

Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand General Assembly 2006
Keynote Speech of The Rev Martin Baker
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‘Did you see that?’ Refocusing the Church and its Mission

It was shortly after my 25th birthday when I began as a Presbyterian Minister in the parish of Seatoun and Strathmore in Wellington. People would come around to the Manse to speak to the Minister. They would knock on the door, look at me and ask to speak with my father. They were welcome to of course, but he lived in Hamilton.

What does it take for us, what needs to happen for us, to see things differently? To see each other, to see the possibilities with our relationship with God, to see the world around us, to see the churches we are from, differently. To see our mission differently?

I believe that how we see things sits at the heart of our Gospel message. Seeing in a new way brings forth the confessions that lie at the base of our church’s confessional faith. ‘It is the Lord’ ‘my Lord and my God’. This is part of how God has always worked.

When I was studying at Otago in the early 1980’s I owned a grey ’67 Volkswagen. There is a lot I could say about that vehicle. But I remember driving with some of my flatmates to Queenstown. Passing through Cromwell towards the Kawarau Gorge. It was a dry desolate place. Do any of you know what it is like now? Vineyards cover the land. Among the finest pinot noir wines in New Zealand come from those properties.

What does it take to see things differently? To see vineyards. To see harvests. To see the possibility of overwhelming abundance. To plan, dream, invest, work?

The very nature of God’s creative endeavour is found in the exciting words from Isaiah (43:19) ‘I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not see it?’

The challenge to see things differently is part of the transformation that God calls forth in all our lives.

Next Sunday many of us will be standing up in our churches. We will have driven or walked through our communities to get there. We will be reflecting on what it means to be sisters and brothers in Christ within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. How we describe these things, our view, how we see, will provide, as it always has, the basis for what we and our congregations will do next. The way we talk about our mission

I’d like to give you a few analogies - little parables, which relate to my experience of what it means to see things differently. Maybe to see a new thing. They are all experiences from New Zealand life, nothing remarkable. You will have seen similar things. I would like to

relate these experiences to Bible passages which contain themes we find repeated through Biblical history.

We're heading out on the boat called the Jet Raider. Fullers fast ferry service to Great Barrier Island where our family have had a batch for some years now.

It's a stormy early evening. Beginning of a long weekend. The boat is rocking around a bit. Unfortunately, we also discover that a good number of the passengers on the boat are going out to the island for a fishing contest. In anticipation of which they have already spent a good hour or two in a nearby bar before boarding the boat. The boat starts rocking more and more. At this point something clearly goes wrong with the boat's internal sewerage system. A bit more rocking around and several bottles of spirits have now smashed onto the floor. There is anger, discomfit, blood, sickness and some other things. And the boat is entering the Colville channel, the stormiest part of the journey.

And then, and then, the captain's voice announces that a pod of whales have just broken the surface on the starboard side. And there is a pause in the mayhem. A rush to the starboard side. People following those who seem to know what that term means. Look there over there a spout, look there there. Look. Just meters away. Chaos; a word spoken; a unity of focus and a bridging of distance when those who can't see are shown. And in the midst of this a new story. It could have been about so many unpleasant things. As people are welcomed when the boat docks at Tryphena, we hear adults and children saying the same things. We hear them speaking. In particular tongues. 'We were this close. We came right up beside them'.

Moments of unity, of shared experience also provide the moment for the creation of a new story. Remember what the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus said: "Were not our hearts, our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

In our church conflict can be addressed, and a sense of unity found, when we allow for the possibility that the Gospel proclamation may be found in places where we had not expected to find it.

'I know that you do not think that starting that new pre school was a good idea. But just come with me for a moment. It is 10 o'clock. It's a time when the pre schoolers lead the prayers. Why don't we share that moment with them? And then we can talk again'.

Last year we opened an art gallery at First Church. It was designed to create a meeting place between faith and creativity. The primary users were, in fact, students from the Otago Polytechnic Art School needing exhibition experience. Despite it not working out entirely as planned, I was invited to provide the inaugural art school lecture on the relationship between faith and art. I was kindly warned that a topic like that would attract just a tiny handful of the Christian group at the art school. Not three or four, but 100 or 110 students packed the room. 90 minutes of quite passionate discussion about students' faith experience of the church and dislike of organised religion testimonies.

Maybe something which we have seen as being difficult just is not that hard. Maybe there is some yearning in people's hearts, which given the right opportunity, beyond our own walls and props and structures, enables us to witness to our faith. It depends on how you're looking at things.

'The word of God continued to spread, the number of disciples increased greatly....'

My Great Great Uncle was someone you've never heard of. His name was Burt Pither, and as is the nature of families, we would like lay claim to the fact that he was the first person in the world to build a metal framed aeroplane.

Burt dreamed of being a pilot. He worked away in his cycle shop near Invercargill. 1906, 1907, and 1908 - Burt worked away in his cycle shop. We can imagine Mrs Pither yelling: 'Burt what are you doing out there?' And Burt saying: 'it's all right dear; I am building an aeroplane of bicycle parts'. What would people have said to him? Catching sight of an aeroplane taking shape in the shed, as they brought their bike to be serviced and chains to be fixed.

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What would they have said and felt as they saw the plane taxi out on Oreti Beach on that July 1909 morning. As the plane built up speed. What would they have said and felt. And then as they witnessed those large bicycle wheels leave the ground. What would they have said? What would they have felt?

That transition from derision to disbelief, to doubt, to belief, to confession. We are not just talking about a change in a state of mind. We are talking about a reinterpretation of past, present and future.

If something like that can happen what else might be possible? If I had viewed the endeavours of myself or others cynically, negatively, or hopelessly, how might our view of my endeavours and the endeavours of others change, now that I know that this is a possibility. For Burt looking down and those others looking up there is now also a dimension change. We had always looked at the world horizontally but what does it mean for our view to take account of a vertical component?

Just prior to his Ascension Jesus says to his disciples: 'You will be my witnesses ...to the ends of the earth'.

The hardest question and the question which I personally find most helpful in the development of mission and outreach programmes is the simple question:

'Who are we here for?'

Are we here as a church firstly for ourselves or are we here first for the world God so loves? At our heart I believe we are here for those who have not be sought, saved, healed redeemed. For those who live, unwelcome at the feast, or remain beaten on the side of the road. I think there is an overwhelming

scriptural mandate that says that we are here for those who are absent. All the hours spent by church people, the insiders, brainstorming ideas for mission planning can be a waste of time if we do not have insights into the situations and circumstances of those who are not with us.

In contemporary consumer society our view of what is 'new' is often a product of the outcome of progress, or evolution or an improvement of what has gone on before. From the Biblical testimony, from creation to the resurrection of Jesus, to the promise of a new kingdom and a new earth, the things that God brings about are not based on the contingencies and thought forms of the past. The church heard the headmaster say our 6th formers will make good checkout operators and storeman and do fine at the local Blockbuster, but they would also make great doctors and teachers and plumbers and designers. Something new needs to happen and you can make that happen. A year after that the first student ever from that school was admitted to entry at the medical school. A young person got an opportunity to work with Karen Walker, another to a film shoot. The mentors came back shaking their heads saying I never knew that children in our community were living with such poverty. From that discovery a new awareness arose about something God was calling us to be in that community.

We can plan and develop projects but what might it mean to be part of this new creation ? To be agents of new creation. Seeing things differently.

Last year after Easter we set off from the Greenstone Valley hut. It was snowing outside the hut and quite dramatic. The hut is located in an open area surrounded by beech forest. To get to it you walk about four hours from a car park located about 40 kilometres from Glenorchy on the far shores of Lake Whakatipu. Its about 100 km's from Queenstown. You'd think it was a somewhat isolated area. But this night the hut was full. And in fact people were sleeping on the floor. There is no privacy. People sleep on platforms and frequently you find yourself sleeping beside someone who you have only just met. There is no power. So it is dark at 6.30 at this time of the year. Cooking gets down to just a single gas burner which you have had to carry in with you. I use this white spirits burner which is like burning vaporised liquid petrol so it brings with it a certain anxiety. There is a loud snorer, there is no TV, there is no hot water, the toilets are outside and hunters have hung a large deer carcass in a small tree near the back door. There are Germans, Dutch, English, Israelis, Australians, two women from the Czech Republic and even a few New Zealanders. And the age range is from 10 to 60 something. No privacy, no hot water, no nice bed, poor cooking facilities, no screens. Why is everyone here? Why is the hut full and each year getting fuller? And yet, and yet, it is the height of our children's tramping trip, everyone is smiling talking to one another looking happy and getting on quite well. People share their food, include others in their games.

You've crossed a threshold to be here. You've given up your identity. In a way. People talk about the journey well before they ask questions about your job back in the city. So you've just put in a new kitchen at home, with the granite, and the heat pump how much did you pay for that. And the new monitored security system and the mains pressure gas water heating system, and the dehumidifier, and the news bed and matters approved by the physiotherapy association. And the bathroom of course. And now you are separated from these things. Perhaps we could say that we have privatised material abundance and then find that there is no one to share it with. There is something in our thinking that allows us to completely abandon, give up all the comforts of modern western life, almost all the benefits of

technology almost, all that we have saved for all that we have borrowed money to buy, all those ads that we have listened to. We can give up the whole lot, even a degree of safety; willingly give up all that to go to some isolated place, for cold-water discomfort and the company of some Australians.

It takes a change in mindset. Even if it's just for a short period of time we can, in truth, all think about something differently. We can all change our views about our priorities, about what is desirable, about what is fulfilling.

There is that question that Jesus asks, that the Gospel asks, could it be that despite all you have built up around you, the priorities you have established, the things that give you security and a feeling of safety. All the things around that reinforce our choices and say yes, yes. Could there still be another way of seeing?.

The fact that the early Christians called themselves the people of 'the way', and were 'instructed in the way'. Clearly there was something about God's message and the call Christ makes on our lives that we do with movement, development, journeying. While we speak about the importance of making worship relevant, invest in data projectors and commit to the whole performance side of worship. And yet for many of us the most intense encounters, the most transforming encounters with Christ, have been moment when all the props and the buildings and the things we own or acquire have been deemed irrelevant. For me, years of building, planning, organising and at the end the thing that can seem to make it worthwhile is a simple service on a beach and the baptism of young people in the ocean waves lapping the Tauwharanui peninsula.

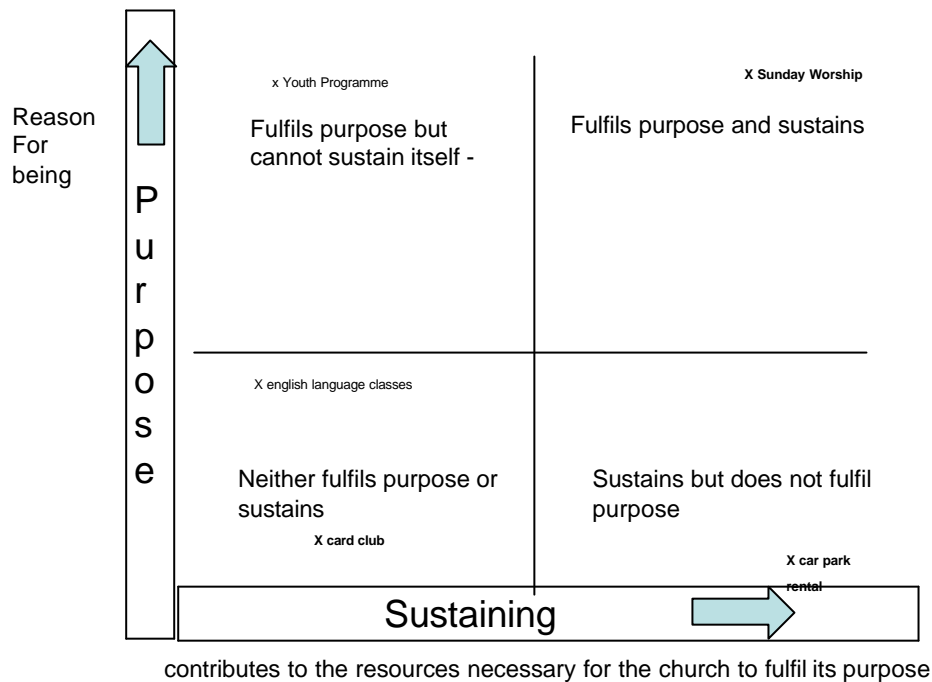
There is great value in purpose and authenticity, an encounter with something overwhelming. Moments of liminality, as people join in worship. When we talk about our mission and our desire to reach out there is something about being on the way, pilgrimage, the sense of thousands of years of biblical testimony, that we are in fact on the way to something else. Maybe, after all, we are more likely to find Jesus in the tramping hut than in the new 800-seat auditorium. The church as a tramping hut.

Let us reflect on the theme of this Assembly. Christ centred and community facing.

Have you ever had that experience of arriving back in your own city or town or community - and for a moment, you see things as a stranger would? You see things as an outsider. And then everything dissolves back into its familiar order. I wonder, next Sunday, just before you see all those familiar faces and buildings and furniture. I wonder if we could pause for a moment. Think about how an outsider would look. Think about the possibility of new things happening that aren't based on former things. That resurrection confession 'my Lord and my God' and what that meant. To point to the new things God is doing and - making sure we do see it. That we join in this excited community of witnesses as a new story forms in our midst.

An exercise in developing a strategy for parish growth.

While I was at the Kennedy School of Government, I learnt about a common way for organisations to develop ways to focus on and grow their mission. This is one model that may be helpful



This kind of ‘mapping’ is used by many organisations in the development of a more strategic approach to future planning. Instead of ‘purpose and ‘sustaining’ there may be other variables whose interaction you would like to compare.

Think about your purpose as a church - why you are here – and gain some consensus about the challenge God may be calling you to respond to in your context. It may be as broad as ‘making Christ known’ or ‘seeking and saving the lost’ or ‘equipping people to be Christ’s disciples’ perhaps there is at this time some more specific challenge in your community which you need to focus on.

Think of all the resources that may be available to you to support and sustain your purpose. People, money, physical resources, gifts and skills. Combined these things make up your ‘organisational capacity’.

The challenge here is to think about how you can do two things at once:

1. Fulfil your purpose and

AND

2. Release the people, money and other resources in support of this challenge.

ASK: How can we move all the things we do in the direction of the arrows?

Take some time to plot your present congregation's activities. An activity like renting out some of your land as car parks may be a good way to bring in money to support your church's purpose – but the challenge is to think both how can this land potentially generate more resource and how can it help fulfil your purpose. There will certainly be activities which you need to support because they strongly reflect your purpose – even though they may not enhance either your income or encourage more people to be involved. Some things you may need to end because they do not achieve either function.

Experience, intuition and a readiness to take some risks are all part of this process. A prayer group that provides no financial income may help enhance an individual's call to commit more time to a church's mission. A community group who meets in your hall may be open to suggestions of speakers who may be able to offer insights from the perspective of Christian faith. A new paid church worker may free up a number of volunteers to support the church's work. There are other times when a group or activity no longer fulfil the challenge it was originally set up for.

Making plans about how you move one church activity into another quadrant or remove some all together may help in developing a direction for your congregation.