

Report on Connections and Nominations Survey and Conference Session.

Introduction

In May and June, the Connections and Nominations Committee (CNC) invited presbyters to fill in an online survey in an attempt to get an understanding of how we as a Presbytery could better serve one another and our congregations. A conference session at the June Presbytery meeting based around the Vivid Vision video released by the Faith Action Leadership Team of the General Assembly, added to the opportunity to hear from one another.

The CNC are grateful to those who responded to the survey and enthusiastically took part in the conference session. Of the 355 presbyters, 104 filled in the survey; an encouraging 29%. That figure rises to 40% of all elders responding, with 23% of ministers (including retired ministers and those not in parishes) and 17% of others (i.e. deacons, readers, MDS and other corresponding members).

Whilst the numerical returns to the survey and some of the comments are available separately for those presbyters who want to see them, this report is an attempt by the CNC to reflect back to Presbytery the main points which have emerged and to make some suggestions. It is hoped that it will stimulate debate on the floor of Presbytery and within our committees. More importantly, it is hoped that it may be a catalyst for positive change.

It is important to say at the outset that in the challenging context of Presbytery Planning and the uniting of the constituent parts of the Presbytery of the North East and the Northern Isles, our Presbytery has come a long way. This is down to the hard work and dedication of a large number of people. Many presbyters give significant amounts of time and energy to the various aspects of the Presbytery's work. Our staff are not just finding their feet but have begun to be a real support and help to local congregations. We should be grateful to God and encouraging of one another for all that has been achieved.

Issues Highlighted

It is clear that there are a number of challenges that we face which are, again, often exacerbated by the difficult circumstances that so many congregations find themselves in. The great challenge facing us as a Presbytery seems to be how to work best to support congregations, which includes such questions as

- what should be our priorities?
- how do we work most efficiently?
- how do we support, enable, and inspire one another?

These challenges will come as no surprise, but two particular barriers to meeting these challenges emerged from the survey and the conference session:

- Issues created by the size and geographical spread of Presbytery
- Tension between the Presbytery's relationship with congregations as both an oversight and administrative body and as a supportive, enabling and inspiring community.

Presbytery Meetings

Much of the business at meetings can feel irrelevant to presbyters and the sheer amount of administrative business restricts time for other important issues. There is a clear desire for more opportunities for sharing of struggles and of inspirational stories; of having the space to listen to one another's experiences and to wrestle with the challenges of church life: be that going through readjustment; bringing the good news of Jesus to our communities and neighbours; dealing with the administrative necessities; sustaining congregational life; or the myriad of other opportunities and challenges that face us all.

Many presbyters expressed a sense of distance between themselves and the "centre" and between each other. Our way of meeting was also raised by a number of people. Hybrid or entirely online meetings "work" to the extent that they allow people to be present at the meetings. However, many find Zoom a barrier to participation, both in the sense of making it more difficult to contribute, but also in the sense that it can become isolating. A few minutes in a Zoom room having a quick chat with a random group does not go far to alleviating this experience. Those who are able to attend meetings onsite comment on how much more enjoyable and engaging that experience is, but the size of the meeting continues to be a problem.

We may need to consider a different meeting format which helps to address these challenges by:

- reducing the necessary administrative business
- creating more time for discussion of issues which presbyters feel are relevant to their church situations
- allowing for improved engagement of all presbyters

One suggestion has been gathering in multiple locations which are connected by video technology and re-ordering our business to give room for both local discussion and general discussion across all sites.

Presbytery Involvement

Beyond the meetings themselves, there was a strong signal in the survey that many presbyters don't feel particularly involved in the work of Presbytery. When asked the question, *On a scale of 1-10 to what extent do you feel that you contribute to the work of Presbytery*, the average score was 5. Amongst elders the sense of contribution was particularly low with 36% scoring in the 1-3 category and only 16% in the 8-10. Ministers felt slightly more engaged with 25% scoring 8-10 and 21% 1-3. When asked about contributing more, it is not surprising that those who are already in an identifiable role responded were more reluctant, but of those not in a role, 50% responded positively.

The main barrier to involvement in the work of Presbytery is, unsurprisingly, time; with many citing the time they give to their local congregation as a factor. However, it was also clear that many presbyters do not feel that the gifts and experience they have are being well utilised within Presbytery. Indeed, the CNC noted the irony of the fact that amongst ourselves there was little or no experience of running and analysis surveys whilst in a

Presbytery of our size there must be a wealth of experience to help us think through the issues we are facing.

Some, thought, therefore needs to be given as to how we identify and utilise all that presbyters have to offer. Once again, the size of Presbytery, which makes it much more difficult to get to know one another, may be a factor.

Presbytery's Function

Many presbyters express uncertainty about what Presbytery does, how it works and even what it is “for”. As reflected in the feelings about our meetings, there is a definite tension between the need for Presbytery to be an overseeing and administrative body and the desire for it to be a supportive, enabling and inspiring organisation. The perception, at least, seems to be that Presbytery can have a negative effect on congregations’ ability to function well – taking up time and making congregations “jump through hoops”. This perception may be coloured by a number of factors, and it is worth remembering that much of the administrative function of Presbytery is necessary and would leave congregations in a difficult place if it were not carried out. This includes such things as the checking of minute books and accounts. These administrative “tasks and asks” that come out from the Presbytery office and committees can seem burdensome at times but the full engagement of congregations and office bearers in these tasks will help to reduce the amount of “asks” coming out of Presbytery.

However, it is clear that there is a desire for Presbytery to somehow be more proactive in helping congregations in fulfilling their calling. It is also worth remembering that Presbytery is primarily made up of individuals all of whom are themselves fully engaged in their own congregations and, therefore, it cannot be that “Presbytery” can simply come in and help each congregation fulfil its mission and ministry. That being said, when we work together we can enable each other. The work of our staff is one way in which we can work together and the CNC are conscious that we did not ask any questions about the engagement of congregations with staff members. It would be interesting to know how much the perception of the role and relevance of Presbytery changed as congregations engaged with individual staff members around the challenges they have identified at a local level.

When we asked in our survey what respondents understood to be the role of Presbytery we gave a list of 8 possible answers. Whilst it was pointed out that this limited the scope of the survey to a top-down predetermining of Presbytery’s function, we did try to give a range of possible responses and we included the four functions of a Presbytery set out in the relevant Act of the General Assembly. The results that we gathered would point to the majority of presbyters understanding Presbytery as a mainly “inward facing” organisation. That is, that as a body the Presbytery is mainly concerned with its own constituent parts – the congregations that make it up (although as has already been said, the balance between oversight and organisation on the one hand and help, support and encouragement on the other, is perhaps in need of change). Eighty Six percent of respondents agreed that the role of Presbytery included the *oversight of congregations* through such things as inspection of records, overseeing correct procedures etc. A similar amount agreed that *supporting congregations* through such things as training, advice on building matters and office bearers support was part of Presbytery’s role. The numbers drop, however, when it comes to

engaging with local, national and international issues (61%) and even further with regards to taking a lead in mission across Presbytery (55%).

These figures would suggest that the focus of our work together should be upon helping local congregations flourish as best they can in the circumstances they find themselves in. However, in discussion and comment one begins to sense a desire for the Presbytery as an organisation to be more ‘outward focussed’ in the sense of making mission and evangelism the driving force behind our work and some thought perhaps needs to be given as to the role the Presbytery as an organisation might have in the proclamation of the gospel to the people amongst whom we live.

Another question that arose more from discussion than the survey returns was with regard to the relationship between the Presbytery and the Central Church (General Assembly and the Church Offices in Edinburgh). Some presbyters expressed a frustration that Presbytery didn’t do enough to push back on what comes “down from on high” nor do enough to influence decisions being made at that level. Once again, it is important to remember that we, collectively, *are* the Presbytery and so it is not a question of someone else succeeding or failing in doing these things, but of our finding the best way to work together so that we can do these things. This stresses the need for greater coordination and effective collaboration within Presbytery.

Practical Steps

When we asked about some of the practical steps that we could take we focussed mostly on the ‘events’ that Presbytery might run. Again, we gave a range of possible answers which may have been limiting as well as helpful. It has to be said that when asked *Which of the following would you be most likely to attend?* only one option crept above 50% of respondents: *an opportunity, in your own local area, to hear from and meet with presbytery staff and/or conveners.* This low number may indicate that attending another ‘event’ is not what is required. However, that response, together with the other answers, seemed to indicate, that, if there were to be such events, people would prefer local, in-person meetings that had a purpose which went beyond the business aspects of Presbytery’s work. It is also worth noting that 41% of ministers responded that they would most likely attend *Some time away (e.g. a retreat) for a day or longer* whereas only 26% of elders chose that option.

Interestingly, when asked about what sort of events *members of your session/congregation are most likely to attend*, the top answer was not *an opportunity to hear from and meet with presbytery staff and/or conveners in your local area (39%)* but was rather *a Presbytery organised event to meet with neighbouring Kirk Sessions to discuss matters of common interest.* Perhaps this indicates that, however Presbytery relates to local congregations, there is a need to scratch where they are itching.

Conclusions

As suggested at the beginning of this report, we hope that it will stimulate discussion at all levels of Presbytery. From the point of view of the CNC we recognise that we need to explore practical ways of identifying and encouraging the gifts of presbyters (e.g. a simple register of skills or a light-touch nominations process) and we would ask presbyters to engage with such a process if and when it is developed. We will also consider what, if any,

events might help strengthen the sense of ownership and involvement that presbyters have in the work of Presbytery and those which will help congregations face the real challenges before them. However, we would also challenge other committees to do the same and would be willing to work with them in organising of such events; recognising that local, purposeful events are what is most wanted. We recognise, also, that we have a role in helping congregations and Presbytery as a whole communicate good news and inspirational stories both amongst ourselves and to the community we are reaching out to. Good communication is at the heart of our missionary endeavour.

We would encourage the Business Committee to reflect upon the way that we meet together with regards to both the content of our meeting and the use of Zoom.

We would encourage all the committees of Presbytery to reflect on how they can reduce the amount of time taken up by administrative business, but more importantly, how they can enable discussion and sharing which will help congregations flourish.

We would encourage all presbyters to be fully engaged in the work of Presbytery, despite its flaws and difficulties, through prayer, attendance, attention and service as much as each one is able.