

Summary:

The New England North West Presbytery is increasingly reliant upon lay worship leaders including both lay preachers and lay presiders. These lay worship leaders offer a qualitatively different leadership to that of lay preachers in more traditional contexts. In some circumstances, lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers may fill a role approaching that of the specified ministry of Pastor.

Not all lay worship leaders are accredited lay preachers partly because of the onerous nature of existing lay preacher accreditation processes. Revaluing the importance of lay worship leaders requires the maintenance of high standards. Congregations and Faith Communities in this *kairos* period deserve the best that can be provided.

The once-for-all-time training program leading to a once-for-all-time accreditation which has served the church well in the past will be of less benefit in the future. A commitment to lifelong learning in a framework of discipleship growth provides the best context for the formation of lay worship leaders, lay sacramental providers and accredited lay preachers,

This submission argues for an approach to accreditation which encourages, affirms and rewards rather than requires a minimum standard which earns permission to lead worship and preach. Candidates need to progress in a way that fits into their busy lives whilst using their gifts for worship leadership and preaching.

The submission imagines a broadly based, accessible, readily achievable foundation course which traverses biblical, theological, and practical skills which would be enriched over time through the completion of additional modules. It cites Chris Walker's "Discipleship Course" as an example of such a course. Enrichment activities need to be diverse, integrate well with existing Presbytery organised training courses and formation opportunities, and include core components. However, these core components will need to be more focussed than the current broad brush, overview style of the once-for-all-time training program units in Old Testament, New Testament, Theology and Christology e.g. Understanding the Bible, Introducing the Basis of Union. This suggests that formation and accreditation processes need to be flexible capable of adaptation from person to person and context to context.

A list of diverse enrichment modules (from a variety of approved providers) which complement existing Presbytery training courses and formation opportunities would be a great assistance.

Introduction

The New England North West Presbytery has noted that the Ministerial Education Commission has established a review with the aims of assisting it to

1. identify whether the definition of the ministry of Lay Preacher is adequate for the future needs of the church (Regs 2.8.1-2.8.13), and make recommendations to the Assembly regarding any necessary Regulation changes
2. identify whether the Rules for Study for the ministry of Lay Preacher are adequate for the nature of the ministry as determined in 1 above, and make recommendations to the Assembly regarding any necessary amendments
3. identify issues related to selection, training and continuing education of Lay Preachers and make recommendations to the body or agency appointed by each Synod
4. review the training being offered by synods and presbyteries in the light of the Rules (as required by the Regulations).

The Presbytery also notes that the review will consider

1. the range of contexts in which Lay Preachers serve
2. the roles and tasks that Lay Preachers perform
3. the roles and recognition of non-accredited lay preachers and worship leaders
4. processes and standards for training and assessment of Lay Preachers
5. supervision and support for Lay Preachers

Because lay preaching is of such critical importance within the life of our Presbytery, we seek to assist the work of review through this submission.

1. The range of contexts in which lay preachers serve within the New England North West Presbytery.

1. Location and Demography

The New England North West Presbytery lies within the Synod of NSW & ACT. It extends from Quirindi in the south to the Queensland border in the north. It services an area traversed by two major highways running in a north-south direction: the New England Highway in the east and the Newell Highway in the west.

Tamworth in the south with a population approaching 45,000 people is the largest city. The university city of Armidale is the only other city with a population of more than 20,000 people. Thus, the new England North West Presbytery worships, witnesses and serves in a region which is largely characterised by rural villages and towns with populations ranging from several hundred people to as many as 10,000 people.

2. Congregations and Ministry

The worship, witness and service of the Presbytery is grounded in the life of

- seven congregations,
- six multi-centres or linked congregations each with at least one congregation and several preaching places,
- two faith communities, and
- two centres where Uniting congregations have entered into special relationships with the Anglican Church.

3. Availability of Ordained and other Specified Ministers

The recently adopted future direction strategy of the Presbytery envisages that seven specified ministers will contribute to the missional, liturgical and pastoral leadership of the congregations, multi-centres and faith communities of the Presbytery. Four congregations will follow what some might regard as a "normal" model of ministry i.e. a single specified minister sharing leadership with the Elders and Church Council in a circumstance where a single congregation is clearly dominant.

Throughout the rest of the Presbytery, four resource ministers will share leadership with the Elders and Church Councils. These resource ministry areas are

- the North West Plains Resource Ministry centred on Moree and Narrabri
- the New England Resource Ministry centred on Glen Innes, Tenterfield and Guyra
- the Liverpool Plains Resource Ministry centred on Gunnedah, Quirindi and Werris Creek
- the Peel Valley/Manilla-Barraba Resource Ministry centred on Manilla, Barraba and Hallsville.

4. Contexts for Lay preachers

Lay leadership and ministry is critically important across the whole Presbytery. In many situations, sacramental ministry is possible only through accredited lay presiders. Similarly, especially in the resource ministry areas, regular worship is only possible through the generously offered gifts of lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers. Thus, there are several significant contexts in which lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers contribute:

- i. What some might regard as a "normal" congregational settings in which worship is led mostly by an ordained Minister of the Word or other specified minister;
- ii. Congregational settings in which once a resident ordained Minister of the Word or other specified minister would

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- i. What some might regard as a "normal" congregational settings in which worship is led mostly by an ordained Minister of the Word or other specified minister;
- ii. Congregational settings in which once a resident ordained Minister of the Word or other specified minister would

have been available, but where the confluence of changing demography, changing worship attendance patterns and reducing financial viability conspire to preclude that possibility;

- iii. Congregations, faith communities and preaching places including homestead services and suchlike where a visiting worship leader / preacher has always lived elsewhere since a resident clergy person has never been present.

2. The roles and tasks that Lay Preachers perform

Across these diverse contexts lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers provide a variety of roles. Some lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers will actually range across these roles because they are not limited to any one context. Within our Presbytery clusters of lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers gather in the larger population centres. Lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers from Tamworth, Armidale and Glen Innes do not limit themselves to their home congregations and travel quite widely within the Presbytery.

1. Lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers as support to resident minister

In larger population centres where a resident minister is readily available lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers provide an important support to that minister. As well as adding to the richness and diversity of the worshipping life of the community, they enable the resident minister to take annual leave, enjoy an occasional weekend off, participate in the wider work of the church (e.g. a meeting of the Synod) and participate in continuing education.

The participation of lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers on the worship schedule of the congregation also indicates something of the theological standpoint of the Uniting Church in Australia and its valuing of the participation of lay people in the ministry of the Church.

2. Lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers as the mainstay of worship and wise counsellors

In many of the congregations and faith communities of the New England North West Presbytery, lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers provide the mainstay of worship life. Although resource ministers contribute to that life to greater and lesser degrees, often lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers will lead most of the worship in those centres. It will be normal in these centres for the congregation to

experience a different worship leader each Sunday though usually that congregation will experience that worship leader several times in a year.

The ministry of lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers including those who are visitors from other towns are deeply appreciated in these circumstances and the lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers are accorded a different kind of respect as spiritual leaders of the community. As well as leading worship, they share their wisdom and creative insight with the congregation or faith community beyond the worship service and become wise counsellors as well as worship leaders. This gift is given as part of a network of lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers which in some situations will be more organised than others.

3. Lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers as key leader within a community

In some situations, a lay worship leader or accredited lay preacher will assume a particular relationship with a congregation, faith community or preaching place. This will emerge as a result of an extended relationship in which they become the sole or main worship leader of that group.

In one such circumstance, one accredited lay preacher is currently undergoing formation under the oversight of a resource minister to be commissioned as a volunteer into the specified ministry of Pastor. In another situation, a lay worship leader and accredited sacramental presider leads congregational worship twice each month and is the person the congregation sees most often leading worship and is the mainstay of the sacramental life of the congregation.

4. Lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers as sacramental providers

In many congregations and faith communities of our Presbytery, sacramental life is possible only through accredited lay presiders. Some but not all accredited lay presiders will also be accredited lay preachers. However, most lay presiders would also regularly lead worship and preach.

5. The role of lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers in pastoral networks and as pastoral support

Because lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers assume such significance in many places, they are also the link in ensuring the provision of pastoral care and support. As well as ensuring that resource ministers and colleague lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers are made aware of

significant pastoral issues, lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers may find themselves confronted with unexpected situations.

For example, recently a lay worship leader was present within a community the Sunday following the death of the daughter of two long standing members of the congregation in a road accident involving a police car two days prior. As well as leading worship, the lay worship leader needed to sensitively address the needs of both the parents and a worshipping community in a significant state of shock.

3. The roles and recognition of non-accredited lay preachers and worship leaders

Although the Presbytery accredits both lay preachers and lay presiders as required within the polity and procedures of the Uniting Church, for all practical purposes a congregation or faith community would be unaware as to whether the person leading worship on any given Sunday was accredited or not. They would be equally unaware as to whether the worship leader was an accredited lay presider or an accredited lay preacher.

Both accredited lay preachers and lay presiders are commissioned into their ministries. Since many lay worship leaders are Elders and Church Councillors who see their worship leadership as part of their broader leadership responsibilities, they have previously been commissioned as Elders and Church Councillors.

However it is probable that a small number of lay worship leaders have not been specifically recognised for the roles that they play. A much larger number would have been commissioned or recognised in a home congregation, but have not been recognised in some of the congregations and faith communities in which they serve. Thus, there would be many situations where congregations and faith communities would be unaware of the accreditation status of their worship leaders. Those congregations simply appreciate the gift that is being given irrespective of the accreditation status of the provider.

4. Processes and standards for training and assessment of Lay Preachers

Within the New England North West Presbytery the training and assessment of lay preachers exists alongside training and formation opportunities for lay leaders more generally. The Presbytery seeks to provide a variety of training and formation opportunities for lay leaders. In this regard special mention

must be made of the formation opportunities for lay sacramental presiders since not all lay presiders are accredited lay preachers, but most accredited lay presiders also lead worship.

The Presbytery recognises that the formation of both lay preachers and lay presiders exists within the polity of the Uniting Church in Australia and the framework of its constitution and regulations. In accrediting both lay presiders and lay preachers the Presbytery has appreciated the distance education facility once provided by Coolamon College and the flexible learning opportunities provided by the soon to be discontinued Education for Life & Ministry (ELM) Centre of the NSW Synod. Some lay preachers and lay presiders have completed Coolamon College courses. Others have worked with the ELM Centre though more for lay preaching than lay presiding. In recent times the Presbytery has been able to conduct its own workshops for potential lay presiders and has worked with the ELM Centre to provide workshops complementing the formation process for lay preachers.

Arising out of this experience the Presbytery would wish to make certain observations and recommendations below.

5. Supervision and support for Lay Preachers

Providing appropriate supervision and support for lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers is one of the underlying principles for the recently adopted future directions strategy of the Presbytery. Under this strategy the Presbytery aims to ensure that each congregation and faith community is assisted to at least some extent by an ordained Minister of the Word or some other specified minister. This means that one to one oversight of lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers becomes possible.

In addition, the Presbytery within the New England Resource Ministry area has been experimenting with pastoral supervision groups for lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers. These groups have had varied success. Not every lay worship leader and accredited lay preacher regards oversight and support as being beneficial to the same extent. Also, because some lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers, being already busy in their professional or community involvements, are actually making a high commitment of time and energy to the task of preaching and leading worship, they are time poor and attending group supervision becomes problematic.

Nevertheless those who attend pastoral supervision regularly regard it as helpful not just for their development of their ministry, but also for establishing the networks that begin to

build a sense of cohesiveness into the worshipping life of the congregations and faith communities which they visit as worship leaders.

6. Experiences and Recommendations

The New England North West Presbytery places a very heavy reliance upon lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers to nourish the worship, witness and service of the its congregations, multi-centres and faith communities. Although this is a developing phenomenon, it is by no means one a recent one. Arising from our experience we believe that our voice is one of the important voices to which the Ministerial Education Committee needs to attend as it reviews various aspects of the ministry of lay preacher.

Accordingly we wish to bring the following matters to the attention of the Review.

1. The Presbytery prefers to imagine an approach to the formation of lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers which arises from affirmation, encouragement and the enjoyment of successful achievement of goals rather than an overly regulated, control over who is or who is not permitted to lead worship and preach in Uniting Church congregations and Faith Communities. It imagines accreditation as a recognition and reward for progress, marking steps along the way, rather than a minimum standard to be acquired before a person is permitted to preach and lead worship.
2. The Presbytery notes its growing reliance upon lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers. This makes the formation and support of those who offer their gifts in this way more important rather than less important. In order to contribute within the mission of God, our congregations and faith require the best that volunteer lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers can provide. In these *kairos* times, lowering standards would be misguided and counter-productive.
3. Instead a growing reliance upon lay worship leaders and accredited lay preachers requires a revaluing of the ministry of lay preaching which understands it as being critical to the survival and development of that part of the mission of God which the Uniting Church in Australia seeks to contribute. Lay preachers will need to be better informed and prepared if they are to rise to the challenges of our present time and nourish a people of God in a way that enables the community of faith to remain contextually relevant.

4. This means that a once-for-all-time training program leading to a once-for-all-time accreditation will have less value than it may have had in the past and that the formation of lay worship leaders, lay presiders and lay preachers (like that of the ordained and other specified ministries) will need to be set in a context of lifetime learning.
5. In fact an overly academic emphasis in a once-for-all-time training program provides an active deterrent to some folk who might otherwise seek to make themselves available as lay worship leaders. Training programs and formation opportunities that are overly intense and require too heavy a time commitment from participants actively discourage some from availing themselves of formation opportunities and training. They can be daunting for people who have not studied previously or not for a long time. Thus, placing too great an emphasis on the academic foundations for worship leadership and preaching at too high a level too soon in the formation process or even as a prerequisite before a lay person can contribute as a lay worship leader and lay preacher actually works to lower the standards in those congregations and faith communities which have become reliant upon lay worship leadership. If the church insists upon too high an initial standard for accreditation some worship leaders who are presently regularly involved in worship leadership may opt out.
6. Formation opportunities which are accessible, well-grounded intellectually, and relevant to discipleship practice will usually be valued by those who are offering to lead worship. Identifying a minimal acceptable foundation which can be enriched over a lifetime of formation opportunities will provide a better formed and trained team of lay worship leaders and lay preachers in the long term.
7. Within the New England North West Presbytery we are exploring the Discipleship Training program developed by the Rev Dr Chris Walker as one such accessible, intellectually well-grounded and practically oriented formation opportunity. Although it is not intended as a program to form lay worship leaders and preacher in particular, it nevertheless offers a breadth that traverses biblical, theological and historical themes. It provides a foundation for the enrichment components of lay preacher formation which necessarily must follow for a formal accreditation. A foundational formation opportunity of this kind would integrate well with the formation opportunities currently provided within the Presbytery for potential lay sacramental providers enabling a complementary approach to the formation of lay worship leaders.

8. The *foundation course plus enrichment units* model reduces the time pressures that lay preacher candidates can experience. Currently candidates can feel a pressure to complete the academic components in the shortest possible time in order to achieve accreditation and exercise a ministry. Setting a minimal standard as a foundation encourages candidates to take formation seriously, manage it within a balanced lifestyle while making a contribution as a worship leader and lay preacher albeit one who has still to become fully accredited.
9. Enrichment units should develop the practical gifts and skills of the candidate, nourish and develop their personal spirituality for their ministry and provide opportunities for intellectual growth and reflection in the areas of biblical studies and theology.
10. Whilst the existing modules of current lay preacher courses would readily fulfil the need for enrichment units, the Presbytery wishes for the opportunity to integrate our current formation and training opportunities into those modules. For example, each year the New England North West Presbytery seeks to provide a seminar relevant to the lectionary for that year. Currently such activities become an additional pressure competing for the time and energies of already busy and often over committed people. This is a particular problem when candidates are working alone using distance education materials and would benefit from the interaction and sharing that takes place in a seminar.
11. However there is nothing sacrosanct about existing lay preacher courses. The movement away from the *once-for-all-time training program leading to a once-for-all-time accreditation* model creates opportunities to rethink the character and structure of existing lay preacher courses. In this rethinking important questions need to be addressed, for example:
 - i. Do lay preachers really need to have the intensive overview of the bible which current subjects in Old Testament and New Testament supply? Or would it be more helpful to assist people understand something of the character of the biblical literature: From whence it comes, how it has informed faith over the centuries and how it continues to inform faith today?
 - ii. Similarly, do the current broad brush subjects in Theology and Christology really enable lay preacher candidates to gain the depth of theological insight that will enable them to illuminate the faith of those for whom they lead worship and preach? Or would a more focussed approach that explored theological and

Christological themes from the vantage point of the Basis of Union be of greater value?

- iii. Since in our Presbytery lay preachers play a growing role in pastoral leadership, should lay preacher courses continue to ignore modules in practical theology and pastoral care?**
- 12. The enrichment program that leads to the accreditation of lay preachers in the future will need to be far more flexible and traverse a wide array of issues and interests than the once-for-all-time training program of the past. The accredited lay preacher of the future will have reflected upon a range of more focussed modules traversing a wider range of interests and issues than the classical courses in Old Testament, New Testament, Theology and Christology allow. For example: One accredited lay preacher may have completed modules in Understanding the bible, Matthew's gospel, the Psalms, the Basis of Union, ethical issues in modern agriculture, and listening skills for pastoral care; another may have completed modules in Understanding the bible, the Uniting Church Manual of Meetings, Romans – Galatians, the funeral service, and Prophecy in the Biblical literature and received credit for participating in the Presbytery lay sacramental presiders workshop.**
- 13. Within the enrichment program attention would need to be paid to core and non-core components and the way in which balance is achieved across the diversity of options available.**
- 14. In order to provide enrichment modules that are relevant to our particular lay worship leader / lay preacher candidates, as well as integrating our own training courses and formation opportunities, Presbyteries like New England North West would be seeking to access courses from a wide array of institutions and formation providers. The maintenance of a list of relevant providers and course modules that the Presbytery and its lay worship leader / lay preacher candidates can access is critically important.**