
PRESBYTERY CONSULTATION 2 - RESULTS

January 13-14, 2017

Background

On January 13-14, 2017 thirty people representing the Presbyteries within BC Conference, the Conference Executive, and Conference staff met in a second Presbytery Consultation (the first was in February 2016) to help discern the next steps in preparing the Presbyteries and Conference for a new structural relationship. The need for a new relationship had emerged from the changing needs and capacity within these bodies to provide the institutional framework needed for a sustainable, connected United Church in BC. The recent decision of the General Council to change the whole church from a four court to a three court system (presently being voted on through Remit) has reinforced the need and desire for such change to take place relatively soon.

The first Consultation and subsequent conversations showed strong support for moving significant responsibilities presently belonging to Presbyteries to the Conference. It also emphasized the importance of developing a clear sense of the purpose and “shape” of Presbyteries after such responsibilities have been transferred or, if the Remit on the church courts passes, of the future Clusters.

This recent Presbytery Consultation, therefore, had two goals:

1. To test a proposal on the transfer of some responsibilities from Presbyteries to the Conference;
2. To develop a clearer vision of Clusters and how they might function.

Transfer of Responsibilities

At the Consultation, it was recognized that the following responsibilities have already been transferred to the Conference over the past two years in the Effective Leadership initiative:

- Oversight of Personnel and Pastoral Relations (*Manual* C.3.2; C.3.3)
- Education and Students (*Manual* C.4.5.3)

There was a strong consensus that the following *Manual* responsibilities presently belong to Presbyteries could be transferred to the Conference in the near future:

- Property (*Manual* C.3.5)
- Assessments (*Manual* C.3.6)

There was also a strong consensus that the following areas of responsibility could also be transferred to the Conference in the near future:

- Legal matters
- Financial management

Manual responsibilities that would not be transferred in the immediate future would be:

- Oversight of Pastoral Charges and Other Local Ministry Units (*Manual* C.3.1)
- Relationship with Other Courts (*Manual* C.3.4)

Transfer of Responsibilities – Commentary

General Comments:

- The transfer of responsibilities could happen no matter what the outcome of the Remit of the church courts; *Manual* D.2.2.2.c allows Presbyteries to request the Conference to “take action on its behalf.”
- It was recognized that the initiative outlined below is on a very “high level” and needs much more detail before implementation but is helpful to keep the work going in the right direction.
- It was often emphasized that the transfer of responsibilities would have to be done well – effectively, efficiently and transparently. Good planning and communication were emphasized.
- It was felt that the transfers did not all have to take place at the same time but when the parties involved were ready.
- Although responsibilities would be transferred, it would still be anticipated that people “on the ground” in local areas would still be significantly involved in carrying out the work involved (ie. they would simply “wear a Conference hat” rather than a “Presbytery hat”).

Legal Matters: Presbytery legal matters are not a *Manual* responsibility. However, in carrying out its responsibilities any organization needs to pay attention to legal concerns. For Presbyteries these usually are related to property and personnel matters. When Presbyteries are faced with a legal or potentially legal matter, they would first consult with Conference to determine how best to deal with the matter. Costs would be borne by the Conference.

Property: Although pastoral charges have the most responsibility related to property, the Presbytery presently operates as a “gatekeeper” which allows or does not allow certain transactions to happen which affect the asset value of the property. Such situations have become much more complicated and in need of professional assistance in recent years, particularly where development has become a viable option. When Presbyteries are faced with property matters, it is envisioned that these matters would immediately be turned over to the Conference for analysis, discernment and decision. However, since United Church property matters are enshrined in civil law, it will be necessary (as long as Presbyteries are still in legal existence) for the Presbytery to still take final decisions and sign documents related to several kinds of property matters.

Assessments and Financial Management: Few Presbyteries have had financial management difficulties but this is an area of responsibility which does not tend to give energy to a Presbytery and where due diligence expectations are rising. Although having adequate financial resources to accomplish goals is important to a group’s mission, ensuring good management and accounting of those resources is secondary. The task of establishing and collecting assessments from pastoral charges, as well as managing all financial matters, could be transferred to the Conference. Carefully formed guidelines, close consultation with Presbyteries, and local budgeting would need to be in place to ensure adequate funding for gatherings and local mission activities. This is an area of responsibility which would require the greatest and most direct change in the present functioning of the Presbyteries and the Conference. As a guideline, we would adopt the principle that such a change would not negatively affect the present cost to pastoral charges for the governance and management of the Presbytery and Conference.

Oversight of Pastoral Charges: It was agreed that the responsibility of providing oversight to pastoral charges not transfer at this time. While Presbytery members seem to be eager to get out of the role of judging one another, there is still a strong desire to maintain close contact with congregations and local ministries. It is anticipated that this *Manual* requirement can be honoured in such a way that Presbyteries can provide capable support and connection with one another. If Remit #1 is approved, however, this responsibility may have to become part of the responsibility of Regions.

Relationship with Other Courts: The ability to relate directly and officially to the other courts of the church is also a function of the Presbytery which is both desired and well within the capacity of the Presbyteries to perform.

Clusters – Principles and Approaches

It was recognized that with the transfer of responsibilities Presbyteries would (or could) become closer to what the Remit on church courts describes as Clusters: “local clusters of communities of faith that provide community and support for communities of faith and their leaders, and focus on worship, mission, learning, collegiality, and strategic planning.” This document will use the term “Cluster” to refer to the “new” Presbytery, whether they legally become “Clusters” or whether they remain Presbyteries. In any event, even if the Remit passes, it will be some years before the legal rules of the church could change in order for Presbyteries to no longer be in existence.

The Presbytery Consultation focused in two areas related to Clusters:

- Getting a clearer vision of their purpose and what they might look like;
- Adopting some principles for how to move forward in planning for the future Clusters even before a blueprint for them is developed.

Clusters – Vision and Purpose

The concept of “Clusters” has not been well-defined anywhere in the church as yet. The Consultation recognized that for progress to be made there would have to be much more clarity on the “purpose” for a Cluster and what one might look like (“vision”).

In particular, a clear, compelling purpose will be necessary since the sustainability of the Clusters would likely be determined by having such a purpose that could attract and inspire continuing participation.

Although exact wording was neither sought nor achieved, there was remarkable agreement about the vision and purpose of Clusters. “We are circling all around the right wording”, seemed to be the common sense.

The two most common words used to describe Clusters were “mission” and “connection.” Clusters are the place where “mission” is jointly discerned, supported, and challenged. They help connect communities of faith with one another, and are the place where church leadership gathers for support, encouragement, learning, and collaboration.

A warning was offered that Clusters, in structure, should not start with the presumption of being “Presbytery-like.” How they meet, what work they do and how they do it should be imagined anew. They would not be gate-keepers or regulators. Accountability would be from the Cluster to the communities of faith rather than vice versa. Management functions (either self-management or management of other church structures and relationships) would be minimal. Both financial and staff support would be needed in order to be sustainable. A small leadership team might guide planning and make needed decisions. Membership in Clusters could be flexible.

Presbytery Consultations

Whether the Presbyteries remain as courts of the church or become Clusters, it was enthusiastically agreed that a regular gathering of people from the various Presbyteries should occur to: share good ideas with one another (mutual learning); share stories of church life in each area (better understanding our context); and to share insights, ideas and concerns about the present and future work of the Conference/Region and the church in general (generating and testing ideas).

Clusters – Going Forward

While not yet clear, the present vision and purpose of Clusters are adequate enough to be able to discern some principles and guidelines that can provide enough direction that the church can move forward in planning. The following guidelines were presented and, while not extensively discussed, were generally accepted at the meeting. The last two guidelines (10 & 11) were added during discussion.

1. We start from where we are, with the present Presbyteries following the same rules and expectations, except without the transferred responsibilities.
2. We leave open the possibility that the present Presbyteries, in conversation with one another, could recommend alternative boundaries (ie. we might see the amalgamation, division, or redefining of boundaries of Presbyteries as they form Clusters).
3. Geographic proximity would continue to guide membership in Clusters.
4. The Presbyteries/Clusters define their own mission and ministries with a focus on mission discernment, pastoral charge support, and collegiality (lay and ordered).
5. Change would be planned to be organic (one step at a time; based on past practice; intentional) rather than systemic (all changes at once based on a new structural model).
6. The present special ministries that are financially supported by Presbyteries would continue into the medium future.
7. The present ProVision Funds and other special Presbytery funds would continue to support the present Presbytery or ministry in that area for the medium future.
8. Presbyteries would continue to receive staff support on a similar basis as the present into the medium future.
9. Financial management and accounting would be transferred to the Conference; the Presbyteries or Clusters would be financially supported through a regular budgetary process.
10. The work of transition in Presbyteries would be strongly supported.
11. Flexibility in timing and implementation as changes are being made would be expected and acceptable.

Summary

- A strong affirmation that several responsibilities should be transferred from Presbyteries to Conference.
- A deep recognition that doing so will call for a large amount of good planning, communication, and change in the ways the Presbyteries and Conference operate.
- A growing vision of United Churches and their leaders gathered together focusing on mission, mutual support, connection and collegiality.
- A strong affirmation of some basic guidelines that would guide planning and implementation.
- A strong sense of “opportunity”... that despite the difficulties of present church structures we are being called into new and exciting relationships full of promise for the future.

Next Steps

1. The results of this Consultation will be summarized. The summary will be circulated to participants for review and comment.

2. An edited Summary will be distributed to participants, Presbyteries, Conference staff, and the Conference Executive and will be posted on the Conference web page. Again, comments will be received.
3. The Conference Executive will receive and consider the Summary (and subsequent comments) at its March 9-11, 2017 meeting.
4. The Conference Executive will decide what from the Summary might be enacted without further decision-making and what will be brought before the Conference General Meeting (May 25-28, 2017) for conversation and decision-making.