



A Theological Vision

**For the Presbyterian Church of Australia
in the State of New South Wales and
the Australian Capital Territory**

PCNSW Special Committee for Denominational Renewal

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Introduction

What should a healthy *Presbyterian* church look like? Most of us want our church to be healthy yet would struggle to answer the question. As a result, some church leaders embrace health frameworks and ministry models from churches and para-church organisations that don't share all our theological convictions. As a confessional church that holds Scripture as our Supreme Standard, we should be able to define for ourselves, from Scripture, what a healthy church looks like. This theological vision seeks to define what health should look like for us – for our churches, our church members, our leaders, and our presbyteries and assemblies.

We are committed to the historic orthodox Christian faith, grounded in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, centred on the gospel of Christ, and enabled by the Holy Spirit, to live and work for God's praise and glory. This theological vision seeks to maintain this commitment by presenting a vision for church and the Christian life which reflects the confessional position of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, and seeks to apply that to the mission of the PCNSW.

As a theological vision, this document aims to set out the direction and ethos which the PCNSW might pursue. It is not seeking to be unnecessarily prescriptive for the life and practice of our churches, but to be the basis for a discussion about how the PCNSW can continue to develop church life which best expresses its theological convictions.

The original draft for the vision was completed by Murray Smith and John McClean who are Assembly-appointed faculty of Christ College, our church's theological college. This work was reviewed in 2015 by several working groups made up of pastoral leaders from our church. It was amended and developed in 2016 in light of those reviews. Further feedback was obtained through consultation with the Presbyteries of the PCNSW throughout 2017 and 2018. Additional changes were made in 2018 and 2019 prior to distribution across the PCNSW.

This vision summary is the first part of a comprehensive Theological Vision for the PCNSW that contains further vision detail, biblical and theological foundations, and enabling conditions to help our church flourish towards this vision. Soft copies of these papers can be downloaded from the Refocus website (www.christcollege.edu.au/refocus) and distributed without restriction.

Vision Summary

1. Healthy churches: centred on the gospel of Christ

God's church plays a central role in God's mission in the world. Particular churches are meeting-communities of believers and their children in which true doctrine is taught, the sacraments are faithfully administered, and people are cared for and matured in Christ.

They are communities called into existence by God through the gospel to:

1. *worship* God by listening to his word, receiving the signs and seals of his grace, relying on him in prayer, praising him in song, and living for him in faithful obedience;
2. *love* each other as they share life together, building each other up, by speaking the truth in love, towards maturity in Christ;
3. *bear* witness to Christ in word and deed by proclaiming the gospel and serving others in love in their local community, and beyond, as part of God's global mission

2. Healthy Christians: trusting in Christ and living for God's glory

These churches are made up of God's people, graciously chosen by God, and called, by his Word and Spirit, out of the state of sin and death, to grace and salvation by Jesus Christ.

They are people who:

1. trust in Christ alone for justification, sanctification and eternal life;
2. are committed to Christ and his gospel, through which they are being saved;
3. seek to grow in love for God and others;
4. demonstrate their faith in God and their repentance from sin in a life of loving obedience to their heavenly Father;
5. join with God's people in the worship and life of the local church;
6. use their God-given gifts to serve Christ in their churches, families, workplaces and all other areas of life.

3. Healthy leadership: teams of shepherds and servants under Christ

These churches are led by teams of properly qualified and carefully selected Shepherds (elders) who together, under Christ's authority and authorised by him, lead the church as it plays its crucial role in God's mission.

The task of the Shepherds, working together, involves:

1. *leading the church in its life and mission* — providing biblically-rooted, contextualised vision, leading the church in declaring the gospel to unbelievers, conducting God-glorifying worship, caring for people to see them mature in Christ, and organising community life so each member is freed and equipped to serve according to their gifts;
2. *praying with and for God's people* — leading the church in public and private prayer, and praying for the church together;
3. *proclaiming the gospel*, teaching the whole counsel of God from the Scriptures, and refuting those who oppose it – preaching and teaching in public, in small groups and in personal ministry, and equipping and empowering others to speak the truth in love in a range of contexts;
4. *modelling life in Christ* by setting an example of the Christian life of faith and repentance.

The goal of the Shepherds' work is that God's people might worship him, love each other, and bear witness to him in the world for God's glory.

Teams of Shepherds (sessions) work together to fulfil these common, God-given functions, but do so according to their diverse gifts. Each team will normally include at least one paid Shepherd (minister) who is set apart to 'labour in the word and teaching' (1 Tim 5.17).

Churches will also normally be cared for by properly qualified and carefully selected Servants (deacons), who manage the practical and material needs of the church, with particular concern for the needs of the vulnerable, weak and the poor.

Note: This theological vision adopts the titles 'Shepherds' and 'Servants'. These titles have good biblical foundations but are not in common use in the PCNSW. The hope is that the use of these titles will stimulate renewed reflection on the biblical vision for church government and leadership. The vision is not proposing that these titles be formally adopted in the church.

4. Healthy presbyteries and assemblies: working together for Christ's mission

Because God's church is united in Christ, Shepherds of particular churches work together in wider councils (Presbyteries and Assemblies) to promote joint gospel mission, and to oversee the health of the particular churches.

These councils:

1. provide a context in which Shepherds from different particular churches support and encourage each other;
2. carefully oversee the examination and setting apart of new Shepherds and encourage and discipline existing Shepherds;
3. pray and work for the health and mission of the churches, by applying God's word and prayerfully seeking to promote the growth of the gospel in and through them;
4. encourage, promote and enable the planting of new churches;
5. oversee, co-ordinate, resource and direct the wider mission of the church.

In the same way, Servants from particular churches work together in joint projects designed to demonstrate God's love by providing for the needs of the vulnerable, weak and poor.

Next Steps

This brief booklet could be used in your Bible Study Group, Committee of Management, Session, Presbytery or ... as a way of thinking through ways to improve health.

After reading through the Theological Vision we encourage you to reflect prayerfully on these questions:

1. Where are we relatively healthy and for what could we give thanks to God?
2. Where could our health be improved?
3. What changes could we introduce to promote improved health in these areas?

Please note: The more detailed Theological Vision has a section on 'Enabling Conditions' that you might find helpful. You can download it at

<https://christcollege.edu.au/refocus>

