



Alternative Models of Ministry

A Discussion Paper

Department for Mission
Lutheran Church - South Australia / Northern Territory

Sometimes we choose to change because we can see a better way of using the resources God has given us. At other times we are forced to change because we can no longer sustain the model of ministry we are using. A parish may find that declining numbers and finances mean they can no longer afford a full-time pastor. Or we may decide that because of the LCA's shortage of pastors we cannot justify replacing our pastor. This discussion paper provides brief descriptions of models of ministry that are being used in our Church and elsewhere. All too often we do nothing until change is forced upon us. By then we have very few choices. A better approach is to be proactive and make changes while we still have the resources – people and finances – to move into different models of ministry that will support the ministry and mission of our congregations into the future. Let's look at some options...

a) Close and join elsewhere

All living things have a lifecycle – they are born and they die. It is the same for a congregation. Many of our congregations were born in the horse and buggy days. With modern cars and roads, distances are not such a barrier. Since we were two synods before 1966 we still have two congregations in some communities. That is not necessarily a bad thing when both congregations are thriving and have complementary ministries. Likewise some small rural congregations fulfil a very important local mission and would be sorely missed by their communities. Instead of closing, we may need to look at a different model of ministry. It is not just about numbers!

It is also a fact of life that there comes a time to die. A congregation may have reached the point when it is appropriate to thank God for the ministry he has performed over many years and then, with joy and thanksgiving, to close the doors and join a neighbouring congregation. That is often not easy and brings with it much pain as we remember the good times and the sad times we have shared. History is important and so are people's feelings. But it is also true that on this earth we have no abiding dwelling and that we are a pilgrim people on our way to a better place while seeking to bring many others with us. If our present circumstances no longer support our God-given mission, then it is time to move on.

b) Realignment

At times it is possible to realign neighbouring parishes. In some ways this has been our traditional response to decline. This may be a good option where the resultant new parish is still manageable or where more effective teamwork becomes possible. This may also be considered together with one of the other models. For example some congregations may close and the new pastor may support up to a dozen congregations, working in different ways to bring ministry to each place (see below). This may also allow more financial support for district and church-wide ministry and mission.

c) Licensed Layman

Where there is a need, the district bishop can license a suitable layman for word and sacrament ministry in a particular congregation. This would mostly be an experienced lay reader/lay preacher, who would have oversight from a seminary-trained pastor who provides mentoring and support. Suitable training is also provided. While this has not been common in our district in the past it is a well established practice in other parts of the Church. In New Zealand there are no active retired pastors and so this is often the only way of providing ministry during a vacancy or when a parish cannot afford a pastor.

d) Specific Ministry Pastors

[Previously called *Pastors with Alternative Training*]

In places of particular need, or where there is an opportunity for mission that cannot otherwise be met, the Church may agree to ordain a suitable layman as a specific ministry pastor (SMP). A SMP is ordained for word and sacrament ministry in a particular location and is not eligible for call elsewhere. When the local need no longer exists the SMP is normally removed from the Roll of Pastors of the LCA. A SMP normally begins his service by being licensed for word and sacrament ministry. Once again training is provided and every SMP has a seminary-trained colleague pastor. SMPs may not be paid, may be paid a part-time stipend or may just have their expenses reimbursed, depending on their circumstances.

e) Pastor Resourcing many Congregations and their Local Leadership Teams

A cluster of up to a dozen congregations may be served by a pastor whose main role is to oversee, equip, support and mentor the voluntary lay leaders in each of the congregations (who would normally include licensed laymen and/or SMPs). These local leaders preach and lead worship services, studies and other congregational activities. They provide most of the pastoral care and do most of the visiting. While the pastor will still preach and take services his aim is not to get to as many congregations as he can each Sunday. His focus is on empowering the ministry of others. Missionaries in PNG worked in similar ways in supporting local preachers and evangelists. The congregations are responsible for meeting their local expenses and also contribute to the costs of the pastor.

f) Regional Team Ministry

Under this model a number of parishes combine their resources to establish a team of pastors and lay workers who serve across parish boundaries, bringing a diversity of gifts and expertise. This may happen in both suburban and rural contexts, often as a variation of the 'pastor resourcing many congregations' model previously described. Such a team may include specialists in pastoral care, youth and family ministry, evangelism and other areas, as well as one or more pastors. As with any good team ministry there is mutual support and the ability to cover for each other.

g) Ecumenical Partnership

The LCA has entered into formal arrangements with the Anglican and Uniting churches in Australia to provide pastoral care and Eucharistic hospitality for each other's members when a denomination can no longer sustain a ministry in an area. A good example in our district is at Wudinna where Pastor Ross Schultz ministers to both UCA and Lutheran folk, in their case alternating services between the two churches. It is going very well. Our Wudinna Parish would not be able to afford a full-time pastor without the contributions of the Uniting congregation and it is too remote to be easily realigned. Each group retains membership in their own denomination.

h) Part-time Pastor

It is very rare to find a pastor who wants to work part-time. Occasionally this happens because of health or family needs or because a pastor wants to study or has another vocation that he desires to pursue. Sometimes a pastor may also work as a chaplain in a state school or another institution or ministry. Staged retirements are becoming more popular in other professions so we may well see more pastors moving from full-time to part-time before they completely retire. Usually a match-up happens because someone knows a pastor is open to this possibility. I keep my eyes and ears open!

i) Regular Visiting Pastor

Sometimes a retired pastor may be prepared to serve a small congregation in an ongoing way. He is their pastor and visits once every month or two. He organises other pastors to fill in when he is unable to come. The congregation pays travel, other costs and perhaps a small honorarium. The congregation therefore has some continuity and a pastor to call their own. A good example is Pastor David Wundersitz looking after Kangaroo Island. He travels over roughly once a month to take a service and visit people in their homes. In between they make local arrangements for worship and other activities. In Broken Hill different retired pastors are rostered to fulfil this role.

Our growing shortage of pastors will also force us to rethink how we use their gifts and training. We currently have 30 pastoral vacancies and each year the number grows.

j) Two Congregations Worshipping Together

Two congregations in fairly close proximity decide to combine their worship each Sunday alternating between the two churches. The singing is much better, less musicians need to be recruited, there are more leaders available for children's ministry and it halves the time required from pastors and other worship leaders. It was happening at places like Neales Flat years ago and is currently done by Neukirch and Ebenezer. At some point in the future one of the churches may be closed.

k) Multi-Site Congregation

A number of congregations combine organisationally into one but continue worship services in their various churches. They have one council, one group of elders, one set of leaders for other ministries and are now a 'lean machine' with fewer people tied up in administrative roles and more people available for ministry and mission. It works well in the Manawatu region in New Zealand (Palmerston North and Feilding).

l) Itinerant Ministry

A pastor is called to visit scattered people and small remote communities. He conducts worship (often in a home), visits and teaches. He may also be responsible for supporting ongoing ministry such as confirmation preparation. Sometimes an itinerant pastor also serves a small congregation that cannot afford a full-time pastor so that he has a base and is not 'on the road' the whole time. This model was often used in the pioneering days of our Church.



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Discussion Questions

1. Do any of these models excite you as a *better way* forward for your congregation?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each model in your context?
3. What growth needs to take place in your congregation for it to change? Are there other ways of addressing some of the needs of your people?
4. Do a "leadership audit." What gifts has God given the people of your congregation?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your congregation's relationship to its local community?
6. If your congregation is small would a home be a better meeting venue than a church building? How would this change the character of your gatherings?
7. Taking into account that there are things you cannot change, what are the best options, or combination of options, for your congregation?