

EASTERN REGIONAL REVIEW

SUMMARY REPORT OF THE INTER-CONGREGATIONAL TASK FORCE FROM MELBOURNE'S EAST

Background

Following an approach to the District from Outer Eastern Lutheran Church which, at the time was looking at the imminent retirement of its pastor, the District established an inter-congregational task force with the objective;

'To identify whether God's mission in Melbourne's eastern suburbs would be strengthened by a regional cooperative approach among the LCA congregations and if so, and within current constraints, propose a route or routes as to how this could be achieved.'

The task force included the District Bishop and representatives of Nunawading-Waverley, Doncaster-Ivanhoe, Outer Eastern, Ringwood-Knox and Greensborough-Thomastown congregations. At the time of establishment, Box Hill was engaged with issues surrounding relocation to a new site and was unable to engage but has done so more recently. Moorabbin-Dandenong participated as an observer. The District Bishop appointed John Paech an ex-District, and General Church Council member as Chair.

The work of the task force was aided by consultants, Pastor Brett Kennett, District Pastor for Congregational Support and Rev Phil McCredden, Principal Consultant at Ecclesia Leadership.

The Church Post-Christendom

God's mission and ministry to and among his people has been blessed since the early church. The term 'Christendom' describes the major influence on western civilisations that the church enjoyed, following the decision of the Roman Emperor in 313 CE to cease persecution of Christians.

Commentators have widely observed how 'under Christendom', for approximately 1700 years, Christianity was accorded the status of being a key feature of society. This is no longer the case.

Two points of reference help explain the situation. In its 2021 report 'The Future of the Church in Australia', highly respected McCrindle Research Pty Ltd, makes the following points;

"...Now, the social landscape of Australia continues to change, driven by demographic forces like increasing cultural diversity, a growing and ageing population, increasing urbanisation and declining religious affiliation. It is important for the Christian church of today to explore and understand these changes in order to reach, serve and support Australians now and into the future."

"...The Census data reflects these changes showing that while Christianity is still the dominant religion in Australia, in recent years affiliation with the religion has declined. In 2006 almost two thirds of Australians (64%) identified with Christianity. A decade later that proportion decreased to 52% (2016). Over the same period, the number of Australians identifying with 'no-religion' has risen from 19% (2006) to 30% (2016) ..."

The ABC/Melbourne University 'Australia Talks' survey which was undertaken earlier this year involved some 60,000 respondents across the nation, and has been acclaimed as a highly representative process, identified that 41 per cent of Australians don't trust religious leaders "at all", a 6% rise since the survey was last conducted in 2019. It also identified that the distrust is even more significant among young people: almost half (47 per cent) of 18–24 year-olds don't trust religious leaders "at all". That's a jump of 15 percentage points in just two years.

'Post-Christendom' can be characterised where dominant societal drivers of values and morals have from a Christian perspective moved away from the Judeo-Christian ten commandments as a base; and a significant proportion of the population identifies in a census as 'no religion'.

This is the environment in which ERR congregations and almost all western churches now function. It certainly challenges the understood, and generally loved, model of today's congregation and the way in which they have historically gone about their ministry and mission.

The challenges which the church now faces require discussion well beyond the ERR's terms of reference and it is the considered position of the task force that a region-wide forum which would include the schools as well as congregations would best serve to address these immense challenges.

ERR Work Program - Major research goals

Understanding the Circumstances of Congregations Now and in the Future

Member congregations were invited to respond in writing to the following questions.

- Why does our congregation exist?
- What are the fundamentals of congregational life?
- What are our projected congregational circumstances if there is no change?
- What problem-solving approaches are we taking to technical problems?
- What adaptive approaches are we learning and applying to missional activity?

Not all provided responses but those which did, but all responses are included in the full report.

The LCA NZ's Position on Pastoral Supply

Bishop Lester provided information on the policies for General Ministry Pastors (GMP) who typically have been trained through Australian Lutheran College and Specific Ministry Pastors (SMP) who generally have been identified by a local congregation where there is unlikely to be approval for a GMP call and where the the SMP receives training and functions under the oversight of a GMP. The "specific" nature relates to being appointed for a specific time in a specific location. Further, in emergency situations a 'Word and Sacrament' licence may be granted by the Bishop.

The task force was made aware of the increasing number of vacant parishes and the low numbers of pastors graduating and the increasing numbers of parishes being permanently deemed as 'parishes without a pastor.'

Other Regional Cooperation Experiences

A number of case studies were undertaken across a range of experiences. These included

- Multipoint parish – number of preaching places - single governance body
- Multipoint parish – number of congregations – multiple governance bodies
- Collegiate approaches whilst retaining existing structure, including pastor sharing as occurred between Doncaster-Invanhoe and OELC, and the Greater Geelong Lutheran Leaders' Forum .

The LCA NZ's Congregational Revitalisation and Congregation Planting Approach

The task force received significant input from Pastor Brett Kennett and Dean Eaton, who at the time was on the staff of the LCA NZ's New and Renewing Churches department. One key features of Pastor Kennett's work was, *"... for revitalisation to occur, a congregation needs to recognize the signals of decline, or the potential for decline, and commit to a process of regularly, prayerfully, reviewing its ministry and mission so that it can move from the decline phase to the formation or development phase once again..."*

And, Dean presented the 'Sending Church' model which involves an existing LCA NZ congregation committing to become a 'sending church'. The process involves coaching for the members, its leadership and its pastor,

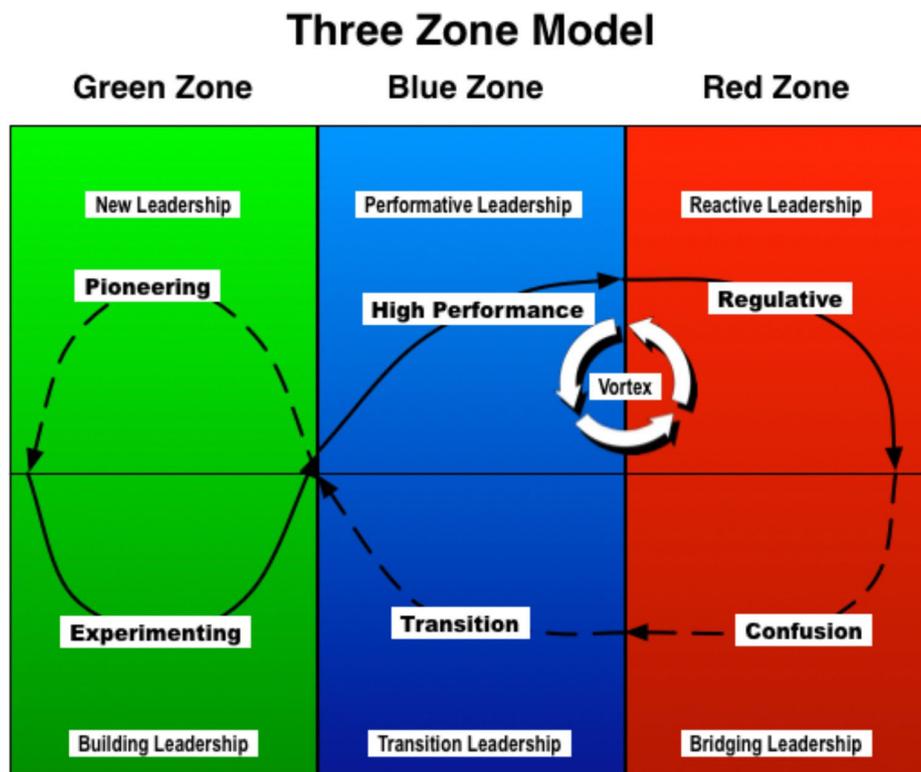
so that the congregation is able to identify, nurture and release teams of lay people into local mission. The focus of these lay-teams will vary depending on natural relational affinity between the team and the unchurched members of the community that God leads them to. The focus may also be geographically removed from the sending church. Key to the process is the development of one-on-one relationships between team members and their non-churched neighbour. Over time, and by the Spirit's power, the model sees small but dynamic faith communities created. The model requires, of course, much intentional support, and this is provided by the LCA's New and Renewing Churches Department and in the Vic Tas District, the Pastor for Congregational Support. Key is for the sending church to grow in its outward focus on those not in the pews on Sunday but who are in need of the gospel.

Digital Ministry

Although not part of the terms of reference, given Covid, considerable resource was applied in this area. The COVID lockdown saw a rapid, yet varied uptake in technology-driven worship and communication across the region. Given this experience, the Task Force formed the view that there is an increasing need for a digital presence and a recognition that this new channel for mission and ministry is here to stay. It was emphasized that technology must be used to support, rather than replace and that the 'local connection' was critical.

Setting the scene for a new way of thinking

Given that congregations are now well and truly functioning in a post-Christendom era, and what has been done in the past is now no longer working, the task force found two organizational models both challenging and instructive. The discussion on these is amplified in the full report, but a preliminary explanation will be attempted here.

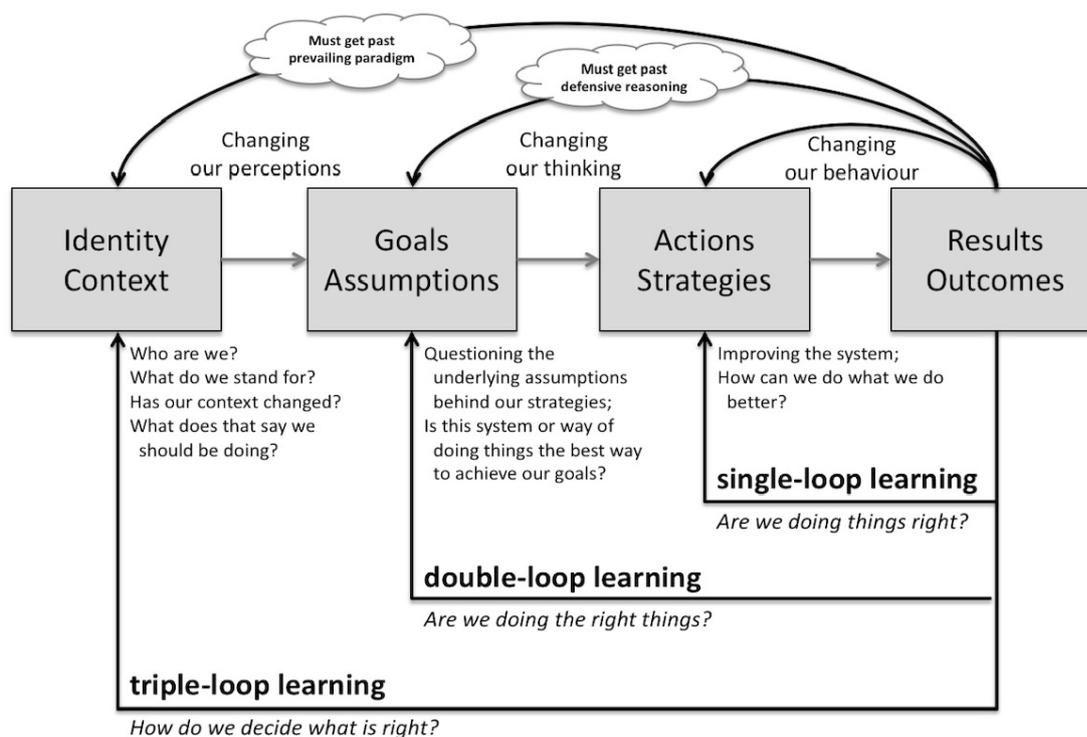


Source: *The Missional Leader*, by Roxburgh and Romanuk

The first as set out in the diagram above, identifies three stages which typically most congregations go through, and given that the authors refer to it as the “Three Zone Model of Missional Leadership”, the styles of leadership required during each stage. Like any model, it is critical to understand that this model addresses principles and not to get bogged down too much with detail as it may apply to a particular congregation.

Many congregations in the region have spent long periods in this high performance space, however some now find themselves heading into the top red space, the reactive zone. At this point they are often trying to identify what needs to be changed, given that the things which have been done successfully in the past may not be working as they once did. ERR congregations variously expressed their position as in the ‘vortex’, that is, going round and round with the understanding that what was being done is no longer appropriate, but not being able to plan a way forward.

The second model is known as the ‘Triple Loop Learning Model’.



Individual and Organizational Learning (with acknowledgement to Chris Argyris) by DR PHELAN

The lower portion of the diagram identifies each loop by posing a question. The single-loop and sometimes, the double loop questions have traditionally been the basis of how a congregation plans for the future, but in many cases the key question has been limited primarily to single-loop thinking.

The model challenges all congregations to look to the questions of ‘are we doing the right things’ and ‘how do we decide what is right’. These questions flow from ‘clouds’ at the top of the diagram, which conceptualize the need to move from what may be described as defensive thinking and move past our prevailing paradigms.

Whilst the model is challenging in the issues it raises, its simplicity lies, in effect by asking a congregation what really needs to occur in order to move from the vortex identified in the Three Zone Model. The model proposes that the congregation must come to a full understanding of the context in which it operates, and

the nature of its own identity. Only then can it make decisions on how it will find God's presence in the community as it supports God's mission.

The task force considers these models so valuable in future planning across regional congregations that it recommends that each undertake a review of mission and ministry using these models and engaging an external consultant to assist. In acknowledging the challenges faced in a congregation being able to think in a completely fresh way, it has agreed to provide seed funding or such a consultant.

Recommendations and implementation strategies

Establishment of a permanent body to support regional cooperation initiatives

That with thanks to God for the blessings showered upon congregations and schools of Melbourne's eastern suburbs over many years, and in recognition that God is now calling his people into a societal context which is unfamiliar, the Eastern Regional Review recommends;

- That a regional group, be established to facilitate cooperation and collaboration between Lutheran congregations and schools in the eastern metropolitan area.
- That member congregations/parishes be encouraged to engage in review and analysis of their societal context and what that means for the congregation and their members in God's mission in the region.

Celebrating Church festivals

That ERR congregations support celebrating God's gifts to his church synodically, including by regionally or sub-regionally.

Congregation-based activities – e.g., youth, men, ladies, young parents, singles groups

That the ERR congregations acknowledge and thank God for the opportunities for co-operation and collaboration between member congregations across a wide range of congregational mission and ministry activities, and support mechanisms, and commit to sharing ideas, programs and resources across the region or sub-regionally, to facilitate Gods work.

Bible study/discipleship

That ERR Congregations acknowledge opportunities for regional engagement in study groups across ERR Congregations.

Pastoral acts – bereavement/funeral, marriage, baptism, holy communion, etc

That, acknowledging the constraints, ERR congregations give in principle support to the concept of sharing pastoral resources.

Leadership development/support

That ERR congregations support regional facilitation of leadership identification, training, development, mentoring, etc.

Technology, including its application to all aspects of congregational life and outreach

That ERR congregations support the critical evaluation of their own physical and digital hybrid model, and given the DCC's intention to receive advice through Pastors Brett Kennett and Tim Stringer on this, and

further, continue to work together to identify cooperative opportunities and facilitate planning and delivery of digital ministry.

Risk management - including all legal compliance

That in recognising the critical importance of risk management, ERR congregations actively seek opportunities to leverage from best practice risk management.

Opportunity for comment

This is a summary report of the full report which is available at the advertised link

An opportunity is provided to congregations, their members and schools to comment on the report and particularly the recommendations and proposed implementation strategies, the latter included in the full report.

Comments are welcomed to the ERR chair, John Paech by emailing him at johnpaech@aapt.net.au by 14th December.

JOHN PAECH

Chair, Eastern Region Review

October 2021