

Conference Review Stage 1 Report to 2018 Convention

Background

This Conference review was initiated by State Board in late 2016 to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of the Conference of Churches of Christ in SA and NT. After early considerations, State Board agreed to use the knowledge and experiences of Derek Linsell of Apricot Consulting to help resource this review.

Derek took direction from State Board regarding the scope of the Review, which was deliberately left broad in order to uncover all that was necessary, but was to include focus on:

- Addressing and improving relationships and cooperation within the Conference.
- Assessing the financial viability and governance of the Conference structures.

A small team of people, referred to as the Conference Review Team, comprising a mix of State Board members and others from our churches, were appointed to work directly with Derek through this process. Derek and the Conference Review Team then sought support from appropriate and willing people to form:

1. A 'Guiding Coalition' whose key responsibility would be to seek and assemble input for the review from each of our individual churches.
2. A team of 'Prayer Partners' to uphold all aspects of the process in prayer.
3. A 'Financial Sustainability Group' of experienced and knowledgeable, financial people. This team later renamed themselves as the 'Financial Review Committee' (FRC).

Guiding Coalition Consultations and Outcome

The 'Guiding Coalition' team consisted of 14 experienced 'facilitators' from various churches, with knowledge of Conference and State Board/State Office operations. Members of this team participated in a consultation process offered to each individual church in the Conference of Churches of Christ in SA and NT.

From the start of the Review, it was evident that this was a huge process which would need a phased approach. Stage 1 of the Review was designed to establish the views of congregations in regard to the currently perceived importance and value of our Conference, as well as thoughts about its future. In effect, 'Where we are Now' - to establish the views and commitment of our Conference, in order to help develop future plans for the Conference which would have widespread support and buy-in, as well as Biblical alignment.

Each of our churches was contacted to set up consultation meetings, with arrangements decided by the leadership of each individual church. Because of both the time constraints of churches and limited availability of the Guiding Coalition (GC) members, this consultation process took longer than expected, extending from July 2017 until March 2018. The leadership of some churches elected for their church not to participate in this process.

Of the 50 churches of the Conference engaged by the GC, 40 participated in this process. In order for this consultation to be consistent despite the different 'facilitators', all participants were provided with:

- A briefing paper regarding the Conference Review.
- An 'Action Sheet' which was used to record everyone's perspectives.

For transparency, all comments received from consultations are provided in the appendices of the full Conference Review report. Another small team of people then analysed all of these church responses (unidentified) to determine common themes.

Data from the GC visits showed an overwhelming affirmation and recognition of our desire to be Christ-centred, Biblically-based, communities of Christians who are relevant in our ministries and missional activities. We want to be about the building of disciples for God's Kingdom! A significant majority of people expressed a desire to be part of the Conference of Churches of Christ. This includes wanting support from State Board and State Office in various aspects of governance, despite our differences.

However, despite the overwhelming statement of wanting to be Churches of Christ together, there are tensions with and within the reports. Only 70% of churches participated; some voices are calling for a more centralised, governed, authority position; other voices argue the need for more autonomy (to the point of dissolving Churches of Christ state systems) and less relationship with other Churches of Christ.

Feedback strengthens our Churches of Christ conviction of a strong culture of unity and diversity - unity in Christ Jesus and His teaching; diversity in local expressions of ministry and mission. Due to the overwhelming response to this Conference Review, we can begin to explore the direction the Holy Spirit is taking this movement over the next 5 to 10 years.

Financial Review Committee Conclusions and Recommendations

Originally tasked with '*finding an additional \$300,000 to make the Conference of Churches of Christ in SA and NT financially sustainable*', the committee concluded early in its deliberations that there was no 'magic pudding' for sourcing this income. However, the FRC also concluded that there was no immediate crisis, because the present strategy to fund Conference deficit budgets by using the interest only from our Conference trusts/investments (from previous property sales) was appropriate as an interim measure.

The FRC noted that the Conference needed to become financially sustainable in the next 2-3 years, leaving our investments to grow for future new church development.

Some key findings of the FRC are:

- We need a solid financial base in order to support our churches' Spiritual, Missional growth and care.
- We need changes in other areas before we can get the financial side right.
- All churches need to commit to the Conference for it to work.
- Healthy churches are a pre-requisite for a healthy Conference.

In reviewing reports from the FRC, it is apparent that Conference sustainability could be achieved by churches funding the full cost of Conference services through increased affiliation fees, through ensuring that all churches contribute an appropriate share and through careful monitoring of expenditure, to match budgeted income.

Conference Review Workshop on 1st September

The Conference Review team, Financial Review Committee, State Board and key State Office personnel gathered for an all-day workshop on 1st September to report and discuss the findings from the various review committees. The gathering also discussed two other key considerations:

1. The critical importance of good governance for our churches and Conference.
2. The risks/concerns for the health of our Conference which need to be addressed.

Where to From Here

With data gathered and assessed, the First Stage of the Conference Review is now complete. The report will be presented to State Board for consideration and identification of future plans to progress the review and to address the concerns identified.

The Conference Review process has not used Derek Linsell's services since April this year. One recommendation to State Board from the Conference Review team is that Derek's involvement is no longer required.

The Financial Review Committee has agreed that their task is completed and will only re-form when changes are in place. We express our thanks for the contribution of all FRC members as well as that of Catherine Nikkerud and James Bowden, who have concluded their time on the Conference Review team.