aren’t looking at member rolls and considering people’s needs as much as they used to. In one of the congregations, which has only recently established a team of people in addition to elders to engage in visitation, there were hopes and fears expressed about the new system.

One of the ministers reflected, “The traditional Presbyterian model has broken down. The elders can’t get around and visit their people.” He was not particularly concerned about this breakdown and embraced governance and management as a primary role for elders. However, another minister said, “Pastoral care should be the main role of elders.” He described his previous two parishes where elders did not view visitation as their primary role: “The trouble in my two previous parishes was that the elders saw themselves as power people. Governance without pastoral care becomes isolated from the needs of people.” He believes that in his present congregation, where elders still have a strong commitment to visitation, the future of eldership is healthy because there’s a foundation of commitment to pastoral care. The elders in his church exercise pastoral care in more ways than just visitation. They also hold teas for people in their district, and some of them lead Bible studies for people in their district.

Insecurity in the elder role

In six of the nine interviews with elders, one or more people expressed insecurity in their role as elder and/or lack of understanding of what the role entails. Perhaps some of this lack of

understanding can be attributed to the changes in the role of elder. In some cases, with the adoption of a parish council model, it is increasingly unclear exactly what elders do.

An elder in a church without a minister said, “One issue is that we feel inadequate in our role. We feel inadequate about decisions we have to make, paperwork and ACC issues.” He went on to say he feels inadequate as a spiritual leader because he doesn’t read the Bible daily. He added, “There’s no formula, no template for elders to follow. I don’t know what elders are supposed to do. We have learned discernment and wisdom from life experiences, but is that enough for elders?” Another elder from the same church said, “We feel we should know it all. We’re still learning. Situations come our way that make us feel we are still young.”

At another church, an elder described the history of the church, saying that the pastors there have been particularly strong and elders have not been invited to exercise very much leadership. She said, “The elders have not had the experience of being elders.” Another elder at that church, who was visibly younger than the other elders, said, “I’ve felt totally lost the whole time I’ve been an elder. I’ve found being younger and being an elder confusing. One thing I have liked, though, is being able to put forth a youth perspective.” She said she has received no training for her elder role.

In several interviews, elders talked about their discomfort shifting conversations to spiritual topics. One elder from a church with a strong history of elders in the role of visitation said, “My discomfort has been in talking about the religious side. The religious side is tough and I resisted becoming an elder for a long time because of it.” He said that praying with someone takes him out of his comfort zone. He continued, “Therefore when I visit I’m a listening ear regarding their kids, their jobs, etc. but I steer away from religious issues.”

One of the ministers (not from the same church) echoed this concern. He said, “Elders need to learn how to talk about God outside of church. We need to empower people to talk about God. People these days are surprisingly open to talking about God, but many Christians have a roadblock in their own heads about it.”

At yet another church, one elder talked about her insecurity because of not growing up in a Christian home. “I craved the grounding in the Christian faith and the Bible that others got in

their family growing up.” She had always felt “threatened” to join a small group because she thought she would be expected to quote from the Bible. Her church recently worked through the Forty Days of Purpose (based on the book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, by Rick Warren) in small groups, and she was delighted by how well she fit into her small group.

At another church, one elder said simply, “I’m not worthy,” and it wasn’t clear to me whether this was appropriate humility, debilitating insecurity, or somewhere in between.

The heart of the role of elder

The comments on the central components of the role of elder reveal a deep commitment to serve God on the part of many elders, but confusion is also evident related to what exactly elders are supposed to be doing. Some elders expressed their view that being an elder primarily means visitation and caring for the needs of individuals. One elder said, “Being an elder means being with people where they’re at. We are God with skin on. Ministers cannot possibly keep in touch with everyone. I visit ten people, and they sometimes talk about God, but not always.” An elder at another church said, “When I was first an elder I got a booklet about the duties of elders, and I realized I was already doing the work of an elder in caring for people and seeing needs.”

Other elders see their role as a blend of spiritual leadership and caring for individuals. One elder, from a church with a strong history of elders doing visitation said, “The heart of the role of elder is exercising care pastoral for the congregation.” He went on to say he views eldership as a role of service, sharing in the ministry with the minister, focused on the needs of the congregation as well as the needs of the wider community.

An elder at another church expressed a similar view: “The role of elder is to keep up with people and be an assistant to the minister in dealing with spiritual matters. This includes fostering the church family, worship, children’s education, visiting, and supporting the minister in his or her private life.” An elder at a different church said, “The role of elder involves leadership in some form. This includes the encouragement of others who lead. Elders are decision makers and are responsible for a part of the body. They care for people. Elders do the spiritual stuff in contrast with deacons who do the practical stuff. The leadership that

elders are called to involves living the Christian lifestyle, being mature. Elders serve according to their giftings. In the outside community, elders are called to be a role model and are supposed to be visionaries about where we are going in reaching out in mission. Visitation by elders is a link with all the people.”

Some elders gave primary emphasis to leadership as their role. One elder said, “Being an elder is about accountability. If something goes wrong, who is in charge? The buck has to stop somewhere. If the rest of the community is upset, they have someone to go to, the parish council.” At another church, an elder said, “The heart of being an elder is direction, decision-making, hearing what God wants.”

Several elders talked about the significance of changes in the role of elder: “There have been a lot of changes in being an elder. We’ve moved from the pastoral role to the governance role. Some like it and some don’t. What does governance mean? Vision and strategic thinking instead of management and hands-on. Communication and encouragement, primarily for the senior pastor, the staff and the congregation.” This elder wondered if he would be able to keep up with the changes in job description as well as all the changes in technology that impact congregational ministry.

An elder at another church grappled with what exactly is the distinctive role of elder: “The role of elders is a bit confusing with the move to a parish council. Some people who do pastoral visiting aren’t elders. Some managers aren’t elders. The elders are unique in being able to serve communion and pray with the minister before communion. And if there were spiritual decisions to be made, it would be the elders who make them. Elders do governing on the spiritual side. Parish counselors do management. Elders do pastoral care, which needs to be confidential. The parish council arose from a desire for everyone in the congregation to be able to use their gifts, even people who weren’t elders.”

One elder expressed her confusion about her role in a different way: “I do things in church. Is it because I’m an elder or because I’m a member of the congregation?” This question of the challenge of a leadership role in tension with friendship both inside and outside the congregation came up in several of the interviews in churches in smaller towns.

Some elders talked about the significance of listening to God as a part of leadership. One elder said, “Our role is to discern the way ahead through prayer, to seek where God would have us go.” At the same church, another elder said, “We’re here to serve others, to be models. So we have to come before God first and seek his way before we can expect others to do that.” At another church, an elder talked about the challenge of listening to God but also being sensitive to people’s needs and cultural issues: “The challenge for elders is to adapt to change but stand firm on the truth.”

Several ministers also talked about the role of elder. At one church, where elders serve on both parish council and on a visitation team alongside other congregation members, the minister said their system “does leave a big question of what is the role of elders. Just to serve communion? I called a meeting of the elders in September to ask them how they viewed their role. I suggested a role of spiritual governance and got shot down. They like the free-flowing form it is now. They’re doing things in their own giftings. I need help in defining what is eldership in our context. It would be helpful to have various models from various church laid out so churches can see the options.”

The same minister went on to say, “You become an elder because people see something in you and want to set you apart, which makes it complicated to say what is an elder. We need to do some theological work on what it means to be an elder in the 21st century. The old patterns – fencing off the communion table – are not good.”

Another minister said, “Ideally elders meet together to pray, study and discern. We do that as a part of the all the things we are called to do, but ideally it is the heart of what we do. Most of the elders here would see eldership as a call to full involvement in the life of the church and beyond. They take seriously their involvement in the communion service. It’s a symbolic thing but it’s about sharing the sacrament and living out the Christian life.” Another minister said, “The role of elder or council member is governance, spiritual leadership, taking responsibility for nurture, discipleship, service, running worship.” He went on to say that the model of eldership will need to be morphed over time in response to changes in the culture and needs in the church.

Another minister talked about the kind of spiritual vision for the congregation elders need to have. She discussed it in the context of worship leadership: “Elders need to be encouraged to pick up leadership in worship. They need to understand that worship styles are not about their own personal preferences, it’s about the whole congregation. They need to hold a spiritual vision for the congregation. They need to understand that what happens on Sunday has to be missional and has to help people connect with God. If you’re already connected with God, then the worship needs to be about helping others connect.”

Spiritual gifts

Several of the ministers talked about the significance of spiritual gifts for elders. One minister in a rural church said, “I think elders should go where their gifts are. I try to acknowledge what they’re doing and encourage it.” She cited the example of a woman in a rest home who is still an elder and who prays frequently for people and their needs, and an elder who has her fingers on the pulse of the community because she coordinates the delivery of the newspaper and her husband coordinates meals on wheels. She believes that part of her role as a minister is to help people discover and use their gifts. Another minister said, “The challenge is to help people find their gifts and enable them to use them in ministry.” Another minister said, “Elders need help working out how they fit, what their gifts are. They need a structure to hang things on.” He cited Myers-Briggs type or spiritual gifts from the Bible as examples of structures that help people talk about the ways they can make a contribution.

Another minister reflected, “Elders need to pay attention to their passions and giftings. They need to watch and see what ‘pings’ for them, what makes them angry. That’s a sign to go there and serve. Elders are often very tentative and anxious when they take up the role. We need to help mitigate their anxiety by giving them encouragement that they are exactly what they need to be to take this on, that they do have gifts. But we also need to help them avoid complacency so they can keep growing into the role.”

At a church where the elders on parish council see their role as leadership and visioning, the elders made an interesting comment about spiritual gifts. They said that long ago the council members did the Network course, which helps people identify spiritual gifts. The spiritual gifts present on the council at that time were mostly compassion and serving gifts. Now the

gifts of the people on parish council are mostly leadership gifts. The elders on that council agreed that this shift in gifts parallels the shift in understanding the heart of the role of elder.

Leadership today and power issues

Several of the groups of elders and several of the ministers talked about shifts in an understanding of power roles and eldership. One elder said, “Being an elder is about recognition by your peers of your commitment, wisdom and leadership, an ability or a level of faith. In the past elders had a kind of status that was more than it deserved, which contributed to a sense of hierarchy. The whole church says that now we’ve got to turn the pyramid upside down. The elder needs to be at the bottom, encouraging and supporting others.”

A minister said that she dislikes the word “leadership”: “It’s such a dangerous work. As soon as someone is acknowledged as a leader or takes on a role as leader there is a power differential that can be corruptive. Yes, I take a leadership role and so do elders, but I would much rather see it as the role of salt or yeast, to enable the whole to change, grow, develop. It’s not about up-front boss stuff. The word leadership conjures that up too quickly, therefore using leadership language is dangerous. We’ve seen so many leaders be abusive, which can be a form of idolatry. We – elders and ministers – are one group in the congregation who have responsibilities to enable the faith community. The elders and ministers can spark off creative ideas which can inspire others to spark off creative ideas.”

Another minister talked about the pressure for ministers to adopt a CEO model in the way they function. Or, he said, sometimes the clerk of session takes the CEO role, and “this often leads to governance from the top down where congregation members feel they need to do what they are told,” which impacts the ability of elders to exercise leadership. Another minister said, “We’ve bought into the model from Pentecostal churches that the teaching elder becomes the ruling elder. This comes from the desire for a ‘strong leader’ as a pastor.”

Another minister talked about the clerk of session at that particular church, who has filled the role for many years and who seems to embrace a “culture of power.” At another church the elders said that some younger people want to hold onto old power roles for elders because

they like having power. “There is a mystique around the role of elders, sort of like secret lodges. Eldership can be viewed as a closed group and a clique.”

Several of the ministers talked about the need to create a model of teamwork for elders: “We need to create a space within session to enable elders to work together as a community, as a team.” Another minister said, “An important skill they need to learn is exercising team leadership.” Another minister amplified this idea: “I see a lack in the understanding of governance and management. I am trying to get the elders to see ministry as something that is done in teams with trust for the team members to fulfill the tasks they are charged with. The elders have a mindset of management; they want to give approval for expenses and schedules. They want control of the details. I am trying to get them to move towards policy setting, focused on the big picture. But then someone brings up small issues and that drags the meeting out.”

An elder who was ordained more than 40 years ago talked about how he learned that the role of elder is to facilitate conversations and relationships in the congregation, not to push an opinion on a controversial topic. He remembered the Geering controversy, where he took a position in favor of Geering’s view and alienated people in his congregation. “I’ll never do that again,” he said. He said he learned from that situation that he needs to listen first, and that listening skills are a central skill for elders. Several elders affirmed that listening skills are important for pastoral care, but they are also helpful in leadership and teamwork.

Governance

Three of the groups of elders and two ministers talked about challenges in the area of governance and accountability. One group of elders from a multiple-staff church talked about issues of accountability and supervision. The elders have made changes recently in accountability patterns. The staff now report to the senior pastor or to their own supervisor. “We have made a conscious effort to stop micromanaging staff and elders. When they are assigned a project to do and money to fund it, we try to let them get on with doing it without demanding an accounting of every penny. We are trying to empower people to be leaders, to support them instead of watching them. Our job is to make things happen.”

This same group of elders talked about their challenges in the area of confidentiality. They recently decided staff members cannot be elders on council, in part to preserve confidentiality in council meetings. They have also made shifts in the tasks assigned to the session clerk, distributing to other boards some of the smaller tasks that the Book of Order assigns to session clerks. “These miniscule tasks are better dealt with outside the council – we are better off listening to God.”

A minister at a multiple-staff church talked about similar issues: “An issue is staff accountability. We have recently moved to a pattern where staff are accountable to the minister, and through the minister to the session. This is confused by the fact that two of our staff members are elders.”

Another minister talked about similar challenges with the relationship between ordained and non-ordained staff: “Is a minister a church employee? Who do other employees report to? Who is the minister responsible to? The congregation or the Presbytery?”

At one church without a minister, the elders talked about their growing need to be aware of New Zealand law regarding employment. This is particularly significant when employing part time people, they said.

Communication

Some of the elders expressed concern that communication channels in their congregations weren't clear. One elder was concerned that people in his congregation don't seem to know how to bring an issue before the leadership. He felt that communication channels need to be clearer. In another church an elder said that the parish doesn't know who the elders are.

Relationship with Presbytery and the PCANZ

In only two congregations, elders expressed frustration with Presbytery. In one case an elder said the amount of correspondence from Presbytery and the PCANZ was overwhelming. His suggestion: “Simplify!” In another church, an elder said, “Presbytery needs to speed up

disseminating information about the new Book of Order. Our presbytery is behind the times and tries to enforce things that have been removed from the new Book of Order.”

On the terminology “ruling elders”

One of the questions on the list uses the terms “ruling elder” and “teaching elders.” In most of the interviews with elders, someone expressed confusion about those terms and wondered what they mean. One elder spoke at length about her distaste for the word “ruling,” because we now understand Christian leadership to be connected with Jesus as servant, with leaders coming under the people they lead, supporting them and building them up.

Another elder reflected on the history of the terms: “The concept was that the ruling elders rule over the teaching elders. Now we understand that our role is pastoral, to care for the pastor and the congregation. Some congregations view the role of ruling elders as much stronger, to try to get people in the congregation to accept one view on divisive issues. In our congregation we have a breadth of theological views but we are serving one Lord Jesus Christ. We don’t operate as ‘ruling’ elders with the goal to be exclusion or drawing lines in the sand.”

Three of the ministers I interviewed also expressed their dislike for the term “ruling elder.” One minister said the term conveys status instead of the challenge of governance. One of them said she strongly dislikes the term: “We still carry our Scottish heritage. It’s not that long since people were excluded from communion because they weren’t ‘good.’ I believe elders today are called to be a gracious, welcoming group, and I can’t imagine excluding someone from communion. If someone feels they need to exclude themselves from communion because of something going on in their life, that’s another thing.”

Another minister said: “The notion of ‘ruling’ has gotten a little out of hand, with some elders thinking they rule the minister. This language confuses the accountability for the minister. According to the Book of Order, the minister is accountable to the Presbytery. There is a kind of creeping congregationalism, partly based on the apparent success of the Baptist and Pentecostal churches. I have to repeat to people in my congregation, ‘If you have complaints about me, the appropriate place to go is the Presbytery moderator.’”

On Training

In most of the congregations, the elders reported minimal training for their role. Typical comments included: “Training has been minimal. It may have been our fault. We’ve flown by the seat of our pants.” “We learned on the job.” “You’re chunked into the deep end and you learn by experience. It’s hard.” “We have very little training for elders in the past.” “Sometimes it’s hard to know what to do, how to deal with something going on, particularly without training.”

After some reflection, however, many of the elders could remember a book or booklet or publication that they had been given or had ordered when they became elders. Several elders brought me booklets from the 60s and 70s about the role of elders. Several brought *A Resource for Elders, Sessions and Parish Councils* by Lester J. Reid (1985, 1997) to show me. Some of them said they remember reading the whole book, but others said they had never read the whole thing and hadn’t discussed it with others.

One parish council had prepared a brochure on the role of elders. They found the process of preparing it to be very helpful. However, it wasn’t clear that the newer elders, who had been ordained after the brochure was prepared, had benefited very much from the existence of the brochure.

Two groups of elders mentioned that training by their presbytery had been helpful, such as training for lay preachers, and training covering creative listening, how to visit, how to give communion, and how to put on funerals. Some elders mentioned training by John Daniel and Bruce Fraser, and said it was very helpful.

One minister had been ordained an elder as a young man and had attended General Assembly soon after that. He sat next to a man who had been an elder for a long time and who wanted to mentor him. This minister said that mentoring relationship was a great blessing to him. In several of the interviews with elders, a desire for a mentoring process for new elders was expressed.

One of the groups of elders described an intentional training time they have every other month. Usually they read a book on church leadership and discuss it. In addition, they hold a session retreat once a year to formulate vision, which is often influenced by the books they've read. They mentioned two books that they had found helpful: *Winning on Purpose: How to Organize Congregations to Succeed in their Mission* by John Edmund Kaiser and *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People to God's Agenda* by Henry T. Blackaby and Richard Blackaby

Several groups of elders mentioned programs that had helped them and others in the congregation grow in faith. Several have used resources from Saddleback Community Church and Willow Creek Community Church, both printed and in DVD form, including the Network program. Four congregations had used the Forty Days of Purpose (based on *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren) in small groups and had found it very helpful. Two groups of elders mentioned Alpha as a program that helped congregation members grow in faith even if it didn't really bring new people into the congregation. One group of elders remembered Evangelism Explosion from the early 1990s, and another mentioned the book *Discover Your God-Given Gifts* by Don and Katie Fortune.

As mentioned earlier, one group of elders was in the middle of using *Caring for God's People*, a DVD from Church of Scotland (Pathways Productions) on visitation, and they were very positive about that experience. They were watching one segment every other month in their meetings, then discussing it in small groups.

One elder said her most valuable training tool was the Bible. Another elder said the same about the Holy Spirit and expressed skepticism about the value of training for elders: "Through the Holy Spirit you get your best training. The Holy Spirit uses your gifts. Training won't turn us into different people." He was the only elder who was skeptical about the benefit of further training. Almost every other elder expressed enthusiasm for the idea of training materials. One elder said, "We need user-friendly information packs about being leaders." When asked what format they would prefer, they were most enthusiastic about a DVD. Some expressed desire for a book to go alongside a DVD, which would include additional resources on the topics presented. Others said it would be good to have a booklet highlighting the things of primary importance and the resources available.

The ministers interviewed were also enthusiastic about having training materials for elders. One minister summarized the challenge: “How do we help elders see their role as enabling, modeling, enthusing, affirming?”

Suggested Topics for a Training Materials for Elders:

In the fourth of sixteen interviews I began asking what topics the interviewees would like to suggest for a possible training DVD for elders. Therefore, I asked that question in 13 of the interviews, not all sixteen. So the fact that people in eight interviews mentioned their desire for training on the role of elders means that it was mentioned in well over half the interviews where I asked the question. If a DVD proves to be out of the question because of financial considerations, written materials on these topics would be helpful.

The role of elder (mentioned in 8 interviews)

What do elders do? Why do we have them? What was the foundation for eldership in the early church? What are the various models for structuring the eldership? What are common problems elders face? What does the congregation expect of elders? How can we better inform the congregation about what elders do? How can we give the elders the confidence they need in order to lead? How do we help them feel adequate in the role? How can we give support to beginning elders and parish council members and welcome them? Should we have some sort of apprentice plan or buddy system?

Conflict resolution (mentioned in 7 interviews)

How can we learn to fight fair? How can we grow in being willing to be honest even when it doesn't seem “nice”? How can we dispel the myth that Christians always agree? How can we do a better job of living with our decisions and remembering that conflict is not necessarily a sign we've made a wrong decision? How do we learn to listen to and respect views that conflict with our own?

Grief (mentioned in 7 interviews)

Stages of grief, handling grief and loss, how to listen to people who are grieving.

Listening skills (mentioned in 6 interviews)

How to be truly present to people. How to pay attention to eye contact, body language, tone. How to repeat back what people have said. Listening skills to use with younger people. Several elders talked about wanting to know listening skills for visitation, but others noted that listening skills relate to conflict management and effective leadership.

Visitation (mentioned in 5 interviews)

What do I say after hello? The challenge of getting over the doorstep, and the challenge that some people think it's not a visit from the church unless the minister or elder do it. How to discern if people want help or not. What is pastoral care today, when people aren't even home during the day? Confidentiality and privacy issues especially in a small town. How to visit without putting on pressure, what to do when people won't let you in, tips on communicating with people on the fringe of the congregation. How to make transition to spiritual issues, what questions help people talk about their faith journey, and how to know if people want to talk about spiritual things. Should they make the transition to spiritual issues or should we? How to pray with people, how to know if people want to be prayed with. Hospital visitation.

Prayer (mentioned in 4 interviews with different emphases)

How to deal with the impression that elders are good at prayer and how to give elders the permission to engage with different forms of prayer. Prayer in busy lives. Praying with someone in need. Praying with someone who wants to take a step of faith. How to pray in simple ways that encourage people in the congregation to pray.

Communicating my faith (mentioned in 3 interviews)

Friendship evangelism, being present to people, communicating the Gospel to the community in ways they understand, assessing Presbyterian and Christian vocabulary that sounds irrelevant to many people in our culture, helping Christians understand the impact of vocabulary choices as well as the low level of biblical literacy. How to perform acts of love that communicate Christ's love.

Communication (mentioned in 3 interviews)

Communication with the congregation, communication with each other on session, the emotional content of our communication

Decision making (mentioned in 3 interviews)

The pros and cons of consensus decisions versus taking a vote. How to affirm our oneness in the midst of diverse opinions and how to come to consensus when opinions differ. How and when to refer decisions back to the whole congregation. How to balance the needs of different people in the congregation.

Spiritual Gifts (mentioned in 3 interviews)

What do we each have to offer? How do we help people discover their gifts, their strength, their passion and how do we help them go beyond identifying gifts and put them into practice? How do we help people discover what “rings their bell” and put it into practice? How to we bring out the gifts in the laity?

Leading worship (mentioned in 3 interviews)

How to do microphone training, training in reading scripture. How to help people lead worship when there is no minister. How to lead prayers and encourage the congregation to pray.

Who is God for the 21st century? (mentioned in 3 interviews)

How to be church in the 21st century. Trends in the culture, coping with change. Helping an older congregation see what has to happen to reach younger people and how to give permission for others to do it. What does the spiritual life look like among Gen X and Y? What positive opportunities does postmodernism bring the church?

Vacancies (mentioned in 3 interviews)

The responsibilities of elders during vacancies. Leadership during a vacancy. Leading worship during a vacancy. How to enable small groups and lay people to lead worship during vacancies. How a vacancy can strengthen a congregation. How not to be afraid of vacancies.

Small Groups/ home groups/cell groups (mentioned in 3 interviews)

How to run small groups. How to get new people involved in groups. How to challenge comfortable groups. Should cell groups split? Should Bible study groups take on social action projects?

The Presbyterian form of government (mentioned in 3 interviews)

What is the role and value of Presbytery? When should congregational leaders consult with Presbytery? How do congregations relate to Presbytery and General Assembly? Presbytery's help in crises and its role as a safeguard to congregations. What is the role of Synod? Who makes the rules in the PCANZ? Where does our church fit in? Who reports to who? What is connectionalism and how does it work?

Stopping ministries in order to let new ones start (mentioned in 2 interviews)

How to pay attention and listen for guidance about letting ministries die. How to recognize when needs are no longer being met by ministries.

Criticism (mentioned in 2 interviews)

How to give constructive criticism. How to handle criticism, including blanket statements like "Christians are all hypocrites."

Employment issues (mentioned in 2 interviews)

Employment contracts, employment law issues. The relationship between minister and session.

Servant leadership and power issues (mentioned in 2 interviews)

Leadership as servanthood. Consensus, teamwork, conflict, communication with the congregation. Power struggles and how they cause damage. Power and control in decision-making, transparency in decision making, living together in community, trusting the vision of people who see things differently, making mistakes is okay, giving permission to fail, minister and elders working as a team.

Other topics for elder training

More than 40 additional topics were mentioned that would be helpful for elder training. Some of these topics overlap to a small or large extent with the topics above or with each other.

Here is an alphabetical list of the additional topics mentioned:

- Abundance, developing a theology of it
- Approaching the Bible

- Assessing needs of the congregation, how to do it
- Authentic Christian relationships
- Baptisms, how to conduct them
- Building a relationship with God
- Busy-ness on the part of elders
- Caring for people in need
- Change – how to create change, how to talk about it, beginning with small changes, how to move on to modern times, how to deal with resistance to change
- Community involvement – is being an elder just what you do at church? Is there a way to exercise eldership on the rugby field?
- Confidentiality – both personal and for session issues
- Communion – what do elders do in communion, particularly in a church without a minister
- Culture of our time – ethnic groups, treaty issues, so we can understand our national church
- Culture of our time – generational cultures, Gen X, Gen Y, and their needs in church
- Culture of our time – how to affirm the middle, e.g. that both old and new music has value
- Demographics – how to use demographic information for planning and setting vision. How to interpret demographic information realistically
- Discernment as a group
- Doctrine – an overview of Westminster Confession and other creeds.
- Encouraging people – to come to Jesus, come to church, come to a small group, how to do this
- Faithful living
- Funerals and the visitation surrounding a funeral, the pastoral care afterwards
- Generous giving
- Hard decisions, how to make them, how to help people live with them, what is the elder's role in making hard decisions
- History of the Presbyterian church and its relevance for today
- Issues for small rural congregations – knowing everyone, low numbers, visitation when you already know people so well (what hat are you wearing when you visit?),

counseling (people aren't as free to open up to an elder as to a minister), rolling population of people coming in and out, people on welfare with great needs

- Interfaith issues – e.g. what do you do if someone wants a Buddhist funeral? Also how enriching it is to build bridges with people of other faiths
- Marriage counseling/support
- Mission – understanding local mission, specifically that filling a building does not equal mission
- Models for elders/parish council/pastoral care teams
- Past perceptions that don't deal with models of ministry today.
- Personality types as a way to help elders work together better
- Preaching and public speaking, particularly delivery
- Recruitment – how to recruit people for finite jobs, how to match people's gifts with the jobs that need doing.
- Self care – elders with too many balls in the air, some people who are at every meeting of every group in the church
- Staff reporting pattern – Who do staff report to? Accountability and job description
- Theological issues – recognition of the huge leaps that theology has made in interpreting the Old and New Testaments
- Turmoil and messiness as a sign that God is at work. “If the Word is being preached properly, there will be turmoil.”
- Union parishes
- Vision for future, how to get there, how to avoid the stumbling block of focusing on how things were done in the past
- Welcoming hospitality
- What does my grandchild think? Generational expectations, letting go and moving on, new ways of doing old things, how to cope with rapid change
- What does it mean to be a Christian?
- Who is my neighbor?
- Youth leaders and children's leaders, how to encourage them

Part III: Response and Recommendations

My Response

As an American who is new to Aotearoa New Zealand, I was reluctant to offer a personal response to the interviews. However, I feel I owe the readers of this report some recounting of my response to all I heard, both the aspects that gave me sorrow and those that left me encouraged. I invite readers to take these reflections as just one person's response.

The challenges facing the Presbyterian Church in Aotearoa New Zealand are great, and at times I felt discouraged and saddened by what I was hearing. My sadness in response to these interviews centered around three areas.

First, the bewilderment on the part of elders about their role. Many more elders than I expected expressed feelings of inadequacy in their role and uncertainty about what they are supposed to be doing. Some of this can be attributed to the shifts in the role of elder that have been occurring in recent decades. But with so much material written on Christian leadership, it is very sad that so many PCANZ elders don't know what God has called them to be and do.

Second, the sense of discouragement, almost desperation, about the decline in numbers. This discouragement seems to be having the effect of preventing Presbyterians from rejoicing in God and being the church, in their setting, to the best of their ability. Quite simply, Jesus is present where two or three are gathered in his name. Every community of Christians, no matter how small, can be a place of light in the world. Sometimes, these truths seemed to be eclipsed by a concern for falling numbers. Some elders talked about wanting to reach out to their community with the gospel, but in some cases it seemed to be related to bringing in people to fill the pews again.

Third, the lack of concern for the needs of the world. Conspicuously missing in all the interviews was a concern about helping congregation members learn to pray for and care about the needs of the world. Churches are declining in membership in New Zealand, which is very sad, but each day tens of thousands of children around the world die of the effects of poverty, and Hiv/Aids is bringing serious changes to life in Africa and elsewhere. And these,

of course, are only two of the many needs worldwide where Christians seek to serve. Perhaps the discouragement about the state of the church here makes it hard to engage with discouraging news from elsewhere in the world. But I believe mission – local and international – is part of the heartbeat of the church, and without a heartbeat the organism can't live.

However, at the same time, I'm happy to report that I came out of every interview energized. I was so impressed by the sincerity and faithfulness of the elders I interviewed. This report focuses on the needs of elders, so I didn't recount the many good news stories I heard. In every interview, elders wanted to tell me things they've learned and things that are going well. I heard about efforts to make congregational tasks manageable and time limited, so recruitment is easier. I heard about significant prayer and listening to God for guidance. I heard about many creative forms of outreach to communities including a radio program, a Sunday school for whole families, programs for children, and eye-catching posters to advertise Christmas services. I heard passion and energy for the needs of children, youth, families, and aging members.

The elders at the three churches without ministers were especially remarkable. They were seriously engaged in leadership, governance and visioning. In those three interviews, I had the privilege of hearing the elders wrestle with issues related to making real the vision they have received from God for their congregations. They have prayed, recruited people, evaluated resources, assessed the effectiveness of what they're doing, cared for individuals in their congregations, led worship, preached, led funerals, and tried to reach out to people in their communities. Despite the fact that some of them feel lost at times, many of the elders at those three churches have engaged in Christian leadership at its best, with reliance on the Holy Spirit.

I was also impressed with the knowledge, competence, enthusiasm and faithfulness of the ministers I interviewed, and I wished I could work more closely with each of them. As always, people are the greatest resource of the church of Jesus Christ, and the PCANZ is blessed with many wonderful people who have so much to offer. I consider it a great privilege to have been able to conduct these interviews.

Recommendations

For follow-up study:

- Several elders and ministers expressed curiosity about how other congregations organize their leadership. I would suggest further interviews – probably by phone – of Presbyterian elders and pastors to explore the models being used for structuring sessions, parish councils, pastoral care teams, Local Ministry Teams, and the pros and cons of each model. The various models could then be described in a written document that could be made available to presbyteries and congregations.
- If further information is desired regarding which topics for training materials are of greatest interest to elders and ministers, the various topics suggested by the elders and ministers could be listed, each with a brief description. A questionnaire could be devised, perhaps with a scale of one to five (“not at all helpful” to “very helpful”) below each topic. Questionnaires could be circulated to each of the elders and ministers who participated in these interviews. This would give further information about which topics seem most pressing and significant.
- Another option for gathering further information about desires for training resources would be to create a questionnaire with open ended answers. Perhaps fifteen or twenty topics could be identified and respondents asked to write questions they have about each topic. This would give further information about what issues are of greatest interest within each topic.

Recommendations for action:

- Prepare a list of resources. Resources are already available for many of the topics that the elders and ministers mentioned. These resources include training materials prepared by Presbyterian Churches in other countries and books published by The Alban Institute and other publishers. For example, an extensive literature already exists on conflict management in congregations. An annotated list of selected resources on the topics mentioned could be prepared in a booklet, with suggestions for how to use the resources with sessions and parish councils.
- Use this report to help with the planning for workshops for presbyteries to be offered by the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

- Prepare a DVD with eight to twelve topics selected from this study. Each DVD segment (topic) could be 10-15 minutes long with discussion questions at the end. The topics could be chosen because other resources are not available, or they could be topics for which a New Zealand perspective would be particularly helpful. The DVD could be accompanied by written material on each topic which could include resources for further reflection and discussion.
- Even though not much interest was expressed in mission as a topic for training, I believe some training in a Christian understanding of the centrality of mission would be a good idea. The training could give examples of engagement with both local and international mission. With respect to local mission, examples of ministries that help grow congregations and ministries that simply serve the community need to be shown.
- In whatever training materials are written or produced, do not use the terms “teaching elder” and “ruling elder.” People in congregations do not relate well to these terms. There was significant distaste in the interviews for the word “ruling.” It seems to connote hierarchy, which is incompatible with an understanding of Jesus as servant leader, and it also harkens back to an era when the elders’ role involved excluding people from communion. Congregation members seem to be comfortable with the words “elders,” “parish council members,” and “ministers.” It would be possible to teach that ministers are a kind of elder without using the terms “teaching elder” and “ruling elder.”