

Uniting Church in Australia

Central West Presbytery

Project Reconnect

Report on the MLMA Congregations



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Dedicated to the
Village congregations of the Mid Lachlan Mission Area
Who are truly
faithful, inspiring and courageous.

Contents:

Executive Summary:	3
Where is Project Reconnect happening in the MLMA:	4
What are the congregations who participate in PR like:	5
Presentation of PR to the Congregations of the MLMA:	6
The change process:	7
Training and Transition to Project Reconnect:	10
The “Message”, “Questions” and “Discussion time”:	11
What is “Church” and how do you understand “Worship” now that you use PR?	16
How do communities make decisions?	17
Resources and how congregations use them:	18
Learning Styles of congregations in the MLMA:	19
Personality Types in the MLMA:	20
Conclusions:	20

Executive Summary:

The Central West Presbytery as part of a pilot project designed to assist congregations to get started with Project Reconnect has commissioned this report.

The pilot program has two main functions.

Firstly to identify in the congregations of the Mid Lachlan Mission Area the successful strategies that have been used to introduce Project Reconnect. Document the benefits to these communities of using Project Reconnect. Make recommendations on any areas of Project Reconnect that may need to be improved.

Secondly to implement best practice ways of introduction to Project Reconnect in the light of the experience of the Mid Lachlan Mission Area, within the Central West Presbytery.

The congregations of the Mid Lachlan Mission Area have been most successful in creating vital and meaningful worshiping communities. In the face of change and possible closure, these congregations have learnt to be creative, persistent and responsive to the working of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

The congregations of the Mid Lachlan Mission Area have struggled at times to let go of traditional ways of being the church at worship. They have concerns for the authentic nature of their faith community and still worry about their long-term future.

In making recommendations for the future direction and implementation of Project Reconnect I would make the following key points:

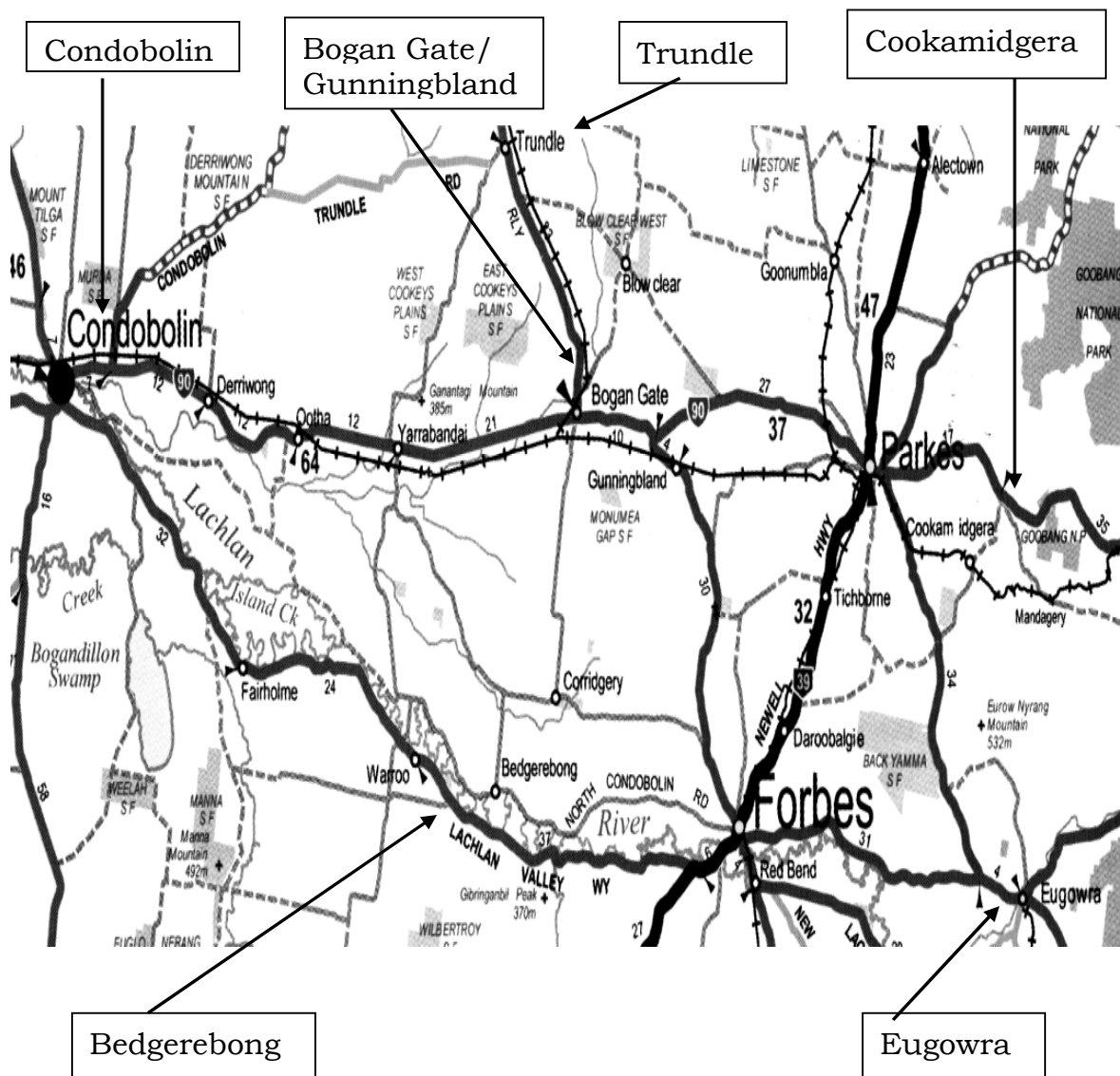
- The change process takes time and intentional long-term commitment by all stakeholders.
- The development of an ecclesiology in response to Project Reconnect will aid the church in implementing life giving communities.
- Spiritual growth, development and change do not happen without training, encouragement and the help of theologically mature and faithful people to walk beside congregations.
- For Project Reconnect to work well “safe” places to “speak” and “be” within community need to be developed and maintained.
- As the church we need to understand and respond to the call of God to be communities of kingdom people forever on the journey of spiritual awakening whatever our location and situation.
- The encouragement of congregations to engage in good decision-making processes aids participation, communication and self-determination.
- Ownership and engagement of people within their own context is revitalising to communities.

Where is Project Reconnect happening in the Mid Lachlan Mission Area?

The Mid Lachlan Mission Area is located in the Central West of New South Wales.

There are six rural village congregations in the Mid Lachlan Mission Area (MLMA) centred on the towns of Parkes and Forbes. Five of the six congregations have been using Project Reconnect (PR) over the last 5 years. The other congregation has been using PR for three years.

There is approximately 150 km's from east to west in the MLMA. These towns and villages are centred on farming, community service facilities and small rural supply businesses.



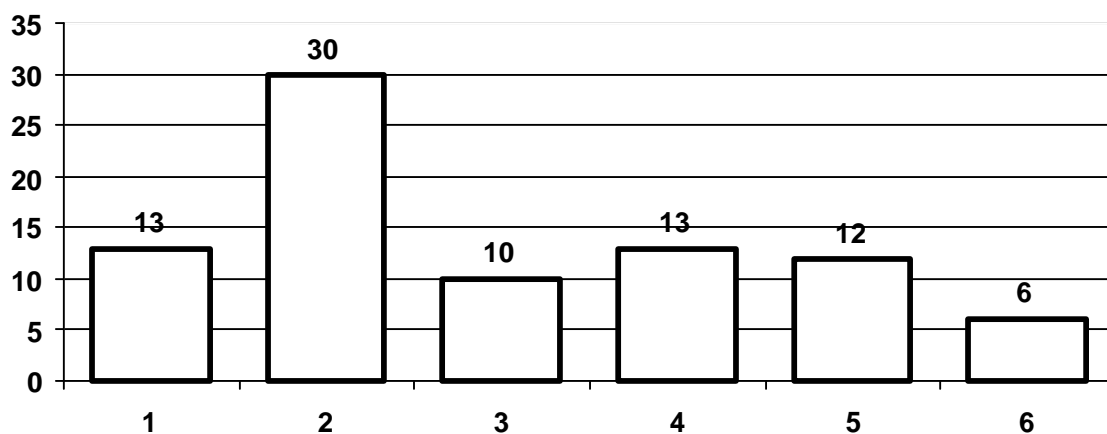
What are the congregations who participate in Project Reconnect like?

The total number of participants who were identified by the congregations in the MLMA was 84. Average attendance at congregations in the MLMA is 14. However, if we discount the large number of young families in congregation number two who do not attend as regularly, the average number is 10. It can also be observed in the graph, that four of the six congregations have ten to thirteen members attending regularly.

A number of additional people have begun worshiping with the congregations of the MLMA since the start of PR. This has mostly happened because they have come into the region for employment, or retired from farms to the nearby town, and now come on a regular basis.

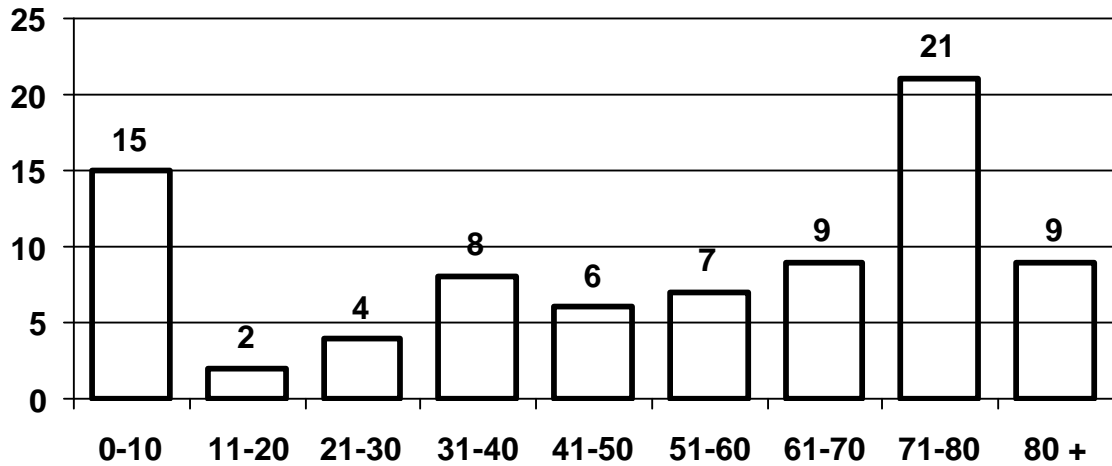
Also some people, who did not come very regularly to church, now do so. Some started to come to help with the technical side of PR; others because they have seen the change that has taken place in the community; but all now participate on a regular basis. A number of people have left the district because of retirement or changed circumstances. (This information has not been sourced from the congregations, because they feel that this is of a sensitive nature.) This has meant that the numbers of people who attend MLMA services using PR has remained static since the start of the project.

Average congregation size in the MLMA:



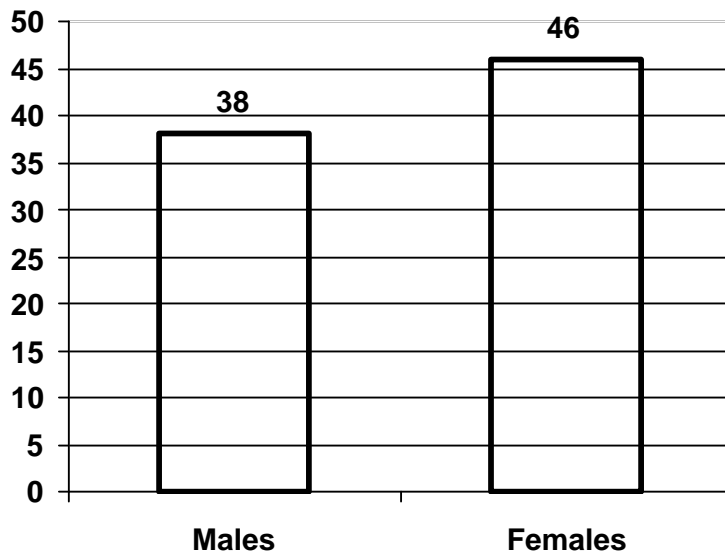
Participants' ages range widely, but the most represented group is the people over the age of 60. The average age of participants in PR congregations is 48 years. However, one congregation has a large number of young families who come irregularly to the family service held once a month. If we discount the irregular attendance of the 0 – 10 year olds and their parents, average age is increased to 62 years.

Age range of the MLMA congregations:



The ratio of Males to Females in the congregations who participate in PR is. Males = 45%
Females = 55%

Males to Females in the MLMA congregations:



Presentation of Project Reconnect to the Congregations of the MLMA:

A number of questions were put to the congregations of the MLMA, regarding the way that PR was presented to them at its inception. They were also asked about their feelings toward the change from traditional worship to using PR, and the way in which they had been involved in PR since its commencement. They responded almost unanimously in negative ways with responses like:

- *We were against the move to using PR at the start.*
- *We were hesitant and not at all sure about PR.*
- *We had questions on whether it would work.*
- *Would we lose a minister all together?*
- *We are too set in our ways.*
- *Some of us had thoughts of missing out on the sacraments altogether.*
- *People were a bit dubious about PR when it was first introduced*
- *Others thought it was going to be expensive.*
- *We were a bit sceptical of PR working*

This response can be seen as the most usual reaction to change by the congregations of the MLMA. There is a lesson to be learned here, about persisting in the change process. Also, it needs to be recognised, that the leadership continued to encourage the congregations in the most positive way possible, to engage in the process of change. All the congregations commented, at some point, on the fact that it takes time and effort to get used to PR, but now they do not want to go back to traditional worship.

The change process:

The change process was explored by a series of questions on how change had occurred, and what had helped to bring about the change for congregations in the MLMA. The outcome of the change process for these congregations has been almost totally positive. The comments of the congregations included positive responses like these:

Participation:

- *The rise in our confidence about PR has occurred through participation in worship.*
- *We can see that participation in worship is a major factor in turning around our negative feelings toward PR.*
- *We have learnt more since we have had to participate in worship; we used to turn off but now we own what we do.*
- *We have grown spiritually through participating in PR.*
- *Our leader for the day hands out parts and we contribute from where we sit. This makes using PR easier, as getting up in front of people and speaking is rather daunting.*

Ownership:

- *PR is a genuine form of worship and a true expression of our faith.*
- *We now own our worship and get a real buzz out of knowing that other worship centres right around Australia are doing this too.*
- *We listen to the message now & pay attention to what is being said.*
- *People now feel secure and comfortable using PR and see that there is now a possibility for growth.*
- *Having “Words for Worship” to place into the liturgy has meant that everyone can participate; this has helped to change our sceptical attitude that PR would not work, because we would not know what to say or do.*

Binding communities together:

- *We are now much closer to each other and supportive of one another.*
- *We have got to know each other.*
- *There is better communication between each other.*
- *People are now willing to pull together.*
- *We are now very chatty.*
- *The music resource has helped a lot as this creates an atmosphere in a small congregation with few singers.*

Time and use factor:

- *We have just got used to PR as the time has gone on.*
- *Using PR and the technology has helped to change our feelings toward PR.*

Variety is the spice of life:

- *We very much enjoy the different messages.*
- *The variety of presenters and their different points of view adds to our faith.*
- *A variety and change in the music resource like the different presenters would help to keep PR interesting.*

New emerging roles:

- *New roles have emerged by using PR. Encouragement and support of these roles by all, has helped to build our sense of growing as a community of faith.*
- *Everyone has a role to play from the youngest to the very old.*

Sense of vitality about worship:

- *There is some newness about our family service now.*
- *Some understanding of how and why the questions are posed has helped.*
- *We understand the service better.*

We're not alone:

- *Traditional worshippers assisting with PR helps us feel that we are not alone.*
- *We now own our worship and get a real buzz out of knowing that other worship centres right around Australia are doing this to.*

Encouragement by Mentors:

- *We are now happy about using PR and greatly appreciate the encouragement from our mentors.*

When we look at the contrast between the congregations' feelings at the inception of PR, and their feelings now, we can see that there has been a dramatic change in culture, attitude and practice of worship, and the way in which they live out their faith. There is no doubt that the participation that is encouraged by PR, through the discussion time and the various parts that go together to make up a service of worship, has been critical in the change process. Any future development of PR to new congregations needs to take into consideration this aspect. Discouragement of traditional forms of using PR (such as a worship leader standing at the front and leading most of the parts in the service) needs to be foremost in the minds of any mentor working with congregations. Member's participation in PR services has directly led to ownership of worship and faith, by the community in their location.

Ownership is also a critical factor in the understanding of what it is to be called to be the people of God in any particular place. This changes the perception of the role of ministry agents and their role within the community. It also changes the role and responsibilities of communities of faith, from passive consumers of faith, to self-determiners of their future faith activities. This shift is from sole leader and knowledge source to being the resourcing/enabling agent of faith exploring with the community what the call of God is in this context. This role is consistent with the approach we see expressed in Ephesians 4: with the gifts of ministry exercised for the building up of the saints.

This change of role for the ministry agents/congregations has been more difficult for some of the congregations to come to terms with than others. It has meant, for some, that they still wish for a minister to lead and "do" worship for them. But other congregations are actively exercising their faith through their worship, work and community activities.

All this change has taken time and all congregations indicated that the use of PR over time has helped to change their feelings toward the concept of PR.

It is encouraging to hear some of the congregations talk about the way they enjoy the different approaches to scripture, and how presenters tackle different issues. This has meant, for many, that they have started to question what it is they really believe, and why. This sense of spiritual journeying is important to how we perceive others, our communities and ourselves, and is a step in re-connecting with each other, our faith stories and our communities.

The changes that have come about through PR have meant that new roles have emerged in the community. This is encouraging to see, as people exercise their gifts and build up the rest of the community.

Where once a sense of isolation existed for many of these congregations, this has changed to feeling that they are part of something much bigger. Having previously relied on larger centres or a minister to be the church, or to gain any sense of identity, isolation could have become a negative factor. But this has been far from the case. In fact, although geographically isolated in some cases, these communities feel very much

part of a larger dynamic that is going on. They feel, rightly so, that they are at the cutting edge of the changes that are taking place within the church and across the country. PR has helped them to connect with many other communities just like their own, and this gives them hope for the future.

Without doubt, the role of mentors in the change process has been significant. It is interesting to note that, mostly, the congregations do not remember what training and mentoring they received. The fact that these congregations have embraced PR in such a positive way is testament to the work done by these mentors. That the congregations don't remember any significant input from mentors, suggests that the mentors have done a fine job in transferring ownership across to the people they worked with, from the very beginning.

Training and Transition to Project Reconnect:

The training that these congregations received at the start of PR was concentrated on the conducting of worship. This was done by looking at orders of service, sharing the roles and encouraging the discussion. Also some practical training as to how the technology side of things worked was given.

These are some of the responses that were given when asked about the training received:

Initial training:

- *No training or support was given.*
- *It just happened as we practiced it.*
- *It was a feet first approach and a matter of sinking or swimming.*
- *Mentors worked with us on how to construct an order of service.*
- *Resource material (Words for Worship) was explained.*
- *Technical training for the DVD/TV operation was given.*
- *Mentors helped to support us as we got used to using PR for our worship.*

Ongoing Training and workshops:

- *Workshops were run on integrating prayer and issues from the community into worship.*
- *Extra resources made available via ministry agents.*
- *A workshop was held on using "Words for Worship"*
- *Workshop on using Seasons of the Spirit.*
- *Pastoral care training*
- *Training for preparing sermon/message/youth messages for the DVD.*

Suggestions for starting new congregations on PR:

- *"KISS" (keep it simple stupid)*
- *Start out with a simple service.*

- *Use one resource only initially until the group gets the hang of what is going on. A resource like “Words for worship” could be used.*
- *A building block approach. One step at a time.*
- *We feel that the best way for the transition to PR for others is for a mentor to show them how PR works, offer encouragement and then be in contact as learning takes place.*
- *Bible studies and programs like Emmaus Walks would help to educate people and give them more confidence in leading and participating in worship.*
- *The use of the lectionary readings, either just the readings that are coming up for that week or the daily resource of “With Love to the World”, would be helpful to get people used to the idea of looking at the passages and getting an understanding of what they were about.*

As can be seen from these responses the initial response is for congregations not to remember what training they received. Later people can then recall some of the workshops and resources that they have been made aware of and helped to use. This has contributed to the changing role of the ministry agents. They have become the resource for the building up of the community of faith.

There are some good practical suggestions on starting congregations with PR. With the simple step-by-step encouragement of mentors the training and transition to PR can happen with a minimum of disruption.

The “Message”, “Questions” and “Discussion time”.

The ethos of PR is “Participation, Communication and Self-Determination”. This encourages engagement with the faith in a number of ways. Firstly people are given parts within the service of worship. This encourages participation by everyone. Participation brings about ownership. Ownership means self-determination.

The message becomes the place where the scriptures are expounded in such a way as to invite the congregation into the participation of proclaiming the gospel message in the context of their situation. Although this is the intended outcome of traditional preaching the responses from these congregations of the MLMA would suggest that mostly people turn off and do not engage the message. They made comments like:

- *“I used to count the boards in the ceiling before PR, now I own what is said and done”*
- *“We listen to the message now and pay attention to what is being said”.*
- *The discussion and questions helps us to concentrate on the message.*

The MLMA congregations have learned that the key to participation is “trying to engage” the message and each other, even when “it is hard to find the words to express what we think”. The message presenters are very much appreciated for the way in which they bring new ideas and

perspectives into the community's life. This is expressed in comments like:

- *The message opens us up to different ideas*
- *We get to hear different views, which we find really positive.*
- *The message followed by the discussion makes your brain wake up and pay attention.*
- *The different views expressed on the DVD by the presenters bring challenges to our set ideas.*
- *We now talk about the message rather than the weather.*
- *Variety is good; it's stimulating, learning to hear many points of view.*
- *The more relaxed the presenters appear the better we hear them.*
- *We are interested to hear what they have to say.*

The messages that seem to be most engaging of the congregations are those that are down to earth, making use of the issues and images that are relevant to the daily lives of the people. The more valued messages are those that are done in a conversational manner, rather than a more traditional preaching style, have less complex theological terms and concepts, are engaging and to the point. This seems to lead into more meaningful conversations, particularly when the following questions for discussion are spoken about and explained in clear and direct ways.

The message is also a good place for the encouragement of a theological understanding of church in the light of PR by the people. It also enables these presenters, who have roles in the wider church to articulate to others such an understanding. Presenters have an opportunity to validate for these village congregations their worship and the style in which they are being church with the aid of PR as a true expression of the faith of people who now find themselves in a context that has not been faced by the church before.

The congregations have raised a number of issues about the questions. They sometimes find the questions difficult, theologically complex, and not relevant to their context. These comments are expressed in terms of:

- *The time the discussion is flat is when the questions are difficult.*
- *Sometimes the questions are difficult and we don't know what to say.*
- *Long "wordy" questions were the one thing they would like to change.*
- *Sometimes the questions are not always suitable for people who live in a rural environment this leads to the discussion falling flat.*
- *Sometimes we skip questions that are too difficult but try to keep on track as much as possible.*

There are four questions on each DVD, designed to stimulate the discussion. The person who is presenting on the DVD poses the questions for discussion. These presenters are either Clergy from the MLMA, Central West Presbytery or Lay-Preachers from the MLMA. They are all well aware of the rural context into which they preach. The questions that are formed by the presenters are done so on the understanding of:

Question 1.

The idea of this question is to invite individuals to comment on what they heard the speaker say. Or there might be some issues that the listener might have been challenged about by way of the message.

Question 2.

The second question is about inviting people to reflect on how they have experienced the things talked about in the message in their own life ... in the ordinariness of their experience.

Question 3.

The third question is about the community of faith. It might be about how the community helps us to grow. Or how the community's faith helps us to grow.

Question 4.

The fourth question is about connecting with the wider community. Or we can ask where we are now, or what we could be to the community?¹

As the presenters prepare their message and pose their questions, these guidelines give clear direction. While we should not dismiss the observations by the congregations as to the questions, we need to recognise the role of the presenters in pushing the boundaries of faith and understanding. There is no doubt however, that on occasions, the questions are obscure and sometimes hard to make sense of. When this happens, feedback is most useful. From all accounts this has helped both presenters and congregations to improve this aspect of PR in the last couple of years.

The PR team needs to continue to encourage presenters to use the guidelines and make questions as accessible as possible. The congregations also need to be encouraged to use their strategies of positively engaging the questions. Either by addressing them directly, taking one particular aspect of the question and working on that, re-framing the question in a way that does speak to them in their context, or moving on to a question that does beg to be answered. Some of the congregations are already doing this, as can be seen with this sort of comment:

- *Sometimes we skip questions that are too difficult, but try to keep on track as much as possible.*
- *Usually some discussion starts even if it is a tangent to the question asked.*
- *It's OK to get off track sometimes.*
- *We go to the next question when this happens or we talk about another issue.*
- *We need to be brave in saying the things that we think in the discussion time.*

¹ Rev Tom Stuart and others. 2001. Development of Project Reconnect. Mission Resource Application 2001.

- *We usually have a discussion leader who helps to start the discussion time.*
- *Sometimes there are two or more thoughts that could speak to the question. When this happens we often just leave it floating, which gives us sometime to think about what has been said.*

One community expressed that permission had been given to explore where the questions take them, without completely losing a sense of order. They have taken this quite literally and it has released a great sense of freedom to share and explore what the God issues are for them as a community. This release of vitality is to be encouraged in all congregations. In the words of this group, *“We are strong and confident in our faith to hear other voices and add these to our experience of faith”*.

One of the unique aspects of PR is the incorporation of the discussion time into the service of worship at the point in which congregations connect with the “Service of the Word”. This discussion is facilitated by a series of questions that arise from the message that is both theologically and contextually informing and enabling of the people to proclaim the gospel in the context they are in.

One congregation said *they felt that the discussion time was primarily responsible for their growth personally and spiritually*. Another congregation said, *“Sometimes it is hard to convey personal thoughts, because you are dealing with issues that touch your life and values”*.

From just these two comments it can be seen how much of an impact the discussion time has had on these communities. It should not be underestimated what the discussion time has brought about in terms of re-connecting people with each other, their faith stories and the way in which they live in their communities. We can see this impact on the community in these sorts of comments:

- *When PR first started we found it awkward to say what we thought in front of others.*
- *Having a laugh at yourself, helps at times to break the ice.*
- *There are times of silence when you feel an expectation to speak.*
- *We don’t mind that people have different opinions.*
- *We have got to know each other on a much deeper level since we started the discussion time.*
- *Sometimes it is hard to find the words to express what we think.*
- *We need to be brave in saying the things that we think in the discussion time.*
- *In time the discussion grows on you.*
- *There are times you just don’t know what to say.*
- *You need to respect the views of others.*
- *We feel that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions we are just happy to hear other points of view. It helps us to grow.*

One congregation, in explaining how PR works, said: *“PR has a message followed by a discussion, which brings about the reward of understanding the message”*. This conceptual understanding of the process of PR is

insightful of the need for participation by every member of the congregation. It is only when participation happens that learning, understanding, spiritual growth and the gospel message are placed into the context of the community.

To encourage participation, a discussion leader is suggested to the congregations as a means by which many voices can be heard. Not all congregations have a discussion leader, but those who do tend to recognise the importance of encouraging people to participate, stopping those who don't know when to stop and starting the discussion with a comment or suggestion. These congregations express this by saying:

- *We usually have a discussion leader who helps to start the discussion time, move it on and generally encourage everyone to have their say.*
- *We now know things about each other and try to encourage individuals to contribute when there are questions that really relate to their experience.*
- *We are aware that we need to move on with the questions sometimes, when people are talking too much, and time is always a factor.*

These congregations tend to be more open to hearing a range of views and concepts, and are more theologically open to new understanding. Their members also experience these communities as “safe” places to be vulnerable to one another in. This has been invigorating for the life of these congregations and it's most encouraging to hear comments like:

- *PR has brought out our identity through participation.*
- *The discussion helps us to ground, refocus and get into perspective the issues we face, like drought, work, kids/grand children and general living in the light of our faith.*
- *“It helps us live from the “Heart”.*
- *The discussion has opened up new ways for us.*
- *It's a positive growing experience to be part of the discussion.*
- *The discussion helps us now to look personally at our ideas.*
- *We now communicate with each other.*
- *The discussion with the different views expressed challenges us to think about what we really believe.*
- *We have grown spiritually because of the discussion.*
- *We like to hear the different points of view that are expressed in the discussion and sometimes this leads to having to go away and think through the ideas that are given.*
- *The discussion helps to bring understanding to what we read in books or ideas that some people express.*

All congregations are encouraged not to look for the “right” answer to the questions, but explore what God might be saying to them in these different views.

Discussion leaders, and the whole congregation, have a role to play in discouraging comments and attitudes that close down the discussion,

dismiss ideas out of hand, reject discussion of questions and maintain the status-quo of positions of power and domination within communities.

What is Church and how do you understand Worship now that you use PR?

In looking at PR and how this resource is enabling congregations to be the people of God. How do these people now view the church and worship? Is this different to the way in which other people may see traditional churches and worship? This is summary of the responses given:

Church is:

- *Fellowship of believers gathering together.*
- *Building.*
- *Date each week.*
- *People – not the building.*
- *Family.*
- *Important place.*
- *Fellowship.*
- *Witness to the community.*
- *A place to come.*
- *To recharge our selves.*
- *Place to worship*
- *Learning.*
- *Sharing ideas.*
- *Place to give thanks.*
- *Prayer – a place to express grief.*
- *Part of our life.*
- *Cause for good.*
- *Its there.*

Worship is:

- *As above.*
- *A place to learn.*
- *An opportunity to express the fellowship we have.*
- *Praising God.*
- *Fellowship with others.*
- *To petition God.*
- *A good sing.*
- *Comfort.*
- *We are reminding the wider community of God's active presence in our community.*
- *Fun.*
- *Learning experience.*
- *Sharing and caring*
- *Bouncing ideas (The events of life and how they can be handled by bouncing ideas off each other in a safe environment.)*
- *Grounding and refocusing. (A real sense of getting into perspective the things that are being experienced eg. Drought, work, kids/grand children)*
- *What we do on Sundays*

- *Expression of our relationship with God.*
- *One of the places God speaks to us.*
- *Draw near to God.*
- *What you make it.*
- *Variety of ideas. (What we hear from each other)*
- *Thanking the Lord*
- *Renewing our faith*

There is a range of views about church and worship. Some are quite traditional, some reflect the way in which church and worship is being practiced in these congregations. Other views are quite abstract in their concept of what church and worship are about. Mostly, people didn't consider a conceptual understanding of church and worship as a high priority. Some had not ever thought about church and worship in these terms before. But all have in some way brought an understanding of these things as they worship and regularly gather together in an expressed form we might call church.

This mixed response to a conceptual understanding of what church and worship is, highlights the need for some theological reflection on PR and the roles people play in such an understanding of church. This is particularly important in congregations where there is still dispute and grief over perceived roles and the loss of traditional ministry. Until a clear understanding of our sense of the call of God to people in this context can be articulated, these congregations will not move on into a robust faith that is life giving and vital, to the individual and community alike. It is also important for new congregations, who are looking at the future ministry options they have open to them. If a clear practical theology of PR can be expressed to these people, they will be more likely to be able to move forward and experience the renewal that congregations in the MLMA have done. It helps also as we consider the implications of lay-ministry positions, lay-presidency and the future roles of ministry agents in rural communities. There is also a role here for such a theology as the wider church addresses the decline in traditional institutional churches.

How do communities make decisions?

How communities of faith make decisions about future directions, their sense of being the church and discerning the calling of God in their lives, is critical to the way in which PR, or any other new initiative, is presented. There were correlations between the comments made about decision-making, and the expressed learning styles indicated in the exercises on learning that were carried out. Some of these comments were:

- *We listen to different ideas and make choices that are viewed as positive to the life of the community.*
- *We never give up on there being an alternative vision for the future or some life giving change coming about.*
- *We feel that talking things over with each other around a cuppa tea often sorted things out and decided the way forward.*

- *We encourage meeting together to talk over the decisions that needed to be made and that choices were talked about until a clear direction came about.*
- *“Knowing each other” was most helpful to decision making; also we have a sense that we’re in this situation together and have to work it out.*
- *There is frustration about the way decisions are made.*
- *We walk together.*
- *We respect each other to do and be who they are.*
- *We are open to hear others ideas.*
- *We live from the heart.*
- *We are determined to make it work. “Necessity is the mother of invention”.*

This decision making process has worked extremely well in some of the communities. It has helped to empower people and communities, as they take ownership of their faith journey. This has been expressed in comments like *“the choice to take on PR has brought about a resurrection of our Church and life”*. It also helps these groups to take responsibility for their future direction and they now see their life together as a *“positive growing experience that opens up new ways”*. The determination shown by these communities to stick at the hard choices that need to be made at times, so that life giving change might come about, is truly inspiring.

Other communities have struggled more with this decision making process. This has led to a general frustration about the future, and the whole process of working together as a community. Differences in learning styles, and conceptual understandings of church and worship, have led to stagnation. Dominant personalities, who fear the changes that have come about through PR, make community life and development very difficult. The encouraging way that some communities go about exploring a range of ideas and ways forward, in a non-threatening way, is to be encouraged in other congregations that struggle with this issue.

Resources and how congregations use them.

The congregations of the MLMA identified a number of different resources that they saw as being available to them.

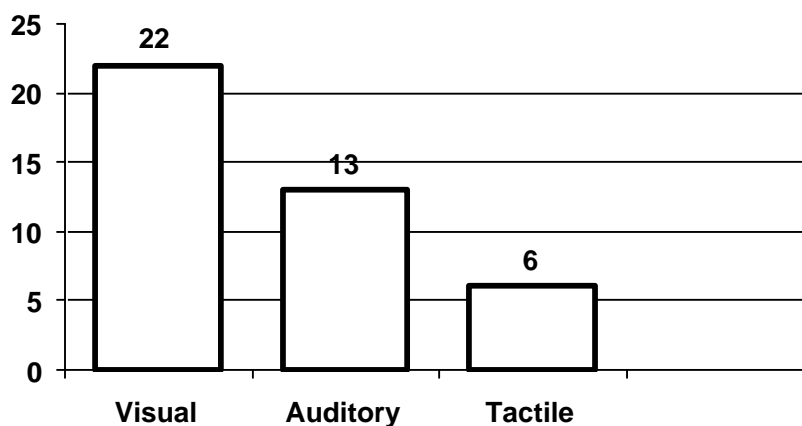
- *Words for Worship* (Media Com)
- *Seasons of the Spirit*. (Media Com)
- *Blue people’s book* (Uniting in Worship)
- *Hymn books* (Australian Hymn Book, Together in Song (AHB 2))
- *With love to the world* (Daily Bible reading Resource based on the Revised Common Lectionary)
- *Music on CD/DVD’s* (other than what’s on the PR DVD)
- *Songs of Praise*. (Music Resource)
- *Other music resources.*
- *Kids scripture resources.*
- *Rev Bronwyn Murphy. Presbytery resources for Christmas/Lent*
- *Rev John Rühle resources for worship/prayer.*
- *Ms Sue Dunbar – spiritual direction and programs.*

- *Minister brainstorming. Along side of congregations.*

All these resources were seen as being available to the congregations to enhance worship and support them. Mostly the congregations found it hard to adapt or integrate these resources to their context, even though there have been workshops and training held with this in mind. It is encouraging to see the way in which Presbytery and MLMA leaders are being used as resource people to build up and support the congregations, and not as the ones who “do” worship or community building for them.

Learning Styles of congregations in the MLMA:

With the aid of a “Learning Style” resource² congregations identified for themselves their preferred learning styles.



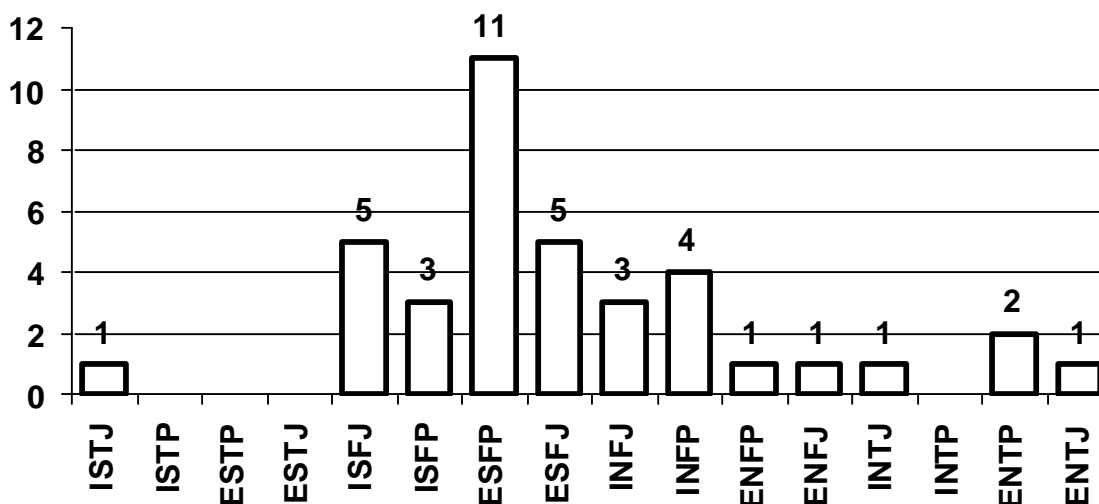
The accuracy of identifying learning styles by congregations in this way is not high. In interpreting the learning style indicators, they should be used as a guide only to the preferred way of learning. Three of the congregations indicated a single (two “visual” one “auditory”) learning style. Two indicated strongly toward one style (“visual/auditory and auditory/tactile) but had some of its members in another learning style. One congregation had a balance of styles with only a slight preference to “visual learning”. In gathering the data it could be seen that comments made about issues raised and the way in which congregations made decisions correlated to the learning style they indicated. This was particularly true of the congregation who made comments about hearing and listening to each other and then indicated their learning style as “auditory”.

There is clearly a strong trend to visual learning within the MLMA congregations. But, any mentoring work that may take place with new congregations needs to be aware of using and encouraging the other learning styles as well. The DVD provides good visual stimulation as well as encouraging people to speak and be heard. The encouragement of tactile exercises for the congregations, which correspond with the message for the day, could be considered as a good addition to the worship services.

² Elm Centre. UCA Board of Education.

Personality Types in the MLMA:

An attempt to map the personality types of the congregations was carried out. This was done in a very simplistic way that merely gives some sort of indication of the personality types of the congregations. This indication should not be viewed as accurate.



The one comment that could be drawn from this set of data is that the majority of people who attend congregations within the MLMA fall into a narrow range of personality types.

Conclusions:

There are a number of issues that have come out of the consultation with the congregations of the Mid Lachlan Mission Area (MLMA). These include the typical nature of the congregations of the MLMA.

Congregations like those found in the MLMA are to be found right across Australia. There are over 200 congregations of less than 20 members in the NSW Synod alone. These congregations, like those in the MLMA, tend to be in the age group of 60+ with 10 –15 members regularly attending worship. These congregations, on the whole, face an uncertain future. They are largely dependent on scarce clergy/lay preachers to lead worship. Economic pressures tend to be at the forefront of congregations future directions and planning. This is contrast to an understanding of the call of God to be communities of kingdom people, whatever their location and situation.

Congregations generally find it hard to be motivated and vital in their faith when faced with this sort of scenario. How congregations can be resourced, encouraged and revitalised in their faith is an issue that the wider church, with the participation of these sorts of congregations, is seeking to address. Project Reconnect (PR) is one way that this question has been tackled, making use of available technology and tapping into the communal nature of village congregations. As can be seen from the experiences of the congregations of the MLMA, PR offers these congregations a transformational way forward.

There is a need for encouragement of congregations by larger worship centres, other linked congregations and the Presbytery. This encouragement is essential, to legitimise and affirm the faithfulness of congregations to the Christian way of life and worship, as they move from traditional worship to using PR. As congregations change away from a form of worship that has been meaningful and significant in their lives and families, for generations in some cases, this encouragement is an aid to them as they deal with the grief and sense of loss that comes with any change process. As can be seen from the comments made by the congregations of the MLMA there is an initial resistance to PR. But this is broken down with the encouragement of mentors, training, resources, use and familiarity.

Intentional encouragement of congregations to stick at the process of culture change, when using PR, is required from all who currently support the congregation. This may mean that those who once led traditional worship, or gave leadership and direction at these centres, now need to refuse to lead traditional worship and encourage congregations to engage PR positively while this change is worked through. Participation, by the members of the congregation, is the key to making the transition from traditional concepts of worship and ministry, to building the community of God's people. Participation in all aspects of congregational life, through the use of PR, brings about ownership of faith and worship, which in turn leads to self-determination and the living of ones faith within the wider community. As can be seen by the comments of the congregations of the MLMA, when this attitude is adopted a new life with a vitality of faith can emerge within communities that would have once been seen as slowly dying.

Training and development of congregations for the use of PR needs to be done in ways that are empowering for the community, giving permission to explore new ways of thinking/doing, and encouraging of all members to be part of the process. With this attitude, the Christian life of faith can be seen as a journey that we grow into and learn about as we engage God, others and our communities. The role of mentors working with congregations, as they take on PR, is critical to the training and adoption of the principles that have been established with the congregations of the MLMA. These principles include simple step-by-step process that invites participation and ownership by the congregations.

The message and discussion time are critical to congregations, as they grow and develop their sense of community. Developing a sense of a safe place to be and speak within the congregation enables this development to take place. The recorded message, and subsequent questions for discussion, opens up the scriptures for interpretation into the context of the congregation. The discussion time particularly enables communication and ownership. This engages people in living out their faith in the many community activities they are involved in. It has been observed, by talking to the congregations, that the conversational style presentation of the message helps to engage people later in the discussion. It will be most helpful if presenters on the DVD's can adopt this style and be reflective of how they present to congregations.

The development of an ecclesiology of PR will be an important tool for the adoption of PR in new situations. The changing face of the church in rural situations is encouraging new ways of understanding the church and the roles she plays. A strong, well-articulated ecclesiology will help congregations, and the wider church, move into new ways of being the church in such situations, with a renewed sense of vitality and life.

Understanding community decision-making is critical to enabling congregations to transition through changes. It is quite clear, from the responses from the congregations of the MLMA, that those congregations that can listen to a range of views before settling on concepts and choices, tend to be more life giving. They adopt the attitude of working things out for the good of all, not giving up when the going gets tough, speaking out their thoughts and ideas to each other, respecting the rights of others to have different views and approaches, learning from each others experience and applying it to their context and not looking for the one correct answer to everything. These communities know that life comes from positively engaging the present, and not allowing life-denying attitudes to continually block new ideas and shut down communication.

Congregations are aware of many resources, but they need to be continually encouraged to use them in worship, in ways that add meaning and life to the context they are in. Training for adaptation, and the inclusion of resources and issues that emerge within community life, is an ongoing issue that will reveal for communities, the presence of God within their midst and involved in the very essence of their lives.

Finally I would like to thank the congregations of the MLMA for allowing me into their community, and to get a glimpse of that life they share together. They have, in many ways, encouraged new congregations to take the bold and daring steps into an unknown world that leads to life. This has been summed up for me in their own words "*the choice to take on PR has brought about a resurrection of our church and life*". I can but pray for other congregations to experience this sort of life together, and not be content with mere survival or slow death. For this is God's call on our lives. "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*"³.

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³ John 10: 10. NRSV. 2003. *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, (NIB) USA: Abingdon Press.