

Ministry Future in the LCA NZ

That the word of the Lord may flourish among us today

Project Progress Report for the Church – 4th May 2023

By Greg Pietsch; last updated 11/5/2023

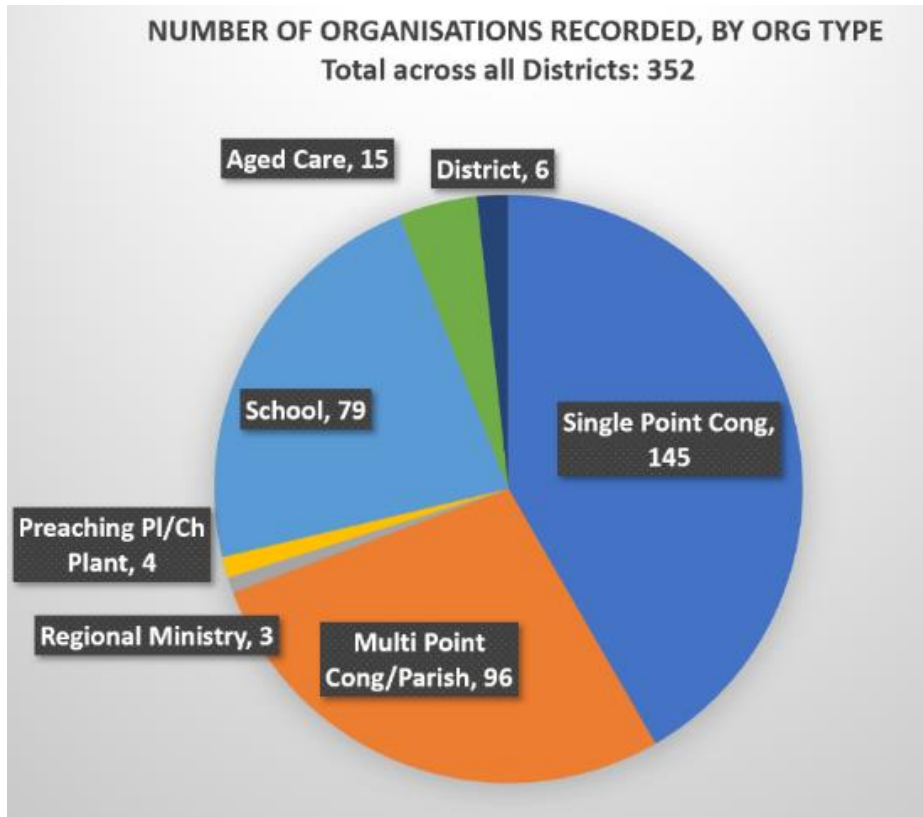
The Lord told them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.' (Luke 10:2)

Introduction

1. **The Ministry Future project has been established by the College of Bishops**, with the support of the General Church Board, **to consider and develop a coordinated response to the decreasing number of pastors in the LCA NZ and the changing nature of our communities**. Our large cohort of Baby Boomer pastors are retiring and only a very small number of pastoral ministry students are graduating. This reflects demographic change across the church, with smaller families and fewer of the younger generations practising the faith and offering themselves for vocational service in the church. The aging of many church communities also shows in pressure to finance a pastor in the same way as the past. The Ministry Future project aims to help the church respond to these changes in ways which still **lets the word of the Lord flourish among us today**, for it is the word of God which brings us Christ and all his benefits.
2. **The difficulties facing the church are clearly evident** – a large number of pastoral vacancies, long periods in vacancy with frustration over the call process which therefore appears 'broken', communities struggling to afford a pastor even in the usual parish structure, large colleges unable to have a school pastor, and more. Yet ministry needs and mission opportunities continue in the Lord's harvest field.
3. **Each District has been responding as best it can**, using the resources and possibilities available to it such as drawing on retired pastors and, in some cases, licencing lay people to undertake what would otherwise be tasks of an ordained pastor. This is permitted for special emergency or mission situations, but now there's a need to consider and design a more regular church-wide response.
4. The College of Bishops therefore **tasked the Ministry Future project with developing:**
 1. a **regional** rather than solely congregation or parish approach to organising pastoral ministry,
 2. suitable **pathways** into general and specialised service – both lay and ordained, and
 3. a regular way of **ordering** the service of lay people involved in word and/or sacrament ministry. This is in addition to the existing preparation and call of Specific Ministry Pastors (SMPs) who have a reduced level of training for particular/specific service in the church by contrast with the more comprehensively trained General Ministry Pastors (GMPs).
5. The project **began with gathering data** on the present situation **and shaping broad proposals** in response. This report shares these discoveries, with the permission of the College of Bishops, and presents the way ahead. Further consultation and collaborative response design will continue through 2023, with reporting to the October 2024 General Convention.

Some Data

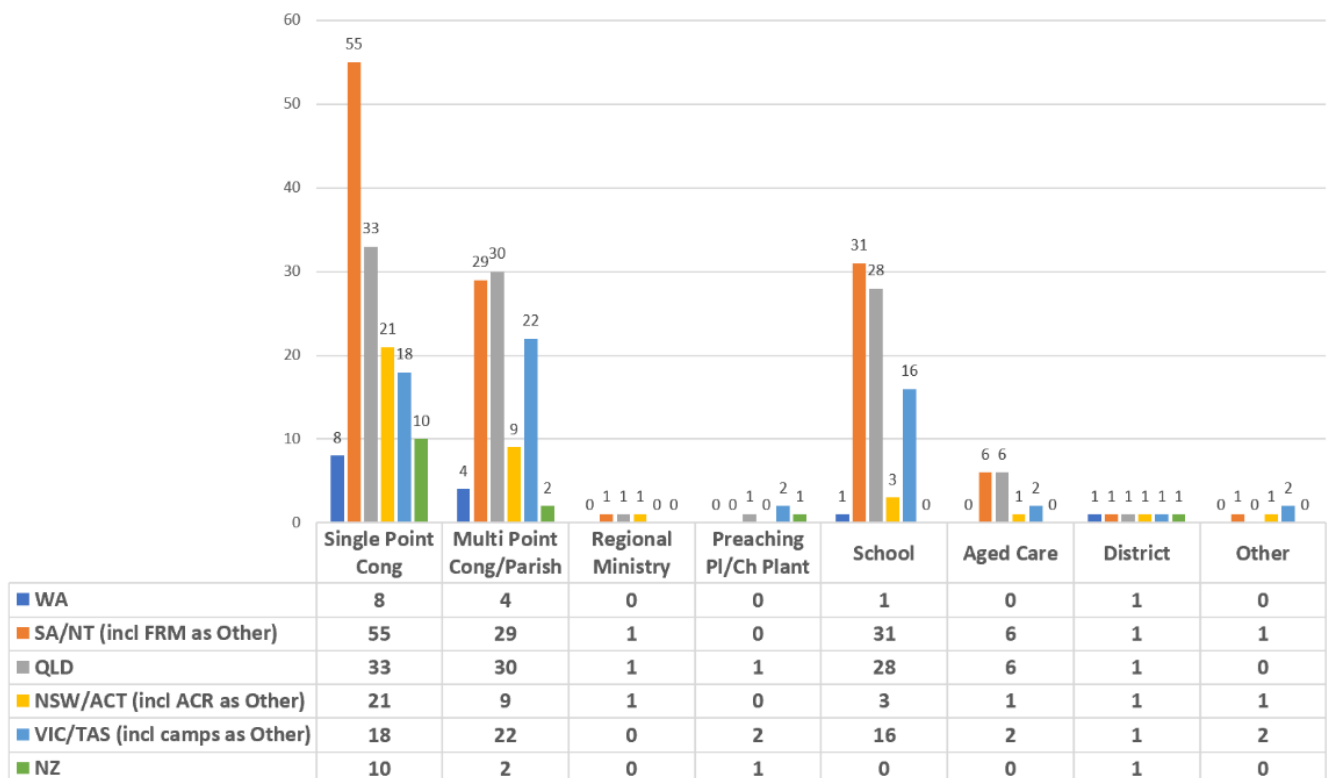
6. **Data was gathered from each of the LCA NZ's six District on individual pastoral ministry positions**, defined as actual roles within the church's congregation and agencies directly participating in the delivery of word and sacrament, or supporting and enabling that in some pastoral-content way. This was intended to capture the 'demand' side of the equation. For each position, the name and type of person filling that position was identified – or if it was in vacancy – thus capturing the 'supply' side of the equation. Also for each position the name and type of organisation being served was captured. Church-wide/LCA NZ positions have been excluded at this stage, to get a clear position of on-the-ground ministries. In all, details of 656 ministry positions across 352 organisations/faith communities, served by 583 individuals, were recorded as at early December 2022. Data was to the best of each District's knowledge at the time, so things will have changed since then and there will be a small margin of error, but this won't be material to the conclusions drawn.
7. In regard to **the worshipping communities and agencies** which the ministry positions serve, here is a chart of the overall number according to their organisation type. Note that there are fewer Preaching Places/Church Plants than expected because they've generally not been separately identified from their main/sending congregations; also note that the communities making up parishes/multi-point congregations were not separately identified.



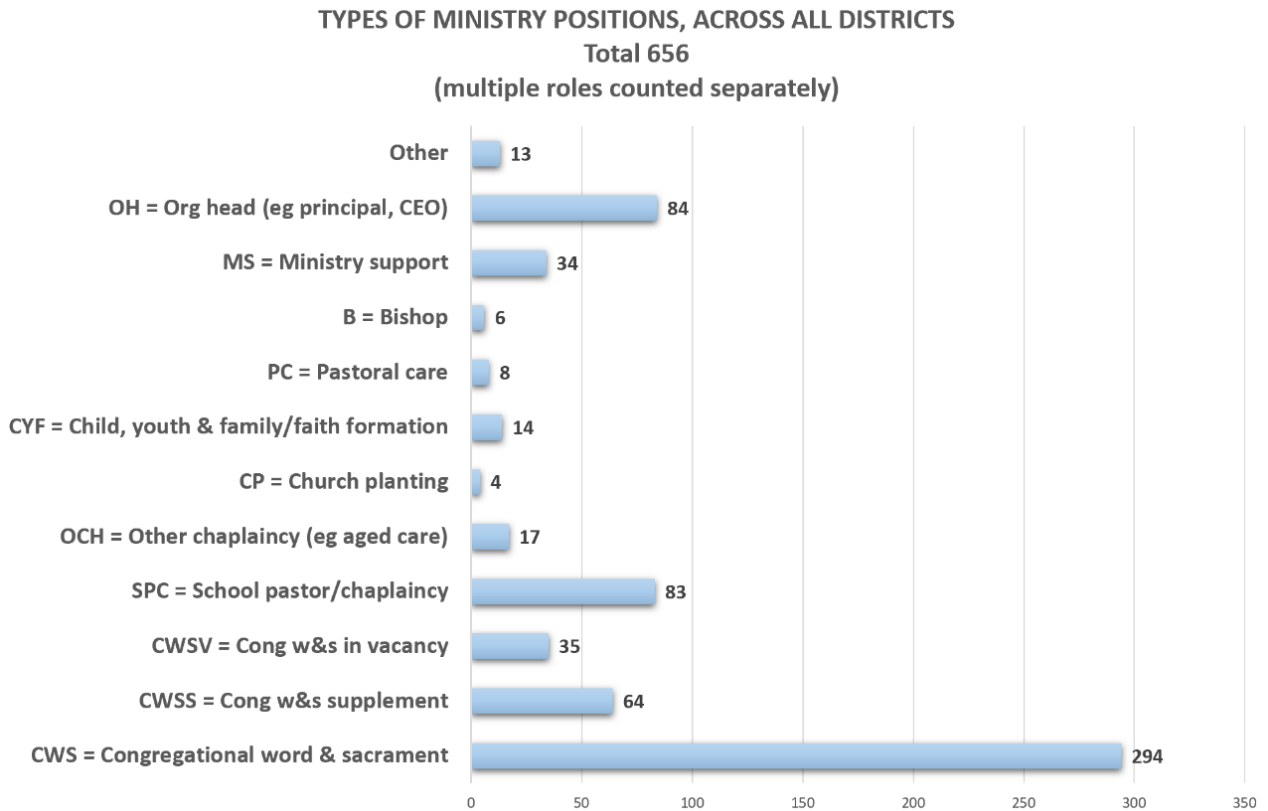
We can see that of the 352 different entities recorded, 248 or 71% are local worshipping communities, made up of Single Point Congregations (145 or 42%), Multi-Point Congs/Parishes (96 or 27%). Regional Ministries (only 3 or 1%) and Preaching Places/Church Plants (only 4 or 1%). The rest of the communities recorded were Schools (79 or 23%), Aged Care (15 or 4%) and the Districts themselves (6 or 2%).

8. Here is a **breakdown by District**...

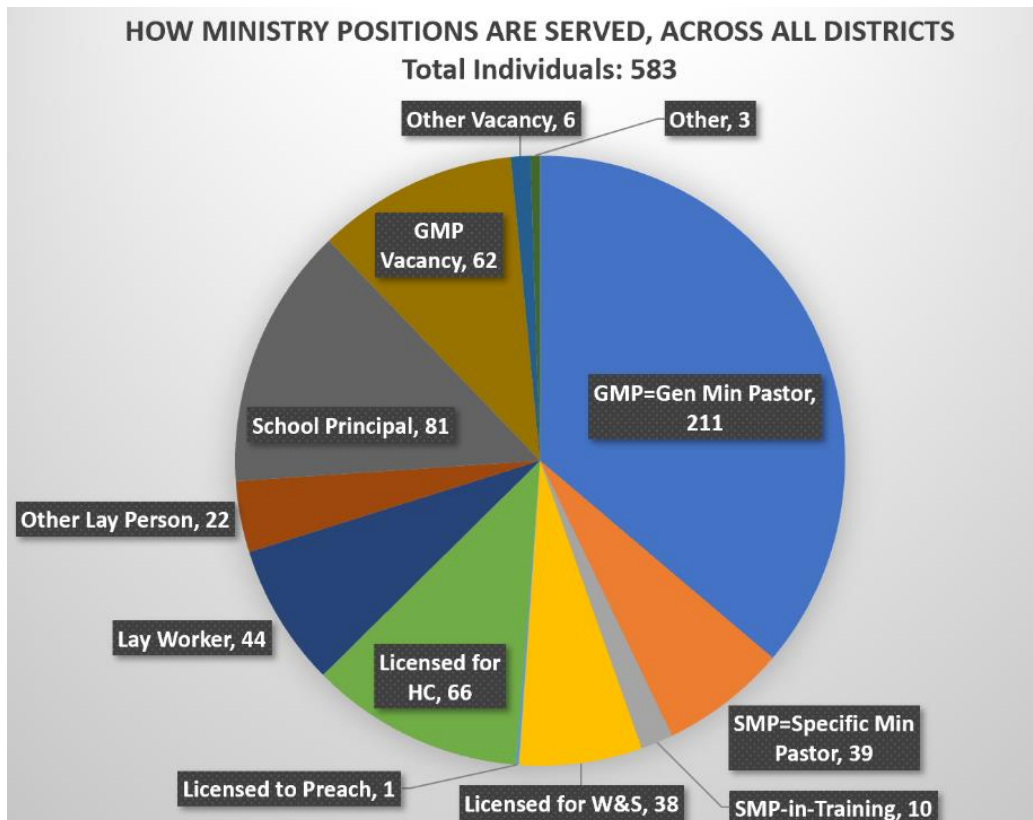
NUMBER OF ORGANISATIONS RECORDED, BY ORG TYPE DISTRICTS SEPARATED



9. Here are **the different ministry position types**, aggregated across all Districts (note that CWSV below are mostly lay licensed lay positions for a vacancy, while CWSS are licensed lay positions to supplement ministry when a pastor is in place)...



10. In regard to **the people serving** at the data gathering time, 211 General Ministry Pastors (GMPs) were recorded in service, with 62 GMP vacancies – a vacancy rate of 23%, clearly very high and increasing with retirements far exceeding new graduations. 19 GMPs were serving in roles across the Districts other than Congregation Word & Sacrament or Schools, mostly in Bishop or Ministry Support positions...

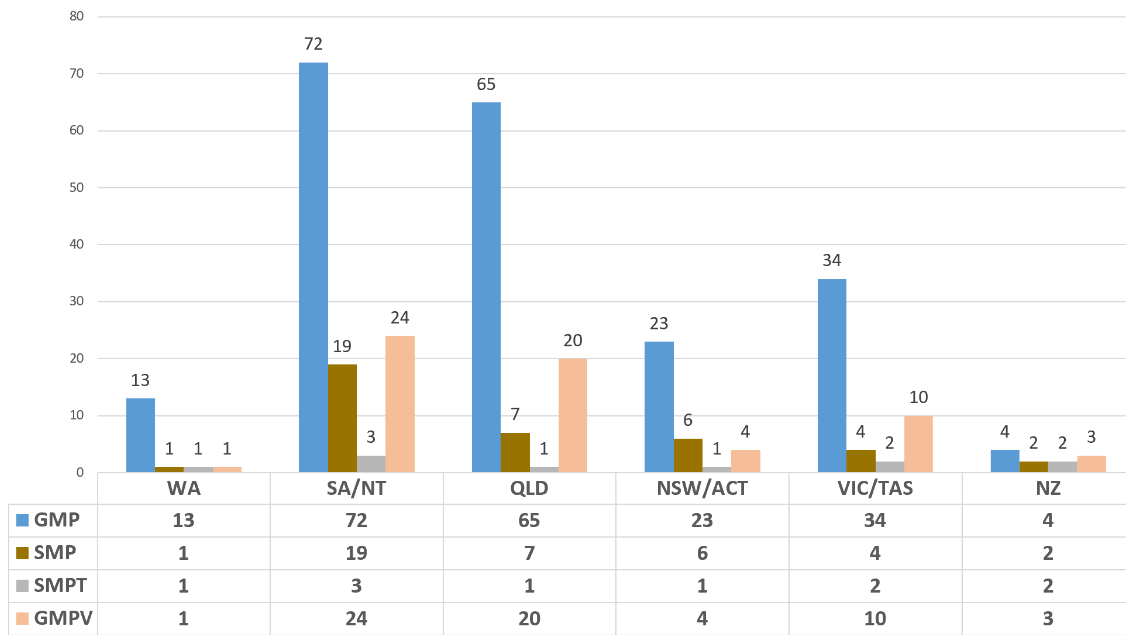


11. Focusing in on **pastors and pastoral vacancies** we get the following...

PASTORS SERVING IN DISTRICTS, BY TYPE - PLUS VACANCIES

Total individuals: 260; GMP vacancies: 62

(multiple roles removed)

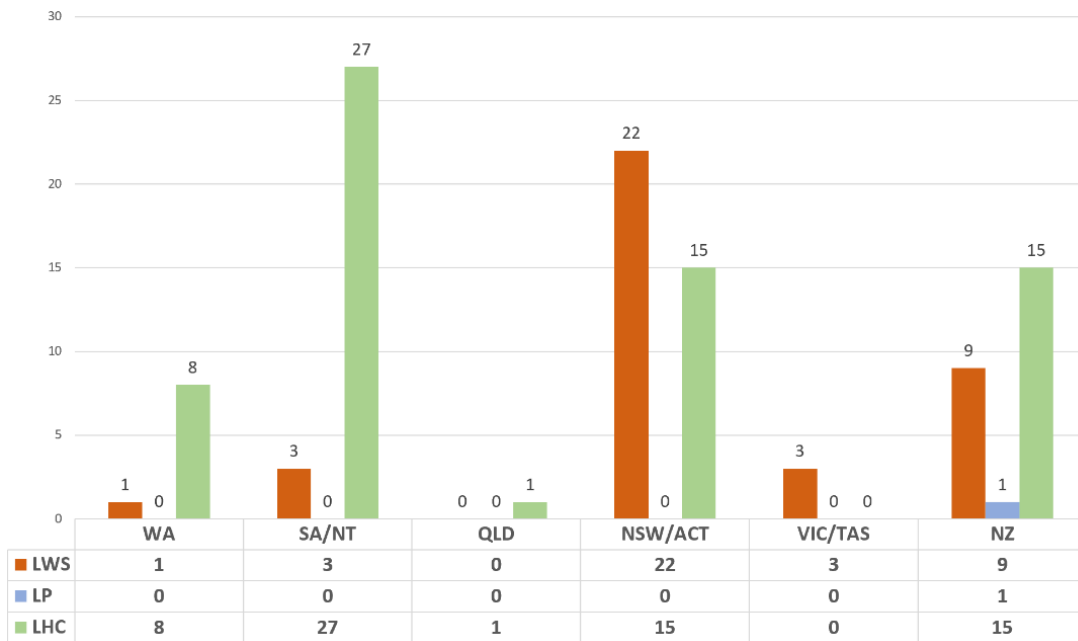


Note that in the SA/NT figures above at that time are 1 GMP, 1 GMP Vacancy, 17 SMPs and 1 SMP in training (SMPT) serving the Fink River Mission, meaning that, for example, apart from FRM, SA/NT has 2 SMPs. There is a relatively small overall number of SMPs in training (SMPTs - 10).

12. Staying with how ministry positions are served, but turning to **licenced lay people** we see the following...

LICENCED LAY PEOPLE SERVING IN DISTRICTS

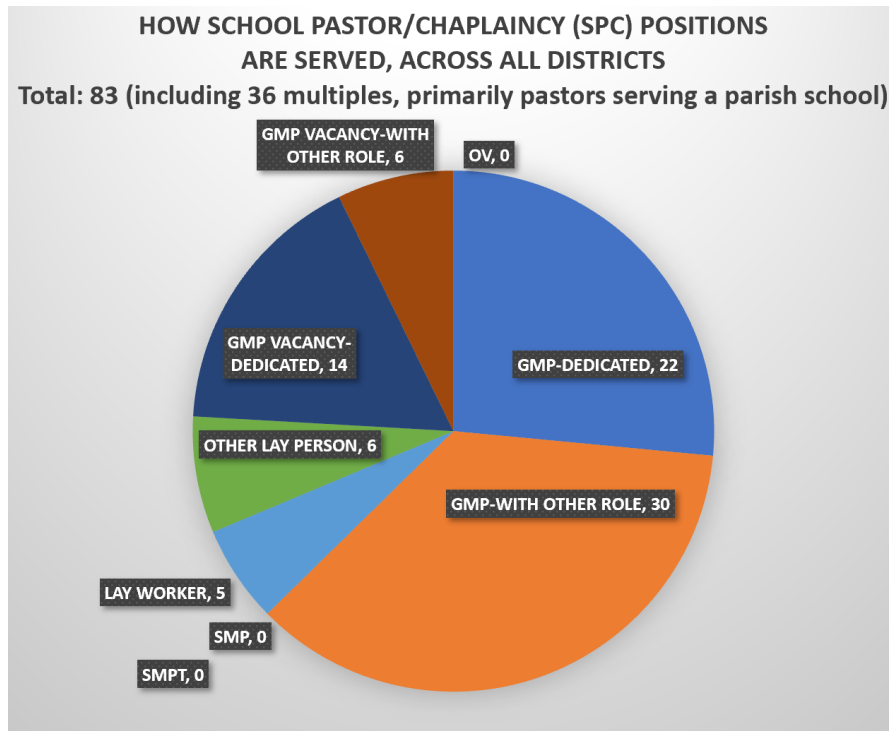
Total individuals: 105



This clearly shows the contrast between approaches to licencing in SA/NT (30 in total), NSW/ACT (35), NZ (24) and WA (8) compared to Qld (1), with Vic/Tas having a relatively small number too (3) – giving impetus to developing a common approach to this.

Note too that NZ has 25 licenced lay people compared to its only 4 GMPs (previous chart), along with its 3 GMP vacancies and 4 SMPs/SMPs-in-training. NSW/ACT has 35 licenced lay people compared to its 23 GMPs and 4 GMP vacancies – showing these District's strong reliance on licencing.

13. Looking at **who is serving just the School Pastor/Chaplain (SPC) ministry position**, with vacancies...

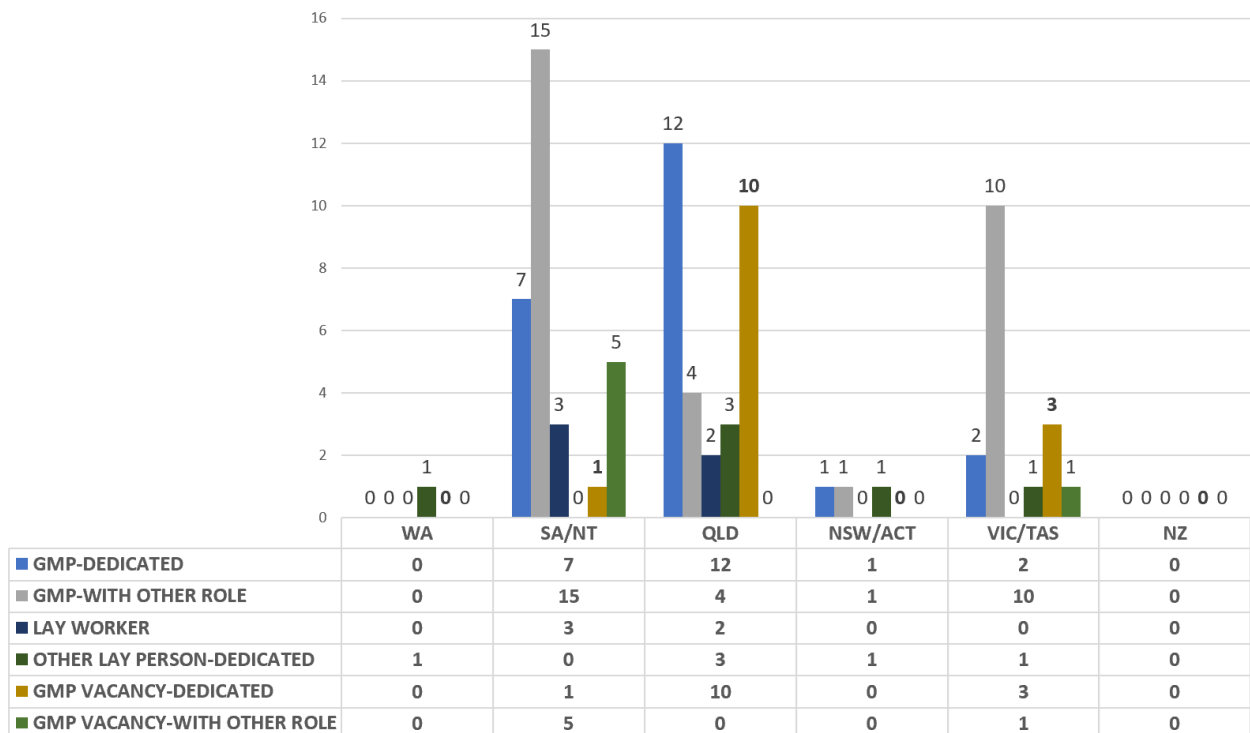


There are only 22 GMPs working in dedicated school positions (at 18.7FTE) with 30 taking a school pastor role as part of another role (usually parish pastor, ie in parishes with a primary school). However of the 20 GMP vacancies, 14 of these are in dedicated school positions (at 12.4FTE) with only 6 coming with another role – showing the severe vacancy situation for dedicated school pastor positions.

Also note that not all school chaplaincy positions filled by lay people have been captured, so these numbers in fact will be higher.

14. Breaking this down by those serving School Pastor/Chaplain (SPC) positions **by District**, with vacancies...

HOW SCHOOL PASTOR/CHAPLAINCY POSITIONS (SPC) ARE SERVED
Total positions: 83, including 20 vacancies



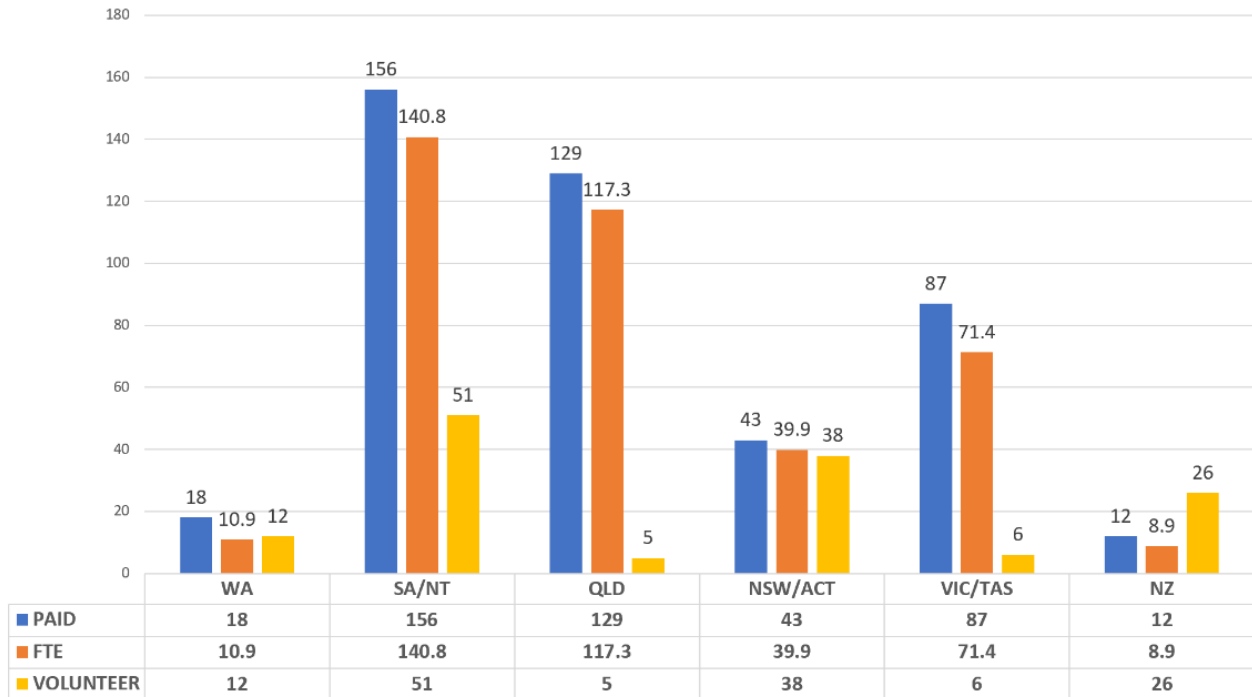
Qld has a far higher proportion of GMPs dedicated to school positions than those whose service is attached to another role, whereas the situation is reversed in SA/NT and Vic/Tas – with Qld also then experiencing the impact of a large number of GMP school ministry vacancies. This probably reflects the large number of P-12

colleges in Qld compared to primary schools. Conversely SA/NT and Vic/Tas have a higher proportion of school ministry by parish pastors with primary schools.

15. Finally it is important to **recognise the service of volunteers** – we thank God for them – with the following chart showing those serving ministry positions who are paid, with their Full Time Equivalence (FTE), and those who are volunteers – noting that the usual volunteer roles (eg as pastoral assistants/elders, Sunday School teachers, musicians, church councillors etc) were not captured at all...

**HOW MINISTRY POSITIONS ARE SERVED, BY PAID AND VOLUNTEER
(multiple roles removed)**

Total paid: 445, FTE 389.1; total volunteer: 138



16. **In conclusion**, the data gathered gives evidence of the critical situation in regards to pastor supply and some of the responses being taken. It helps understand the task ahead, showing that proposed strategies other than licencing lay people are not clearly identified or developed. It therefore reinforces the need and urgency of this project and informs some of the work to be done.

The Way Ahead for Congregations

17. So **how does the church respond** to this situation and even turn it into creative opportunity in the Lord’s gospel mission, avoiding the feast-or-famine we now experience when a pastor accepts a call elsewhere? How do we let the word of the Lord flourish among us today?
18. **One way is to multiply the ministry of our pastors by working more in team across a larger number of communities – so-called regionalisation.** Regionalisation envisages a zone or region of congregations and parishes being served with the full range of word and sacrament ministry *collectively*, using a team approach led by an overseeing GMP with the possibility of other GMPs or SMPs in the team as well. Each congregation/worshipping community will continue with its own lay leadership and volunteer ministry roles of the traditional kind, possibly supplemented by a local SMP or designated lay person with a pastoral leadership role. In this way a good standard of pastoral ministry can be brought to the whole region, spreading the ministry of now-scarce GMPs further while maintaining achievable expectations and enriching their service by a team approach. Periods of pastoral vacancy will have less impact as the ministry team can continue its service supported by an acting senior pastor from the team or elsewhere. Retired pastors, if available for service, can be built into the regional team without it being dependent on them, remembering that their service is usually limited to Sunday worship services rather than broader aspects of congregational life. Regionalisation also responds to the financial pressures faced by many parishes and the limits of feasible re-alignment, and provides the opportunity for more collectivised administration, worship support, ministry sharing and the like. Local specialist ministries, such as school or aged care chaplaincy, can be built into the

plan as well, providing GMP oversight of lay ministries there. And new church planting can be parented within the region as well.

19. **One example from another denomination** networks eight communities together like this, five traditional congregations and three church plants/mission communities. It has three ordained ministers – one serves three of the congregations and the thirty different small groups across the whole region; another serves the three new communities as a church planter; and the third serves the remaining two congregations and as team leader for overall planning, coordination, reporting to governance and the like. Lay people serve various roles as well, and there are some community-faced ministries too, such as a parish nurse and a café. Administration and other support is provided across the whole network rather than by each individual community. There's change involved, but it's been a blessing to the communities, bringing a sense of joy in closer relationship with neighbouring communities and the opportunities that come from working together. **Our LifeWay Church in New South Wales**, with the central hub in Epping, is perhaps the fullest expression of regionalisation in the LCA, with five locations across Sydney, western Sydney, Newcastle, and Wollongong, served by a team of five pastors (not all full-time), with two SMPs (one Chinese), a Cambodian pastor, a lay church-planter and multiple lay ministry coordinators.
20. Clearly Regionalisation **permits specialisation** for particular ministry opportunities, and the benefit of **collegiality** in a ministry team vs the sole pastor model. There's also the blessing of **joy** in close partnering with neighbouring communities, and **continuity** in ordained ministry if/when one pastor leaves (with adjustments in the usual ministry pattern). Regionalisation invites a more **stream-lined approach** to administration and communications too, and opens up the possibility of **combined mission work**.
21. **Conversations between neighbouring congregations about closer cooperation are accelerating across the LCA**, especially when pastoral vacancies occur. These conversations and the journey toward a regional approach are being facilitated by District bishops and mission directors.
22. While the shape of each particular region will depend on the local context, the Ministry Future project is working with District mission directors to develop a standard model as a resource. **The regional ministry model will outline things like this:**
 - A Regional Ministry Agreement identifying the congregations and agencies involved, its finance and governance arrangements (akin to a parish budget and council), its congregational worship and ministry patterns and expectations, any agency ministry expectations, the ministry personnel structure (ordained and lay) and provisioning (salary, housing, costs etc) with responsibilities and accountability mechanisms, a ministry planning and coordination mechanism, mechanisms for periodic Regional Ministry Agreement review and adjustment etc, and District and wider-church support for this.
 - A GMP as lead pastor called to oversee and support ministry provision across the whole region.
 - One or more other GMPs called to serve word and sacrament ministry across the whole region or parts of it. In the absence of the lead pastor GMP, one may be asked to serve as acting lead pastor.
 - One or more SMPs called from within the region to serve word and sacrament ministry across the whole region or parts of it.
 - Multiple supporting lay roles (technically called 'auxiliary offices' in some LCA documents) with designated ministry responsibilities across the whole region or parts of it.
 - Other lay positions in supporting roles.
23. There will be both challenges and opportunities in moving to a regional ministry approach, keeping in mind that the primary purpose is to let the word of the Lord flourish among us today – and to enable this by the ministry of both pastors and lay alike. Thank God that lay people are responding by taking up ministry service in many ways – service which needs affirmation, training and support. So **another response to our situation is to understand, appreciate and advance the service of lay and ordained alike with education and training to match – pathways into service and for service development**. For example, a regional ministry lead pastor will need particularly developed leadership skills, and the others in the team will need corresponding team player skills. We already have a well-defined pathway into service as a Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) for those called to such a ministry by their local community. There are other specialisations for which pathways have been developed more recently too – for aged care and community service chaplains, schools ministry personnel and church planters. Australian Lutheran College (ALC) is actively responding to needs as they are identified, with a focus on utilising skilled practitioners as teachers within a distributed learning approach, ie learning in one's own local ministry context. The Ministry Future project hopes to collect together the diversity of ministry roles and training in an LCA Ministry Framework so that people can clearly see the possibilities and opportunities

for them and their community. Included in that, of course, is comprehensive training and development as much-needed General Ministry Pastors.

24. We also thank God for the lay folk who serve in ways usually reserved for pastors under licence by their District bishop – most likely by conducting holy communion during a vacancy or sometimes in support of a pastor serving multiple distant locations. The church permits this for emergency or particular mission opportunities. It's been taken up in some of our Districts more than others. The question now is **how best to regularise or rearrange licensing – how to order it** – for the ongoing life of the church in today's context. The College of Bishops have asked the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) to contribute to this as part of the project. Whatever is done needs to have the blessing of the whole church, be transparent and supported, with good training and oversight of those involved.

The Way Ahead for Schools and other Ministry Agencies

25. The shortage of pastors means that our large schools are increasingly going without a school pastor, turning us to more and more lay people for senior chaplain roles. This raises new challenges in our ministry and mission in and through schools. The **formation and support of lay chaplains and other ministry personnel**, some of whom come with a limited understanding of our Lutheran confession and ethos, becomes critical. Thankfully Lutheran Education Australia and our three schools Regions are responding – with a recent LEA Ministry Personnel Accreditation policy and with formation leaders (ordained and lay) with substantial theological credentials. The Ministry Future project is engaging with school system leadership to better understand these efforts and consider further responses. Specialist formation for parish pastors serving as local school pastors should not be forgotten either, as they enter and serve the world of the school alongside congregation ministry.
26. The central nature and ministry function of **school principals themselves** needs to be noted, along with **Region and national Directors**. While not formally serving a ministry of the word in their primary role, each have large influence over the spiritual and confessional identity of the schools in their care, and hence on our church's ministry in and through them. The same challenge exists to understand, endorse, promote and support these valued auxiliary offices of the church.
27. A similar situation is occurring in the church's **aged care and community service agencies**. Again, a chaplaincy accreditation policy has recently been prepared, and the Ministry Future project is engaging leadership to better understand and support these efforts, and to consider other responses.
28. Other specialist training, support and accreditation is being put in place for **church planters** too, through the LCANZ's New and Renewing Churches group, in addition to our on-going provision for LCANZ **lay workers more generally**, wherever they serve. And the LCANZ Church Worker Support department assists both those serving this way and the communities which call or appoint them.

The Next Phase

29. The first six months of this project have been focused on getting a reasonably detailed picture of the church's situation, and shaping a general way ahead in the three areas requested by the College of Bishops, ie regionalisation (beyond a parish), pathways (for training and support), and ordering (of licensing and other responses). This now **moves to collaborative response design**, working with responsible leaders across the church, with continued accountability to the College of Bishops and church-wide reporting to the 2024 General Convention. We do this with the hope and prayer that *the word of the Lord may flourish among us today*.
30. So **please pray for this project** as it seeks to support and develop our Lord's ministry of word and sacrament among his people, and his mission to the world. Pray as Jesus instructed: *Lord of the harvest, you direct us to pray for workers for the plentiful harvest which awaits, and promise that faith grows and bears fruit where your word is sown, so please let this project multiply and equip workers – lay and ordained – so that your life-giving word flourishes among us in the very changed church and world we live in today. Amen.*
And **look forward in confidence for the church is the Lord's** and he is always with us for eternal blessing.

Greg Pietsch, Project Leader – 4th May 2023