

Report on the Presbyterian General Assembly 2025 – held October 20-23 in Christchurch

Prepared by Rev Steve Jourdain, Palmerston North.

Assembly was held in the new buildings of St Paul's Trinity Pacific Church, after their previous 140 year old building was pulled down following the earthquakes of 2010-11. Their new facility is spacious and attractive in design. Their congregation of volunteers hosted us so warmly and well with meeting spaces, great food, Pasifika dance and song over dinner, parking, and a wonderful contemporary worship band and singers throughout. About 200 of us gathered from across Aotearoa NZ.

No overseas guests were present at Assembly, but video messages were received from the President of the Uniting Church of Australia and from the Assembly Clerk of the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu. The executive officer of the Uniting Congregations (UCANZ) also attended. We watched video reports from each of the seven presbyteries, which included the Pacific Presbytery and the Maori Synod (Te Aka Puahou – a new name meaning 'The New Vine, The New Shoot'); and from various departments of our church including the national youth ministry and overseas mission.

The Moderator for this Assembly was the Rev Peter Dunn, minister of Windsor Presbyterian Church in Invercargill. He led the Assembly with grace and humour. His theme was "We believe" and he sought to reaffirm the fundamental beliefs of our Christian Faith. Instead of inviting a speaker to give a keynote lectures, he arranged for two elders each day to share their testimonies of how they came to faith in Jesus and how that has shaped their lives. This was refreshing.

The sessions of Assembly ran from 9am (after 30 minutes of worship) until 5.30pm each day, except for an extra session on the Wednesday night, to ensure we would finish by 1pm on Thursday.

The 'White Book' of documents (Assembly papers) for Assembly business, comprised over 325 typed pages! It was a lot to get our heads around. However, executive summaries and verbal presentations by convenors, helped to explain the breadth of work that the various committees and workgroups of our national church are engaged with, for the benefit of us all.

Key Decisions

- 1. The Council of Assembly** reported on their response to the report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Historical Abuse in Care of Faith-Based Institution. It was one of the biggest bodies of work the Council had ever done. After listening deeply to survivors of abuse in care, and consulting with the Survivors Advisory Group of Experts (SAGE), the Council prepared **a National Public Apology (delivered by our Moderator) and developed a thorough redress process for survivors of abuse in Presbyterian institutions**. About 30 of these people presented to the Royal Commission and to date, 12 have made a claim for redress. Others are encouraged to apply. The details of the apology and redress process can be read on our national Presbyterian website (www.presbyterian.org.nz).
- 2. A new Assembly Executive Secretary** – Rev Erin Pendreigh of South Otago was appointed by the Assembly following a recruitment and discernment process by the Recruitment Committee. Erin is the first woman to hold this position as the executive officer of the PCANZ. She has been the Mission Enabler for the Synod of Otago and Southland for the past 10 years. She follows the Rev Wayne Matheson, who has served us very well over the past 11 years and was warmly farewelled.
- 3. The Moderator Designate is Rev Dr Murray Rae**, Professor of Theology at Otago University, where he has taught theology for over 20 years. His special interest is in Māori engagements with Christianity. His father, Rev Alister Rae, was Moderator of the General Assembly in 1984.
- 4. The Doctrine Core Group** has written a helpful paper describing the Presbyterian understanding of Ordination, referring to ministers, elders and the significant role of lay people.

5. A Survey of Parish Life 2025, prepared by the Church Property Trustees, reports on the state of Presbyterian and Cooperative Venture churches. It summarises the current state of our: attendance at worship, congregation sizes, children and youth, expressions of personal faith, leadership, financial resources and buildings. It is a most helpful analysis for church councils to consider.

6. Assembly received reports from three groups who were charged with reviewing the following:

i) PressGo – established in 2008 to support and fund mission initiatives, its work was to be reviewed every five years. This review reaffirmed the ongoing significance of this body in equipping, resourcing and inspiring mission in churches and presbyteries.

ii) Mission Enterprise Fund – this was established in 2014 to collect 10% of the net sale of church properties (which were not used for the replacement of a church building or manse), to be used to fund mission initiatives. It was administered by PressGo. Due to some legal advice, and concerns about effectiveness, this Assembly agreed to close the MEF. 80% of the remaining funds will be divided between Te Aka Puahou, Pacific Presbytery, and the other 4 regional presbyteries, for mission. The other 20% of funds comprise the Aroha Fund which is designated to support ministry among people who are vulnerable and socially disadvantaged and will be administered by Te Aka Puahou.

iii) The General Assembly (GA) – this review was initially proposed to explore how to make Assembly for affordable so that more churches would be able to attend, as cost has been a major barrier. The GA budget costs comprise: 5% for venue hire, 4-8% travel, food 20% and Assembly staff costs (work time & travel) 60%. The review group made 6 major recommendations including:

- that the core funding for Assembly be included in the annual Assembly budget
 - the need to develop a new funding model for GA that could include building the attendance costs into the Assembly Assessment that congregations pay
 - that up to 25% of a presbytery's commissioners could attend by zoom, creating a hybrid Assembly
 - that a standing (permanent) committee be formed to continue to discern the future shape of GA.
- A recommendation to explore models of consensus decision-making for GA was lost.

7. Assembly received the report of Te Kahui Whanaungatanga Workgroup which was asked to discern a strategic direction for the PCANZ through listening to the voices of our people and the Spirit. The report has some helpful observations asking, "What kind of people do we want to be?" rather than "What kind of plan/strategy do we want? Looking for relational solutions rather than technical solutions. That "(organisational) culture eats strategy for breakfast". That relationship, culture, trust and belonging are the soil from which everything else arises. This is "whanaungatanga". Strategy should be set by the presbyteries, while keeping whanaungatanga in mind, using the seven specific ways suggested in the report. A booklet of 6 brief reflections has been prepared for church groups.

8. Presbyterian Women's Successor Organisation. Assembly decided to set up a task group to form a new organisation that could continue the participation of NZ Presbyterian women in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, to include girls in Presbyterian schools.

9. From 2027, candidates for Local Ordained Ministry will now join candidates for National Ordained Ministry at the national assessment weekend, to provide a greater consistency of assessment and discernment across NZ. This is after both sets of candidates have been accepted by their presbyteries.

10. The Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa NZ (UCANZ) has recognised the need for a thorough review of its purpose, structures, procedures, and the very need of its existence. A commission of 3 national leaders from the Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian partners will report back in 2027.

The Presbyterian website (presbyterian.org.nz) has all the Assembly reports, news and summaries of decisions made at Assembly, the videos presented, and videos of business sessions.