

# **MISSED CALLS:**

**Examining candidacy for ordained ministry in the PCANZ  
through Northern Presbytery**

**An Executive Summary submitted to the Council of Northern Presbytery**

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## **THE ISSUE**

“Decline” is a word often used today to describe the church in New Zealand. While usually tied to religious affiliation, congregation membership, and worship attendance, it is now increasingly including clergy. This report is a response to the growing concern of the latter; especially with respect to the declining recruitment number for ordained ministry in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ) through the Northern Presbytery.

This concern was brought to the attention of Northern Presbytery Council towards the end of 2020 by Rev Dr Emma Keown, an assessor of the National Assessment Workgroup (NAW). Her deep distress was that the candidacy process for national ordained ministry (NOM) was “incredibly restrictive” culminating in fewer and fewer people applying for or engaging with candidacy. These are missed opportunities, hence the title of this report. But “Missed Calls” is not solely about missed opportunities of individuals in terms of their sense of call to such a vocation; rather, they are potential losses for the future of ordained ministry within Northern Presbytery and PCANZ.

This report is a response to the concerns raised. But there are challenges for this undertaking in terms of the extent of presbytery responsibility. The candidacy application requirements, assessment, and candidate convener procedures are all informed by the NAW processes. NAW operates under the auspices of the Leadership Sub-Committee (LSC) of Council of Assembly (COA) as does the ministry training programme through KCML. All of these components are related in providing a pathway towards ordained ministry. Therefore, any review or changes to the assessment process and ministry training must involve NAW and KCML and is ultimately a responsibility of the LSC and COA.

So, what is the real issue for Northern Presbytery? While Rev Dr Keown does not advocate lowering standards of the candidacy process requirements, she strongly contends that it should be possible for people to “begin the process in the first place.” If this is the case, then the real issue may not be any fault in the current candidacy process towards ordained ministry. Instead, it could very well be the lack of candidates “in the first place” who are considering and applying for candidacy.

## **AIM**

The study wanted to examine the status of ministry within Northern Presbytery regarding the sufficiency of ministers, but more so candidates for ministry. To assist that endeavour, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- **Is there a shortage of ministers in Northern Presbytery?**
- **Is there a decline of candidates for ministry from Northern Presbytery?**
- **If so, what factors contribute to the decline of candidates?**
- **What can be done to encourage more people to consider applying for ordained ministry?**

## **CLERGY & RECRUITMENT: OVERSEAS AND NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT**

To gain a greater appreciation of the issues raised, the study considered literature exploring clergy and recruitment shortage within the overseas context of the wider church. It found that Christian denominations had been struggling with these concerns for decades. While clergy leaving church ministry through retirement, death, or for other reasons is not new, what is a relatively recent development is the rapidly diminishing number of people taking up the opportunity of a vocation in ministry. The reasons may be mixed, but the reality is very clear.

The church in New Zealand is not exempt from this struggle either. Examining details from various denominations showed that they too are beginning to wake up to and grapple with the same disturbing reality. Within the PCANZ, there is growing concern of the availability of ministers reaching the age of retirement and possibly discontinuing in parish ministry. Filling the void of these positions has been helped somewhat through the reception of ministers already trained and ordained from other denominations. For the question: “Is there a minister shortage in Northern Presbytery?” The answer is: not at the moment. While parishes in Northern Presbytery have experienced decline in membership and church attendance, the majority of parishes are still served by at least one minister. However, this could all change in a few short years when many ministers will reach or exceed retirement age.

The second question: “Are there fewer candidates coming through for ordained ministry within Northern Presbytery?” The answer is: it appears so. While the number of candidates can fluctuate over the years, details for national assessment in the past decade showed that the total number of candidates attending significantly reduced by 82 percent. The dismal representation of candidates from Northern Presbytery included three respective years when none progressed to national assessment. The only positive was that most who did attend were successful in having their candidacy confirmed. Overall, there is very good reason for Northern Presbytery and PCANZ to be worried about the status of its future leaders in ordained ministry.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study sought to understand the experiences of those involved in the candidacy process within Northern Presbytery. Primarily, they were parishioners (20 – 50 years), ministers, and those who served in the role of presbytery candidate convener. A mixed methodology incorporating both quantitative and qualitative approaches was applied to gather and analyse information through questionnaires and in-depth interviews. There were, however, obvious limitations of this study. Due to the Covid-19 lockdowns, information was obtained via electronic means through online surveys and zoom interviews rather than in person and face-to-face. Moreover, the response rate to questionnaires and interviews was much lower than expected. Therefore, although the information obtained from respondents was helpful, they cannot be taken to generalise the whole of the target-groups in Northern Presbytery.

## FINDINGS

To answer the question: “What factors contribute to the decline of candidates?” the parishioner analysis revealed some interesting results. Among various factors identified, they culminated to four as having significant influence upon respondents.

1. **No clear sense of calling to ordained ministry.** The positive experiences of lay ministry in the parish does not necessarily motivate people to pursue ordained ministry in the wider church. The limited intentional exploration or discernment of God’s calling upon parishioners also limits the scope of their service.
2. **Lack of clarity and confidence regarding candidacy requirements and process.** It is not so much a matter of what information there is about candidacy; rather the challenge of accessing the information to have at hand and being supported to clearly understand candidacy expectations. Uncertainty and ambiguity about such requirements coupled with a vague sense of call makes the pathway to ordained ministry an extremely difficult choice for people.
3. **Personal and financial costs.** It appears that in assessing their future vocation in the church, people also wrestle with anticipated costs upon their finances and family life. This includes how the required theological studies would be covered (if studying fulltime) while still having to manage other financial commitments and how relocation affects the family dynamic if successfully entering the internship programme. Included in the sense of cost is the lengthy candidacy process discouraging some people not to pursue such a vocation. The low number of candidates in Northern Presbytery perhaps reflects the compounding uncertainty people have regarding the future that candidacy offers them and, therefore, choosing to avoid risking a pathway that could potentially incur greater hardship upon them.
4. **Greater preference for their current status.** Although the notion of ordained ministry may be an aspiration for people, the desire to pursue it does not appear to be as strong as the preference to remain where they are and doing what they currently do. Saying “no” to all the future uncertainties of candidacy might also be saying “yes” to the present securities of parishioner life.

Further to the above factors, the work of ministers also has a bearing upon those considering candidacy for ordained ministry. While they experienced the candidacy process themselves and were well established in parish ministry, ministers seemed less inclined to promote ministry candidacy in their work. They tended to encourage parishioner involvement in the congregation, but not the same extent regarding candidacy for ministry in the wider church. A consequence was the lack of serious engagement by ministers in the discernment of a parishioner’s sense of call to such a vocation.

Although most minister respondents believed they were familiar with relevant information of the candidacy process to advise people in their parish, a significant number remained very vague about such matters. It was not surprising, then, that most indicated that they had never put forward anyone from their parish as a candidate for

ministry. The unfamiliarity about relevant information involving candidacy requirements has implications for how they can assist a potential candidate.

Another integral role with respect to candidacy is the presbytery candidate convener. They are key to inform and assist candidates and ministers. While both ministers and candidate conveners are critical for parishioners about discernment of call and advice on how to deal with the challenges of candidacy, candidate conveners are the ones who seem to increasingly recognise the concerns of parishioners. In particular is the concern about costs that have a huge impact on those contemplating ordained ministry.

Despite the importance of the candidate convener role, it appears to be underutilised by ministers or parishioners. Like the low priority ministers give to promoting candidacy in their ministry, candidate conveners also appear to follow suit despite candidacy being their primary responsibility. Apart from the usual notice about candidacy amongst other Northern Presbytery notices, the effort looks very passive. The lack of intentionality and initiative-taking by church leaders seems to reflect a declining appreciation of ordained ministry. The disinterest in candidacy for ministry within Northern Presbytery is perhaps a consequence.

## **PROPOSALS**

The candidacy process is not a perfect system at the parish and presbytery level In Northern Presbytery. So, there is room for improvement. Drawing from what has been identified already, some proposals are offered as a helpful response to curb the reduction of candidates and, hopefully, turn it around. These proposals are:

### **1. Prioritise and encourage candidacy for ministry in congregations**

Not enough is being done by ministers or parish leaders to promote the vocation of ordained ministry to members. But if encouraging discernment for how God might be working in the lives of parishioners, including the possibility of candidacy, is not a priority in parish ministry, then the diminishing number of parishioners considering ordained ministry will most likely continue. It raises the question: where, then, does Northern Presbytery expect ministry candidates to come from?

### **2. Improve presbytery promotion of candidacy for ministry**

Raising the profile of candidacy for ordained ministry also needs to happen at presbytery level. Northern Presbytery is encouraged to find ways to be more proactive in how it communicates candidacy to parishes. This might involve varying the medium of communication as well as increasing the frequency of contact with parishes.

### **3. Develop a candidacy for ministry handbook**

This study clearly heard of the lack of clarity about the candidacy process. Both parishioners and ministers conveyed this concern. What might be a helpful way to increase the number of people contemplating and being assisted towards candidacy for ministry is for Northern Presbytery to have the relevant information in the form of a handbook. Having a handbook can be a helpful resource for parishioners, ministers, and candidate conveners.

The contents of the handbook is important. While this proposal is not meant to be prescriptive, the following are suggestions. There are certain aspects (already highlighted in this paper) that need to be articulated well in the handbook as part of the candidacy process. They can include the:

- discernment process at the parish level
- application requirements
- discernment and assessment process at the presbytery level
- national assessment process
- theological foundation studies
- internship programme

The handbook can also incorporate relevant dates for receiving applications as well as dates for presbytery and national assessments. Although much information about the requirements for NOM and LOM are on the KCML website, these can be simplified and integrated into a document that is clear, reader-friendly, and attractive to potential candidates. Having the profile of the presbytery candidate convener within it is also helpful as an initial introduction to enquirers of the appropriate presbytery person to have conversations with.

#### **4. Financial support for foundational studies**

An incentive for potential candidates for ministry is having the assurance that the costs for their foundation theological studies will be met. Rather than financial support though KCML being conditional upon the sufficiency of certain funds, meeting the costs of required studies needs to be more solid. Responsibility for funding the foundation studies of successful candidates (confirmed at national assessment) should lie at a higher level. It ought to be funded by the national church rather than by the presbytery. This would require approval from either LSC or COA or General Assembly. It would be an investment by the national church to enable new ministers to serve throughout the church. Knowing that such fees are secure means that the priority for potential candidates is ensuring that the parish discernment is affirmed, the application requirements are met, and the appropriate preparations made for presbytery assessment, and if successful, national assessment. It is proposed, then, that Northern Presbytery consider making a proposal to either LSC or COA or General Assembly to approve the funding of foundation studies for successful candidates for ministry.

#### **CLOSING COMMENT**

The proposals offer a hopeful way forward regarding candidacy for ministry for Northern Presbytery and its parishes. It means that the efforts of this study do not stop here but must continue through measures deemed appropriate to be implemented. A favourable outcome would see more people in congregations better encouraged and assisted about candidacy for ordained ministry. If this report can achieve that, then it may also serve as a helpful

and hopeful resource for other presbyteries and PCANZ as a whole. To reach this point could mean a change to the title of this paper from “Missed Calls” to “Calls Answered.”