

WHAT'S THE *future of ministry* IN THE LCANZ?

Last year the College of Bishops met with district and churchwide leaders to address the LCANZ's church worker supply shortage. Victorian Bishop Emeritus Greg Pietsch was appointed to oversee the Ministry Future project and report to the 2024 General Synod. To follow is an excerpt of his first progress report for the church.

The Ministry Future project has been established by the LCANZ's College of Bishops (CoB), with the support of the General Church Board, to consider and develop a coordinated response to the decreasing number of pastors in the church and the changing nature of our communities.

Our 'Baby Boomer' pastors are retiring and only a very small number of pastoral ministry students are graduating. This reflects demographic change – fewer of the younger generations are practising the faith and offering themselves for vocational service. As church communities age, they find it difficult to finance a pastor. The Ministry Future project aims to help the church respond to these changes in ways that still let the word of the Lord flourish among us today, for it is the word of God that brings us Christ and all his benefits.

The difficulties facing the church are clear – a large number of pastoral vacancies, long periods in vacancy with frustration over the call process, communities struggling to afford a pastor even in the 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. Each district has been responding as best it can, such as drawing on retired pastors and, in some cases, appropriately licensing lay people to undertake what would otherwise be tasks of an ordained pastor.

CoB tasked the Ministry Future project with developing: a regional rather than solely congregation or parish approach to organising pastoral ministry; suitable pathways into general and specialised service – both lay and ordained; and 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 by contrast with General Ministry Pastors (GMPs).

The project gathered data on the present situation and shaped broad proposals in response. Further consultation and collaborative response design will continue through 2023, with reporting to the 2024 General Convention.

Data was gathered from each of the LCANZ's six districts on individual pastoral ministry positions. In all, details of 656 ministry positions across 352 organisations/faith communities, served by 583 individuals, were recorded as at early December 2022. There were 211 GMPs recorded in service, with 62 GMP vacancies – a vacancy rate of 23 per cent, clearly very high and increasing. Nineteen GMPs were serving across the districts other than congregation word and sacrament or schools, mostly in bishop or ministry support positions.

The data gathered reinforces the need and urgency of this project and informs some of the work to be done.

THE WAY AHEAD FOR CONGREGATIONS

So how does the church respond to this situation and even turn it into a creative opportunity in the Lord's gospel mission?

One way is to multiply the ministry of pastors by working in teams across communities – so-called regionalisation. Regionalisation envisages a zone or region of congregations and parishes being served with word and sacrament ministry



Joel Grieger, Ed Shoesmith and Jeremy Smith were the three graduate pastors ordained late last year.



Above: The ministry team from LifeWay Lutheran church with NSW-ACT District Bishop Robert Bartholomaeus (third from left) at the ordination of Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) Francis Leung (third from right). From left they are SMP Mark Simpfendorfer, Newcastle Pastor Mathew von Stanke, Lead Pastor Mark Schultz and Illawarra Pastor David Schuppan. Inset left: Church Planter Danny Brock, Children & Family Ministry Coordinator Elise von Stanke and Music Ministry Coordinator Oliver Witt. Inset right: Church Planting Pastor Khit Vibol.

SO HOW DOES THE CHURCH RESPOND TO THIS SITUATION AND EVEN TURN IT INTO A CREATIVE OPPORTUNITY IN THE LORD'S GOSPEL MISSION?

collectively, led by an overseeing GMP with the possibility of other GMPs or SMPs in the team as well. Each worshipping community will continue its own lay leadership and volunteer ministry roles, possibly supplemented by a local SMP or designated lay person with a pastoral leadership role.

Regionalisation also responds to the financial pressures faced by many parishes and the limits of feasible re-alignment and provides the opportunity for collective administration, worship support, ministry sharing and the like.

Local specialist ministries, such as school or aged-care chaplaincy, can be built into the plan, providing GMP oversight of lay ministries there. And new church planting can be parented within the region as well.

LifeWay Church in New South Wales, with the central hub in Epping, is perhaps the fullest expression of regionalisation in the LCANZ, with five locations across Sydney, Western Sydney, Newcastle, and Wollongong, served by a team of five pastors (not all full-time), including two SMPs, a Cambodian pastor, a lay church planter and multiple lay ministry coordinators.

Conversations between neighbouring congregations about closer cooperation are accelerating across the LCANZ, especially when pastoral vacancies occur. These conversations and the journey toward a regional approach are being facilitated by district bishops and mission directors.

While the shape of each 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.

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 – 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.

Australian Lutheran College is actively responding to needs as they are identified, and offering a distributed learning approach, that is, using a combination of online and in-person teaching, so that people can learn in their own local ministry context.

The Ministry Future project hopes to record the diversity of ministry roles and training in an LCANZ ministry framework, so that people can see the opportunities for them and their community. Included in that is comprehensive training and development for much-needed General Ministry Pastors. We also thank God for the lay folk who serve under licence by their district bishop in ways usually reserved for pastors – mostly by conducting holy communion during a vacancy or sometimes in support of a pastor serving multiple distant locations.

The question now is how best to regularise or rearrange licensing – how to order it – for the ongoing life of the church. CoB has asked the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations to contribute to this. Whatever is done needs the blessing of the whole church, to be transparent and supported, with good training and oversight.

THE NEXT PHASE

This project now moves to collaborative response design, working with leaders across the church, with accountability to CoB and 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.

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.

Read the full report at www.lca.org.au/ministryfuture
If you would like to provide feedback to Pastor Greg, you are welcome to do so by emailing your contribution to greg.pietsch@lca.org.au