Alpine Presbytery

Strategic Framework
May 2015

fostering, resourcing, encouraging, supporting our churches and faith communities

working for the emergence of healthy, vibrant Presbyterian mission in our region
Introduction

The Alpine Presbytery was formed in 2014, and is made up of urban, rural, Presbyterian and Co-operating/Union congregations across the upper South Island (north of the Waitaki River). As we find our way in this new Presbytery, this document is an invitation to a story, and an opportunity to respond afresh to the call we hear together from our loving active God.

This document is not a detailed plan. Our Presbyterian ethos is one of Presbytery and congregations working together. Therefore this is a living document intended to describe our future together by providing a framework to guide congregations in ministry and mission while interacting with other churches in their area, as we seek to fulfil Jesus prayer that we all become one.

Why we exist

Alpine Presbytery exists to foster, resource, encourage and support those churches and faith communities that lie in its bounds to be signs of God’s liberating reign and a foretaste of God’s new creation.

In fulfilment of this purpose, our vision is to see the emergence of a healthy, vibrant Presbyterian mission that will be accessible to all and will make a significant and distinctive contribution to the future life of the region.

God’s story

We believe that God is active in creation, the reconciliation of all things to God through Christ, in the power of the Spirit. Thus God relates with us, and calls us into relationship with God and each other. Our unity is found in the community of God. We are invited to participate in that story as individuals, congregations, and as a Presbytery.

We know that for the church there can be no participation in Christ without participation in the missio dei, God’s mission in and to the world. This is highlighted by Jesus when he opened the scroll of Isaiah and said (in Luke 4:18-21):

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”
Jesus then declared that this has been fulfilled in his ministry. Thus the church is invited by God to be a participant in this mission and is thus God’s missionary people.

It is not the church of God that has a mission, but the God of mission who has a church.

Our story – remembering the legacy, and the challenge

The story of the church in our Presbytery is one of mission with decades of loyalty and dedication. Generations of people, captured by God’s story, responded to their local community and mission by forming faith communities, planting congregations, and serving in mission. They gave years of loving faithful service that has seen congregations formed all across our region as an expression of God’s love. As these congregations gathered around Christ, joining him in his mission of love to the world, significant activities emerged serving the local communities, towns and cities. To this legacy we are extremely grateful, and we honour those who have gone before. We know the church is not ‘ours’ – those who founded Presbyterian expressions of faith in this region built them with a hope and dream for the generations to follow.

In recent times we have seen momentous societal change and the church has not always adapted well to this new context. The dis-connect between the church and our local contexts has widened, bringing uncertainty and undermining our sense of identity in Christ. Our misunderstanding of the gospel has caused us to narrow our focus to compartmentalise the aspects of the gospel that we are comfortable with and, from that perspective, criticise other expressions of it. There has been a decline in worship attendance and membership, with the focus in energy moving to survival. In this shift in focus, along with conflict, reaction, and hurt, trust has been broken and congregations have tended to retreat into silos of activity, undermining our Presbyterian ethos of being together. To be Presbyterian means to work together as a Presbytery which is a corporate expression of our congregational life, but we have tended to move from a big ‘We’ as a Presbytery, to a small ‘we’ operating as individual congregations and a rift has emerged in our life together between congregations and Presbytery.
Our capacity as a Presbytery is also in decline. We struggle to fill roles of interim moderators and ministry settlement boards, and our standing committee members have increasing workloads impacting their capacity to minister in their own congregations. In short, we have less people doing more work and we risk undermining our congregation’s mission by having key people serving in wider Presbytery activities. At the same time resources have increased markedly as cash and property assets have increased, and building resources are sold.

An invitation to a new chapter in the story

We believe God is inviting us to imagine a season in the ongoing story of the relationship between God and people. It is an opportunity to live together allowing for diverse expressions of faith depending on the context that various congregations find themselves in. This involves:

- reclaiming our heritage of working together as Presbyterians
- developing a sense that the justification for the church is not found within itself, but that it exists to participate in the relationship and mission activity of God
- encouraging significant times of theological reflection in our life together to rediscover the holistic nature of the gospel
- commitment to ongoing reformation of church and a desire to contextualise it into 21st Century New Zealand culture
- experimenting with models of church to enable expressions of the gospel in ways that engage New Zealanders who have little understanding or knowledge of Jesus
The new chapter in action

Our response to God’s activity in our region is to pay fresh attention to God’s spirit in forming us to be more Christ-like and Christ radiant individuals and congregations. We want to pay attention to God’s activity of reconciling all things and identify opportunities to participate in that activity. We will resource our congregations to help form communities that are signs of God’s liberating reign. We will honour each other recognising multiple ways of communicating the gospel in the lives of congregations large and small. We will help resource those activities by ensuring congregations have facilities and ministry appropriate to their participation in God’s mission.

This involves having the courage to:

- be honest about our current story without blame or judgement
- experiment with new contextual expressions of church
- follow previous generations by planting congregations in new residential areas as discernment leads and opportunities arise
- identify and relate to like-minded entities in our areas where strategic partnerships could be formed
- encourage networks of congregations working together with synergy (together they achieve more than individually). These networks will be diverse depending on their context, with some choosing to worship together, some choosing to collaborate in community activities, others having common ministry and staff
- foster and create connections with other churches in our communities, and seek to widen our relationships beyond traditional ecumenical partners
- increase our resourcing, training, and equipping of our members to grow in our effectiveness to reach out to our communities
- give special attention to the younger members of our communities
ensure there is effective pastoral care to the ageing population within our Presbytery, whilst at the same time seeking to inspire older generations to have a vision for the church of the future

establish Ministry Settlement Boards that are effective in taking the opportunity to re-imagine the congregation’s future, rather than simply look for a new minister

acknowledge the legacy left for us by those gone before – the gospel that has been passed to us, our sense of what it means to be Presbyterian, and our attention to robust intellectual engagement with the gospel for the well-being of our world. This also includes ensuring the resources available to us contribute to an ongoing legacy for future generations.

Some basic principles to guide our practice

We as a Presbytery have the desire and commitment to be a part of this new story. Nothing will happen without hard work, and there is a risk that this document gathers dust on our shelves. We are determined not to allow that to happen, and therefore identify the following ‘bottom lines’ in our life together:

- the PCANZ experience has shown that the merging of congregations seldom achieves the expected result (the problems that lead to mergers tend to revisit soon after the merger), therefore alternative creative ways of working together will be explored. This will bring opportunities to work together by creating ministry teams that work across the networks.
- we will share our legacy of resources for the good of the whole
mere survival or maintenance of congregations is no longer a desirable strategy. We all will engage in discovering our place in the future story. Passive resources (i.e. investment income) will only be able to be used to underwrite the on-going costs of ministry support where this relates to Presbytery-endorsed missional initiatives.

all situations where there is a change in ministry will have a Ministry Settlement Board formed whose first task is to identify and articulate the congregation’s place in the new story.

all congregations are required to go through the mission planning process, particularly those with ministry or building proposals. This process is not a one-off activity, but an ongoing way of ensuring we remain effectively connected with our local contexts.

the Presbytery work required by standing committees, interim moderators, and ministry settlement boards will be examined to find ways to radically re-engineer the way we work together to ensure the Presbyterian ethos is guarded (and strengthened) at the same time finding creative ways to achieve the tasks at hand.

Specific goals

To ensure we are intentional in participating in God’s story, we will:

1. Be good stewards of the legacy of what we have in this Presbytery and be responsible in using the resources for effective mission
2. Require and assist every congregation to develop and regularly update a mission plan that is consistent with this framework
3. Ensure that we support initiatives already underway to re-imagine church structures. We will work hard to make sure we learn from those who have undergone recent significant change
4. Experiment with fresh contextual expressions of church, identifying and training pioneers and supporting innovation with funding and resources

5. Be sensitive to, and enabling of, congregations who have decided that they have come to the end of their ability to exist as a congregation

6. Explore the widening of the scope of the existing Christchurch Mission Fund to the whole Alpine region so that there is one strategic framework, and one Mission Fund for the Presbytery

7. Strengthen our relationships with entities within our family e.g. Presbyterian Support and church schools.

8. Share with each other the stories of God’s activity in our midst, along with an increase in effective communication across the Presbytery

Conclusion

God is at work, and we are not alone. Together as a Presbytery we can look to the future with faith and optimism that the legacy passed to us will be continued to be passed on to future generations, and that there will be exciting and fruitful expressions of faith throughout our region.