

Developing Mission Leaders in a Presbytery Context: Learning's from the Port Phillip West *Regenerating the Church Strategy*

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INTRODUCTION

Regenerating the Church is a strategy developed by the Presbytery of Port Phillip West in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania 2013. A goal of this strategy is the identification, nurturing and development of missional leadership for the development of fresh expressions of church and the renewal of existing congregations. This presentation reflects on the early stages of this strategy and the processes used for the development of mission leaders.

It focuses on the following areas:

- The strategic and theological framework used in Port Phillip West for developing mission leaders;
- The process used for identifying and equipping mission leaders;
- Reflection on the needs of mission leaders for the development of fresh expressions and mission leadership;
- Reflection on what we have learned from the Port Phillip West experience.
- The implications for the wider Uniting Church from a Presbytery training perspective.

1. THE CONTEXT

The Presbytery of Port Phillip West faces significant challenges as we respond to the changes and growth in our region. These include:

- Of the six key Melbourne growth areas, three (Melton, Wyndham, Craigieburn) belong in our Presbytery;
- Melton and Wyndham are the 2nd and 3rd fastest growing areas in Australia;
- By 2030, Melton will be the same size as the Sunshine Coast;
- Port Phillip West includes four of the ten most disadvantaged areas of Melbourne;
- The majority of red alerts for employment vulnerability in Melbourne belong in the Western and fringe suburbs (mortgage belt) of Melbourne;
- Community services are already overwhelmed with lengthy waiting lists for basic services;
- Pressures will increase as community funding decreases due to reduced government income and changing social agenda;

- Many services have been reluctant to move into the West, remaining in areas of traditional poverty but now of increasing wealth, e.g. inner city.
- Port Phillip West is a major Australian 'port' for newly arrived people including refugee communities. There is an increasing need for assistance in re-establishment;

Alongside this, the Presbytery established a fund for the purposes of developing mission in the growth areas. This was called the New Areas of Ministry fund. The fund was changed to New Approached to Ministry and became focused around the development of new approaches to mission and church.

2. THE STRATEGY

The strategy responded to the questions and needs of congregations within the Presbytery. As we listened to people across the Presbytery, it was clear that many of our congregations were struggling with four interrelated questions. These questions are each interconnected but are distinctive in their emphasis. The first is a *discipleship* question: What does it mean to live as communities of followers of Jesus in a needy, unjust and rapidly changing context? The second is a *mission* question: How do we equip the people of God to engage, serve and create space for the de-churched and non-churched to explore following Jesus and join in with God's mission. The third question has an *ecclesial* emphasis: What does it mean to allow our engagement in mission to shape Christian community? Related to this is the final question of *church polity*: what is the role of the Presbytery in supporting congregations within its region to develop as missional communities? In response to these questions, the Presbytery developed a strategy titled *Regenerating the Church: A Strategy for Port Phillip West*. This strategy provides innovative ways of developing a culture of mission experimentation and educating, developing and equipping mission leadership across the Presbytery.

The key features of the Strategy include:

Vision:

To be God's people in mission by developing and sustaining a culture within the Presbytery characterised by healthy and vibrant missional communities of Christ, embracing both the planting of new expressions of church and the birthing of new missional life within existing congregations and other placements.

Two streams of missional church are envisaged in the strategy:

- Fresh Expressions are forms of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.
- The renewal of the life and witness of existing congregations who seek to enter more fully into God's mission.

The aim is for missional church diversity. Typically, this will take one of three shapes:

- **A Christian community engaged in contextual mission within a conventional expression of church.**

Example: A congregation that had very little direct mission activity has developed a drop in centre with an integrated during the week worship. It now has contact with 45 people through its regular community meals program, supports community service programs in partnership with the local Uniting Care agency and has a short worship service every fortnight that has 8 new people attending worship, all from the community meals program.

- **Fresh expression of church alongside a conventional expression of church.**

Example: A mid sized church has developed a contemplative gathering alongside its Sunday morning worship. This small community meets together every fortnight, in different locations, sharing a time of spiritual practices followed by a meal. More than half of this group is people who did not belong to any church before becoming part of this gathering. It has developed a mission to the local school and now runs a breakfast program.

- **Fresh expression of church emerges on its own, but always in relationship with the wider church.**

Example: A congregation within the Presbytery has supplied funds for a .5 ministry in a large regional centre for the development of fresh expressions of church. This minister has gathered together a mission team to develop a fresh expression of church focused on the growth fringe of the regional area. The aim of this is to develop 'church' with its own worship, community life, mission and relationship with the wider church focused on people who do not belong to any church.

3. THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

There is much missiological and theological underpinning of *the Regenerating the Church* strategy, and in this paper we can only briefly indicate some of the ways that it connects with the *Basis of Union*. The following three statements from the *Basis of Union* are central to the strategy.

The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of his completed work.

The church is called to fresh responses to our changing world and we do so with the assurance that Christ is with us enabling faithful witness. Developing new forms of church, planting a variety of expressions of church and encouraging new mission life in existing congregations is undertaken in response to the call to be faithful witnesses to Christ in our changing world. Christ is already present in the world and we are sent to participate in God's mission in the world.

Fresh hearing and responding to Christ is the vocation of the Christian community. The 'essence' of the church is expressed in the response of the Christian community to Christ coming, addressing and dealing with people through the news of his completed work. This means that 'being church' can never simply be about a past hearing or responding to Christ. Although the Christ we hear today is the Christ heard in previous generations, and is the Christ who is witnessed to in Scripture, *our* hearing and responding will always be new.

The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal.

To be a 'pilgrim people' means that we are constantly 'becoming' the church. We never 'make it' as the church, but we are called to be the church anew in every historical moment. The church is also defined not only in relation to the *missio Dei*, but in its *response* to God's mission in the world. This is the truly 'pilgrim' nature of the church as it responds afresh in every historical moment to what God has done, is doing and will do in creation. At the heart of mission is the church's witness to and joining in of the economy of salvation. Christ is at the centre of God's mission in the world defining God's creative, reconciling and liberating work and the 'end' that is the promised goal of creation. Missional church diversity is an expression of the pilgrim people. It is about a people shaped by their engagement in mission as they witness to the Triune God.

Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith.

As we proclaim Christ crucified and risen afresh in our changing world, we do so in the confidence that Christ, through the Spirit, makes disciples and transforms the world. Human witness in word and action has multiple mission dimensions. The *Regenerating the Church* strategy doesn't prescribe a particular mission emphasis, but seeks to cultivate a culture of mission diversity. The Mission Principles from the Major Strategic Review of the Synod of Victoria/Tasmania capture the different marks of mission. These mission principles build on the Five Marks of Mission adopted by the Anglican Communion.

God in Christ reaches out to the world and calls the Church in the Spirit to:

- 1. Share the Good News of Jesus Christ**
- 2. Nurture disciples in life-giving communities of reconciliation**
- 3. Respond in compassion to human need**
- 4. Live justly and seek justice for all**
- 5. Care for creation**
- 6. Express the Gospel in fresh ways for each generation and culture**
- 7. Pursue God's mission in partnership**

Human witness in word and action, in all its diversity, is enabled by the work of the Spirit of Christ. Each Christian community is encouraged to discern the shape of human witness in their unique context, in the confidence that the Spirit of Christ will make use of their words and actions to awaken faith inside and outside the Christian community.

4. STRATEGIC ASSUMPTIONS

In the *Regenerating the Church* strategy, there are several strategic assumptions about the role of the Presbytery in mission. The first is that the Presbytery does not limit or direct the shape of church or mission in particular areas, but seeks to support the emergence of a multiplicity of ways of being the church in our changing world. This approach recognises that it is the people of God in congregations that can best discern the shape of mission in local contexts, rather than the Presbytery.

A second assumption is that mission engagement cannot be ‘planned’ in the sense that it happens in a neat controlled environment with predicative outcomes. Mission directions unfold through the process of mission engagement, and any mission goals are adapted and redefined by new partnerships that emerge through mission engagement.

The third assumption builds on the previous two. This assumption is that mission emerges contingently through an interactive engagement with a context, allowing the context to shape the mission engagement and responding to emergent opportunities.

As a result of these assumptions, a key role of the strategy is about culture rather than programs. It is about creating a culture that identifies, nurtures, equips and supports mission leadership across the Presbytery. This is expressed in the three goals of the strategy that clearly identifies the role of the Presbytery.

Goals:

1. *To identify and train people across the Presbytery to:
 - a) lead the planting of a variety of expressions of missional church;
 - b) lead the development of new forms of church in existing congregations, schools or agencies.*
2. *To nurture, develop and support missional leadership for the renewal of existing congregations, schools or agencies.*
3. *To identify and encourage congregations to actively explore and support (through people, financial and other resources) the development of new forms of church and planting a variety of expressions of missional church.*

5. THE PROCESS OF BUILDING A MISSIONAL CULTURE

We have identified three phases in the unfolding of the *Regenerating the Church strategy*. These are conversation, experimentation and action reflection. In practice these phases are not meant to be prescriptive or sequential, but are descriptive and dynamic. Within each phase we have developed a simplified narrative that captures the essence of that phase and is used in the communication of the strategy. There are various programs that support the different phases of the strategy and the Presbytery has a particular role in each phase.

Conversation:

The conversation phase is not simply about putting mission on the agenda or talking about new ways of being church. It is about a shift in thinking about church, culture and mission. It is also about shifting the church's self-talk away from the despondency of decline to a posture of discernment. The narrative used during this phase is that a changing mission context means discerning anew faithfulness in mission. This is very much solution and future focused rather than an analysis of what 'we have done wrong' or 'how we have done it in the past'. The way that we have undertaken this as a Presbytery is through the following activities and programs:

- Presentations to congregations in the Presbytery regarding the strategy;
- The development of a website hosting key communication of the strategy;
- Sharing stories at Presbytery meetings;
- Communicating strategy to other parts of the UCA particularly different parts of the Synod.

The role of the Presbytery in the conversation phase is setting the strategic direction, sharing the vision, shaping the narrative and driving and facilitating the conversation.

Experimentation:

The experimentation phase is about moving from talk to action. Experimentation is the appropriate word because this phase is not simply about doing things, but is about testing new possibilities, encouraging innovation, doing things that we have not done before and reaching people we haven't reached before. The narrative of this phase is about 'having a go' at new expressions of mission and new expressions of church. The aim is to encourage a culture that celebrates risk taking rather than outcomes, and that affirms faithfulness in having a go rather than 'success'. The way that we have undertaken this as a Presbytery is through the following activities and programs:

- Mission coaching to give long term support and reflection on practice;
- Mission Shaped Ministry course;
- Pioneer learning community for ongoing learning, sharing and support in mission experimentation;
- Seed funding of mission initiatives through the Simpson Bequest;
- Mission planning including imagination workshops and regional work;
- Regeneration Ministry as a way of supporting mission focused ministry and development of fresh expressions of church;
- Pioneer Intensive.

The role of the Presbytery in the experimentation phase is provide long term support rather than short term reports, providing mission education and resourcing, encouraging and supporting experimentation, stimulating mission imagination and creating a culture of risk taking in mission experimentation

Action Reflection:

The action reflection phase is about building and sustaining a missional culture across the Presbytery and constantly learning and responding to emergent situations. This is a phase that we have not reached, but we continue to keep on our agenda. The narrative of this phase is that 'Regenerating the church is not about programs but creating a missional church. We are called to continuously respond to the movement of the Spirit.' The way that we have/will undertake this as a Presbytery is through the following activities and programs:

- Ongoing discernment of new mission opportunities;
- Continuing mission leadership development;
- Assessment of ongoing needs and opportunities;
- Responding to changing Presbytery environment and new learning.

The role of the Presbytery in the action reflection phase is to provide the strategic framework for Regeneration culture, listening and responding to congregational needs, ongoing identification and support of mission leadership and responding to changing Presbytery environment and new learning.

6. LESSONS LEARNT

To conclude this paper, we will outline the key learnings from our journey so far that we consider helpful to the wider church.

- **Just in time institutional change:** Avoid making changes that are too early and that are not evidence based. This simply consumes energy and is likely to encounter institutional resistance, without making a contribution to future directions.
- **It's all about investing in people:** The key is to invest in people rather than programs. Programs should be a means of investing in people in an effective way. This requires time, energy and patients. Identifying and discerning the right people to invest in is critical.
- **Working within the 'not yet' phase:** A difficult space to be in is the beginning of experimentation with only preliminary 'evidence' of outcomes. Established or mature outcomes can take years. Keeping up the momentum and continuing to move forward requires a lot of grit and good solid communication. It also requires advocates who will continue to communicate the rationale for what we are doing.
- **Domino effect:** When we change one part of the institution there will be another group of unforeseen changes and implications. What is required is people who are 'structural thinkers' and can communicate with people who understand church in a different way and work within the polity.
- **Importance of clear goals that taps the imagination and enthusiasm of people:** It is important to keep the strategy simple in the way that it is communicated. It is also important to communicate in a way that is

inviting and taps the enthusiasm and imagination of people across the Presbytery.

- **Strategic planning that holds the goals 'loosely' and responds to emergent and unforeseen directions:** There are many unknowns in any strategy. This requires a posture of deep and critical listening; planning and reflection space; a critical group of supporters to help reflect on emerging situations; and flexibility to shift directions during the journey.
- **Missional church diversity:** In the present UCA environment, there can be a defensiveness and reactivity from different parts of the church to different understandings of fresh expressions of church. This can be seen whenever the conventional model is critiqued indirectly or directly. What is important here is to be willing to engage in ongoing conversation and to affirm missional church diversity.
- **Reference to UCA identity:** It is important to continue to make overt or specific connections with the UCA theology especially the Basis of Union.

CONCLUSION

There are many congregations who hold a deep hope for a renewing by the Spirit. A key part of responding to this hope is to seek ways to respond to our changing culture. This must necessarily entail new forms of church. Our call is not to 'save' the church, but to constantly discern how to be faithful missional communities witnessing to Christ crucified and risen in the diverse cultures that we live, work and network in. This won't simply happen, but requires strategic thinking and intentional regionally based focus of time, prayer and resources.

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