

A fresh look at Elders/Leaders in the Uniting Church

The Uniting Church...will seek to recognise in the congregation those endowed by the Spirit with gifts fitting them for rule and oversight. Such members will be called Elders or Leaders. [Basis of Union 14 (b)]

The Uniting Church makes provision in its constitution for...The Elders' or Leaders' meeting (the council within a congregation or group of congregations) consists of the minister and those who are called to share with the minister in oversight. It is responsible for building up the congregation in faith and hope, sustaining its members in hope, and leading them into a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world. [Basis of Union 15 (b)]

Preface

Terence Corkin, Assembly General Secretary

This discussion paper has been commissioned by the Assembly Standing Committee in response to the perception that there is widespread confusion in the church about the ministry of Elder and concern in some quarters that something vital to the spiritual health of the church is, or has been, lost.

The Ministry of Elder, Deacon and Leader had a strong tradition as a ministry of spiritual leadership and oversight in the churches that came into Union. This ministry of spiritual oversight alongside the ordained ministries of the church was consolidated in the life of the Uniting Church with the establishment of the Elders Council.

In 1997 the Church decided to combine the, then, Parish Council and the Elders Council and to have only one Church Council. This seems to have resulted in the role of Elders becoming confused in many places and the distinctive contribution Elders make to the life of a congregation being lost. The regulations themselves are not easy to interpret when it comes to how Elders are appointed and on what basis it is decided which Elders are on the Church Council and what way the other Elders relate to each other.

A concerned group of experienced Ministers raised with the Standing Committee that it would be helpful if the members of the Church could look afresh at the Ministry of Eldership and take stock of what we are doing and consider what we think would be helpful to do, for the sake of the health of the Church. Standing Committee agreed with this request and a small group has been established to develop this document, to receive the feedback from the church and to provide a report and recommendation to the Assembly Standing Committee in time for any proposals to go to the 14th Assembly for consideration.

This document does not seek to make the case for Eldership but rather note some of the understandings that the UCA has had around Eldership and noting some of the ways that our present practices seems to work against it. If the feedback is that there is a risk of losing something important through the various decisions that we have made over the years; then the Assembly Standing Committee may bring to the 14th Assembly some advice on how the regulations can better hold forth the vision of Eldership and support it.

I commend this conversation to you; and ask that your local leaders and / or congregation make time to respond to the questions that have been placed before you by the due date of November 30th 2014.

A. Introduction

Since the introduction of the (one) Church Council there has been a great deal of confusion in the Uniting Church about the ministry of Elder/Leader. Furthermore, many in the Uniting Church believe that the ministry of Elders/Leaders has been steadily diminished. Unfortunately a few think that the UCA no longer has this ministry.

This paper outlines some of the issues and invites members of the Church to participate in a process to help the ministry to find its rightful place. The process is designed to enable the Fourteenth Assembly in 2015 to consider the matters.

B. The Issues

1. The move to one Church Council following the Eighth Assembly (1997) means that the Church Council now undertakes the responsibilities of the previous Council of Elders (notably pastoral care, nurture, education and worship) as well as caring for finance and property. However, many Church Councils seem to be preoccupied with issues of property, finance and survival. This is in spite of Reg 3.1.2 commencing with an important reminder which many Church Councils find difficult to observe The Church Council shall give priority in its life to building up the Congregation in faith and love, sustaining members in hope, and leading the Congregation to a fuller participation in Christ's mission in the world. This priority shall be reflected in the agenda of its ordinary meetings [Reg. 3.1.2(a)].
2. It is not sufficiently clear that the Church Council (Reg 3.3) is the Elders' or Leaders' Meeting referred to in the Basis of Union 15 (b). The fact that the Regulations and the Basis use different terminology contributes to the confusion.
3. The fact that there may be members of Church Council who are not Elders causes confusion. The Basis of Union states that it is the role of Elders/Leaders to exercise "spiritual oversight" while the Regulations state this is the role of the Church Council, which often includes people who are not Elders/Leaders.
4. Members of Church councils who are not Elders may not have a clear role, or understanding of their role. Similarly elders who are not members of the Church Council may not have a clear understanding of their role.

5. By having a Church Council consisting of both Elders and non-Elders we have inadvertently continued the unhelpful dichotomy between “spiritual” and “property/financial” which the move to one Church Council in 1997 sought to overcome.

6. “Spiritual oversight” is a concept which many in the UCA do not understand.

7. There is no separate section on Elders or their duties in the current edition of the published Regulations. Understandably, many people therefore conclude that the Eldership has been progressively diminished or even eradicated in the Uniting Church.

8. In the past some people have seen the role of Elders as visiting. Visiting is now no longer explicitly mentioned in Reg. 3.1.2. This has unfortunately contributed to people wrongly assuming the UCA has done away with Elders. Social change has meant that it is sometimes difficult or awkward to visit people in their homes. Pastoral conversations may be conducted in coffee shops, at clubs, community events or countless other ways. It is still important for Elders to seek creative opportunities to have significant conversations with people and, where appropriate, to pray with them.

9. In many congregations there has been an understanding that every Elder/Leader is expected to be a pastoral visitor, although this has never been the understanding of Eldership/Leadership embodied in the Basis of Union or the Regulations.

10. There is uncertainty about the role of Elders/Leaders in congregations in which there is no minister, or in which there is a very part time Minister or an Associated Minister. Note: The Regulations now make provision for the Presbytery to appoint an Associated Minister where there is no Minister in placement - Reg. 3.1.3m(ii), effective 1 Jan, 2014.)

There is also uncertainty and variety of practice in relation to whether Lay Ministry Teams (however styled) should consist only or mostly of Elders/Leaders.

11. In 1997 the Assembly recognised that Congregations are very diverse and therefore sought to reduce the number of matters required by Regulation. Some people have wrongly assumed that the removal of the requirement to do something means that they are no longer permitted to do so. The lack of explicit directives should be taken as an encouragement to find ways of doing things which best facilitate the worship, witness and service of the Congregation in its specific local context as participants in God's mission to the world.

12. There is little guidance given as to how Elders and Church Councillors relate to people with other roles, such as Ministry agent, lay preacher, other worship leaders, pastoral carer/visitor, property maintenance people, etc.

13. It is important to note that the Basis of Union provides the alternative titles of “Elder” or “Leader”, and congregations may choose which terminology is used in their local setting. Regardless of the title the function is identical. Although the word “Elder” has an honoured place in the Bible and in the Reformed tradition some in contemporary society see it as ageist, and a deterrence to young men and women responding to the call to leadership in their congregation.

14. There is nothing in the Regulations to require a congregation to elect Elders. It may be read as implicit, but clarification would be of assistance

15. The Regulations for Church Councils in small congregations [Reg 3.9.3] are silent on the issue of Elders/Leaders in such congregations.

16. The most recent statement on Elders/Leaders from the Assembly was in 2003 and is as follows:

Eldership is exercised corporately within the church council by ensuring that the agenda for church council meetings gives priority to the following matters:

- making arrangements for the pastoral care of the members of the congregation;
- assisting the Minister in planning the worship of the congregation;
- building up the congregation in faith, hope and love;
- encouraging the congregation in Christ’s mission in the world.

Eldership may be exercised in an individual way by:

- modelling the Christian life;
- developing a pastoral relationship with particular members of the congregation;
- participating in aspects of the congregation's education and mission program;
- assisting the Minister in the leadership of worship and the administration of the sacraments;
- encouraging individual members to share in the mission of the church – local, regional and global.

Tenth Assembly Minute 03.14

This statement has not reduced the confusion in the Church, and there is a need for greater clarity about the nature of leadership in the congregation.

C. Spiritual Oversight

Two former Presidents of the Assembly have written helpful comments:

“The ministry of Elder/Leader is clearly for “spiritual oversight”. Both words are basic. The elders/leaders are not primarily administrators; their work is spiritual guidance and pastoral care. They can assist in worship, education and mission, but these are expressions of the one basic role of spiritual oversight. This word “oversight” (episcope in Greek) means keeping the flock together, jointly caring for the people; keeping the purpose of the church in view; and building up the people by prayer and encouragement for their part in the mission of Christ”

[D’Arcy Wood, Building on a Solid Basis p.45]

“Elders will be those ‘endowed by the Spirit with gifts fitting them for rule and oversight’. A proper understanding of what ‘rule’ is in the Church will begin in the local congregation and in the council of elders. Certainly it includes a capacity to make decisions, a refusal to pass the buck, a determination to say and to show by example what – after prayer and consultation – may be for the good of the congregation.”

[Davis McCaughey, A Commentary on the Basis of Union p75-76]

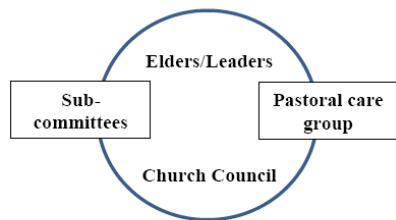
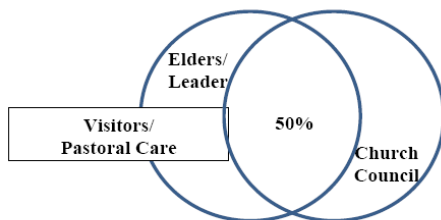
D. A Way Forward

1. It is appropriate for the Fourteenth Assembly (2015) to reaffirm affirm the importance of Eldership.
2. It is timely to appreciate that every aspect of the life and mission of a congregation has a spiritual dimension. The old divisions about “sacred” and “secular” dimensions of church life need to be discarded, and in particular there needs to be a reclaiming that decisions about the maintenance and use of property and financial resources are profoundly missional and spiritual.
3. It is appropriate to reaffirm the role of Elders/Leaders in spiritual oversight.
4. The context for Congregational life and mission in Australia in the 21st century requires that the Council within the congregation consists of those whom the congregation recognises as endowed by the Holy Spirit with gifts fitting them for rule and oversight.
5. Those whom the congregation recognises to have other gifts can be welcomed as members of sub-committees which provide advice to Church Council.

Therefore the Task Group recommends that the Church Council consist only of those elected as Elders/Leaders, and that all Elders/Leaders are members of Church Council. This is consistent with the Basis of Union, overcomes some of the difficulties experienced since the introduction of the one Church Council, places government of the congregation in the hands of those recognised with spiritual gifts, but also provides a place for people to be engaged in some aspects of congregational life without having responsibility for the whole.

This does not mean that all Elders/Leaders are expected to be active in every one of the responsibilities of Elders/Leaders. In particular, not every Elder/Leader is expected to be a pastoral visitor.

The following two diagrams represent the current model (on the left) and the recommended model (on the right):



E. Questions

1. What do you see as confusing in the current situation re elders/leaders in the UCA?
2. Over the years what have you most valued about the ministry of Elder/Leader?
3. If you are or have been an elder, how have you exercised your role with other elders?
4. How do you understand “spiritual oversight”?
5. What advantages or disadvantages do you see in the proposal that all elders should be members of Church Council?
6. What advantages or disadvantages do you see in the proposal that the Church Council should consist of Elders/Leaders only?
7. Has your congregation considered which alternative title should be used?

**Responses by 30 November 2014 to
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