



Regional Placements in Port Phillip East

Presbytery Discussion Paper

The purpose of this brief paper is to raise issues for PPE related to creating ministry placements which are regional in nature. For this purpose, “regional placements” refers to more than one ministry agent serving more than one congregation across one geographic locale. It does not refer simply to one minister working with two or more congregations.

What are regional placements?

Regional placements....

- are placements to a region and not just to a group of churches
- may be Presbytery placements or placements made by agreement with a group of churches
- are placements to a team ministry within region
- may have pastoral ties to particular congregations within the region
- will usually have specialist, complementary roles within the team and region
- will have ministry roles that go beyond any particular congregation
- will have some degree of emphasis on equipping lay leaders for ministry and mission

Why move to regional placements?

To frame this in positive terms, regional placements might be considered if

- participation in God's mission by existing congregations is a clear focus
- team ministry brings greater richness to ministry and mission
- congregational strengths and differences bring greater richness to ministry and mission
- sharing and pooling of resources allows for greater freedom to enhance and explore ministry and mission regionally
- a regional focus allows for broader partnerships with other agencies and organisations
- congregations are willing to 'let go' and embrace a different future
- congregations are willing to be more intentional about growing missional disciples

To put it conversely, regional ministry and mission will be ineffective if

- the focus is solely on the existing congregations
- there is not a healthy team ministry
- congregations are unwilling to share gifts and resources
- congregations are unwilling to be changed
- there is not a refreshed focus on growing lifelong disciples
- there is not a significant focus on doing new things beyond existing congregations

Clearly there are a number of reasons why regional placements will be desirable or even necessary in some locations. There is no question that in many areas, a driving motivation has been that the current financial model of one ordained minister per congregation is

unsustainable for an increasing number of our churches. This is already the case across all Synods, evidenced by the growing number of part-time placements. As we know, this is partly a symptom of the large number of congregations entering church union 40 years ago

This is of course associated with declining and ageing membership. A key factor is not only the limited ability of a small group to 'run a congregation', but more importantly a loss of relational, spiritual and missional vitality. Bringing small congregations together can result in greater health in the qualities of Christian community.

Regional placements may be part of a pathway to a reduced number of congregations in a region over time, but this is not necessarily the case or the goal. A great deal of energy can go into establishing co-operative arrangements which effectively are about congregational palliative care. To dress this up as missional rather than pastoral in the short term is probably unhelpful. There needs to be some distinction between the urge to sustain small and declining congregations and the call to wider mission. Missional growth doesn't require regional arrangements, it requires missional disciples.

A regional focus can be part of a 'mixed ecology' of ministry and mission, encouraging every congregation to be the people of God in their local community, and at the same time seeking to be faithful to God's call to mission beyond the scope or capabilities of our current congregations. Hence the following considerations are not based primarily on seeing regional ministry and mission as a strategy for amalgamation of congregations.

Oversight and Accountability

Ministers in placement remain accountable to the Presbytery. However, team ministry requires team co-ordination and oversight. In the regional ministries which I examined, the following options existed.

- Congregations were linked regionally by a range of means,
 - a. no formal connection between congregations
 - b. individual congregations with a voluntary regional leaders forum to help provide co-ordination
 - c. a formal network of congregations with one Church Council
 - d. one Congregation/Council with multiple faith communities
- Team oversight/co-ordination provided in each instance by a team leader – in some cases appointed by Presbytery, in others through usual JNC processes.
- Where multiple congregations existed, each minister worked with their individual Church Councils.
- Where one congregation or network existed, all ministers worked with the one Church Council.

It is important to say that in practice, the manner of the ministers' accountability to the Presbytery varied, and was strongest (although not necessarily the most effective) where the team leader was a Presbytery appointment.

Moving to Regional Placements

Whether or not regional ministry is developed before or after congregations are formally linked, it will usually be the case that placement vacancies in the region are asynchronous. Hence, regional appointments may need to be made with the agreement of some (rather than all) congregations before a clear regional framework or team structure is in place. ie. there will be transitional appointments with interim roles and accountabilities.

These are some of the steps that need to be considered (not necessarily in order)

- Presbytery works with congregations to determine both local and regional ministry and mission profile and priorities
- Agreement between Presbytery and congregations of an initial ministry co-ordination arrangement (ie. team setup, work with Councils regionally)
- Discernment and understanding of ministry agents' gifts, experience and roles
- Agreement of Church Councils and congregations to seek regional placements
- Agreement by Presbytery and congregations about whether these are Presbytery placements or regional congregational placements
- Establishment of a regional JNC with suitable local and Presbytery membership

At the very least, one or more congregations needs to agree to work with Presbytery on a regional placement(s), giving consideration to regional ministry and mission development, and agreeing to greater determination by the Presbytery in shaping a regional ministry team.

Learning from experience

Regional placements are not new in the Uniting Church or even its parent denominations, in fact they are common in rural areas and are becoming more common in outer suburban areas. In the 1990's, examinations of models of regional or cluster ministry were undertaken by David Uren in Victoria, and Ross Irvine and Terence Corkin in NSW/ACT. In the 2000s, the SA Synod commissioned Christian Research Association to conduct a study of rural cluster ministries. There have been more than one driving factors and more than one model or approach. Currently there are a number of regional approaches in Presbyteries across the VicTas Synod.

In working with a cluster of congregations in the inner northern suburbs of Adelaide, Rev Robin Trebilcock made the observation that if you put several plates of cheese sandwiches together, all you end up with is a big plate of cheese sandwiches. A smorgasbord is a more appetising meal! Congregational diversity is a strength in regional mission, and yet in many areas, sufficient diversity is precisely what is lacking.

So, what is the role of discernment regarding participation in mission? How do growing missional disciples, congregational mission focus, and mission beyond existing congregations, together shape regional strategies, when for many congregations these are not the driving factors?

In many cluster/regional models, ministers spend less time with individual congregations in what might be considered 'traditional' minister roles, and as a result have an increased role in resourcing and equipping lay members for local ministry and mission, including worship leadership and preaching, pastoral care and administration. This involves a shift both for ministers (most of whom were not trained for this) and for congregations (likewise). It has significant implications for role definition, appointment, continuing education and supervision of team members.

In my brief examination of four regional/cluster ministries, it was evident that there are two pathways – create a regional ministry team first, or set up a co-operative churches structure first. For several reasons, the former seems to be a more easily achievable pathway that can lead to the latter, whereas the latter can take years of wrangling. Can we take regional development approaches that 'go with the flow' of openness to change, so that team changes and congregational co-operation are encouraged and allowed to emerge, rather than forced?

- It is not clear whether having a team leader is necessarily a good thing, based on team size, roles and personalities (or rather, having a team leader and team working well together is a challenge). However, clearly the larger the team, the greater the degree of co-ordination required.
- Most people will say that they work well in a team, whether they do or not.
- Most clusters are set up with diminishing resources, so that there are fewer ministry agents (or FTE equivalent) in the region than previously. This is not by itself a recipe for expansion of any kind.
- Team roles will initially and inevitably be drawn towards fulfilling traditional expectations of congregational ministry. Transition out of this seems quite difficult.
- Team ministries without ongoing, planned role and skill (re)orientation struggle to change gears/roles.
- Teams with designated roles around new initiatives have more ability to develop this focus, yet it remains contested by the status quo in terms of time, finance and outcomes.

Craig Mitchell
Presbytery Minister - Church Development