



Prepared by Rev. Eliana Maxim

Self-Assessment: Presbytery of Yukon

INTRODUCTION AND PROCESS

Over a two-week period from September 6 through 17, conversations were conducted with over 40 ministry leaders in the presbytery including members of the Road Churches, Native (Village) Churches, Leadership Council, and the Ministry Commission.

Of note, there was no participation by any representative of the Korean churches and the youngest participant was a member of the native ministry team.

Similar questions were asked of participants as conversation starters to elicit relevant information to help form this report.

It has been said that transitional times are liminal phases that allow us the opportunity to examine ourselves and the system in which we operate, let go of what no longer serves us and our mission, and become transformed into who and what God is needing from us at this time. Liminality ultimately brings us into a deeper relationship with God.

In order to discover what this new thing the presbytery is being called to, conversations with the leadership were to address the four points that will serve as guides to both future restructuring and staffing. Each one will be addressed below, with commonly held beliefs and opinions highlighted. Recommendations follow.



IDENTITY

Who are we?

The Presbytery of the Yukon was unanimously described by all groups as geographically vast and diverse, with some churches in extremely remote locations. There is an appreciation for the cultural diversity in the presbytery and the acknowledgement that there is not equitable representation in all areas of leadership and the dominant white culture still prevails in these spaces. The reasons for this were varied including logistical challenges of distance and communication (spotty internet connection for many) and lack of leadership development primarily among the village churches.

There are both road and village churches with greater voice and attention given to the road churches. Several described the stance towards the village churches as still paternalistic.

The presbytery relationally functions like one huge extended family, with many relationships going back decades and rooted in various locations throughout the presbytery. Meetings are considered an opportunity to reconnect and hear from as many as possible.

Presbytery leaders are concerned about the lack of future leaders being nurtured and developed, the aging of both presbytery and local congregations, community challenges such as alcoholism, suicide, and homelessness. The impact of climate change on the communities in Alaska was also cited.

The aging of the congregations, inflexibility to consider alternative forms of theological formation, financial sustainability of the presbytery, and tendency to avoid change were all lifted as concerns for the future.



CONTEXT

Who do we serve?

The complexities of the presbytery are its gifts and challenges.

Serving 4 separate cultures and languages, with many unreachable churches except by dog sled or plane both enriches and limits the ministry. Many of the village or native churches are seen as a community outpost, providing support particularly to the youth, yet limitations of resources both financial and in leadership, prevents those local churches from being effective.

Not all churches are served by a minister of word and sacrament, but a few have been blessed with a commissioned lay pastor. The lack of an intentional leadership development program has prevented there being consistent pastoral presence in all churches.

Presbytery diversity also includes theological differences, and although the loss of several churches after the constitutional changes to the definition of marriage and ordination standards was (and continues to be) painful, most feel they can work well together despite differences.



VALUES

What do we stand for?

Another place of unanimous agreement was the significant work around race and reconciliation the presbytery has already accomplished. It has allowed for difficult subjects to be discussed, strengthened relationships within the presbytery as well with the denomination, and encouraged many that change is not only possible once but needs to continue.

This value is held so widely, that almost all participants were able to not only celebrate past events marking this work, but also pointed to the need to continue this reconciliatory work with indigenous communities as well as other marginalized groups. Many were able to identify how white dominant culture continues to exert power and influence throughout the presbytery and a shared desire to work towards its dismantling.

Relationships are extremely valuable and prized. The building of the Gamble Church provided a tangible opportunity to live into this. The expressed desire for any future presbytery executive to be more physically present in the North Slope seeks to nurture those relationships. There is a concern that the identity and values of being Presbyterian are not being shared with the youth.



PURPOSE

What is our call now?

When discussing the future of the presbytery, participants shared enthusiasm and optimism. There is energy and positivity in the core leadership groups plus the willingness to do the hard work necessary.

The following areas were the most mentioned about the future direction of the presbytery:

- Leadership development

There needs to be a strategic plan for leadership development across the presbytery, particularly in the native/village church communities. Whatever program is designed, it needs to be consistent and contextual. It needs to address the needs for pastoral leadership, ruling elders training, and faith formation for youth.

- Community engagement

Considering the significant social challenges facing many of the Alaskan communities, as well as the cultural value placed on existing churches, there is a desire and need to invest in ecumenical and secular partnerships. Native/village churches have identified their communities' need for the church to be a community center or outpost, going beyond worship on Sundays and providing a "third place" for doing life together.

- Creative ministry approaches

The presbytery of the Yukon presents unique challenges to ministry due to its geography, weather, and diversity. Participants in this study acknowledge the need to "think outside the box" and find creative ways to serve congregations and are willing to do it. Again, participants were energized to consider alternative ways to do ministry other than the way things have always been done. For example, explore innovative technology available to provide more consistent and reliable communication throughout the presbytery.



PURPOSE

What is our call now?

This could impact committee meetings and even the presbytery meeting schedule and format itself.

It was also expressed numerous times that the diversity of cultural identities throughout the presbytery are distinct and need to be addressed individually. This would also mean creating a contextually appropriate assessment to determine what is a viable congregation and how to walk alongside that church in its continuing service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. EP role, regardless of time commitment, should have the flexibility to physically be in the North Slope part of the time. This would provide the presbytery leader the opportunity to get to know these communities and begin to identify partnerships and future leaders so other presbytery leadership bodies are aware and invest in those relationships as well.
2. Because of the stated value and desire for not only diversity but equitable power distribution throughout all the churches, the presbytery staff should reflect the cultural makeup of the presbytery. At minimum, it is recommended that a native or village church leader be considered in some sort of partnership role with, if not the, executive presbyter. Whoever this individual(s) will be, they will need to be highly relational, culturally sensitive, flexible, and innovative (willing to experiment).
3. There was some conversation around merging the stated clerk and executive role into one position. Due to conflicting responsibilities in potential disciplinary matters, it is recommended to keep those two roles separate.



RECOMMENDATIONS

4. It would be helpful in the presbytery's commitment towards racial reconciliation and equity that both the structure and practices of the presbytery (from identification and preparation of future leaders to composition of leadership bodies, finances, and property policies) be examined to address potential ongoing colonizing and/or paternalistic attitudes and practices. This could be done through an outside source skilled in EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusivity) assessments.

5. A comprehensive leadership development strategy needs to be devised, considering the various needs throughout the presbytery. With the growing use of virtual training, it could be feasible to have a variety of ministry leaders not just in the presbytery but from the denomination, participate in this learning opportunity.