



Statements of belief

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Making sense of words

Amanda Wells

It is no coincidence that the last issue of *Candour* for the year has the topic “Statements of faith”. Each month, when I pick from the list of topics, I try to get a good balance between previous/subsequent months but at the same time undoubtedly tend towards what seems most interesting. Creeds and confessions, I confess, do not initially seem exciting.

That’s not to say they are not important; like insurance or dental floss, statements of faith play a crucial role in maintaining our collective state of being. It’s only when you’ve spent all that time negotiating the nuance of every word and phrase that you can put the statement away, to be used as a key reference point rather than an everyday mantra.

However, different words mean different things to different people, and it’s not necessarily true that one statement can provide a definition of faith that means exactly or even nearly the same thing for all its readers. That doesn’t mean that we should not try to develop a creed that functions as a “best fit”, but it does mean that pinning down exact interpretation can be a near impossible task. In many ways it’s the exercise of creating the statement that’s the important thing; the conversations, the revisions, the compromise, the continued dialogue. If we can agree on an end product, that agreement itself says something significant about the Church.

I must have grown up with “do not put us to the test” in the sung version of the Lord’s Prayer. Now it seems more common to use “do not bring us to the test”. Unfortunately this means I tend to spend the latter half of the prayer speculating on the theological difference between “put” and “bring” and the consequent implications for the role of God. Yes, words are important, but they can also get in the way of connection and contemplation.

Part of developing any kind of group statement means an agreement that we’re all going in the same direction. It’s easy to scoff at the effort put into vision or mission statements, but the value of agreeing on your key goal should not be underestimated. If you know that your church’s mission is, say, “to bring the people of x-town into God’s community”, then you can measure every project’s worth against that, and much more easily discard those ideas that don’t align with your goal. We all have a tendency to think that our personal interpreta-

tion of our group’s purpose is shared by others. If your church doesn’t have a clearly, frequently articulated statement of purpose, I’d suggest that there are as many interpretations of your *raison d’être* as there are people in your congregation.

But rather than pinning down purpose or goals, a statement of belief intends to define exactly that. And perhaps, belief is both more complex and less definable than vision. For the issue of *Spanz* that you’ll receive next week, I interviewed hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray. One of the most interesting things she said was that it is the words of hymns and songs that stick in our minds, far longer than sermons. They become woven into personal creeds, composed of a hodgepodge of frequently sung or well-remembered lyrics. You can develop some quite dodgy theology this way, without conscious thought. Does it make a difference that I instinctively sing “put” not “bring” in the Lord’s Prayer? Can you ever eradicate inane lyrics from your internal vocabulary? When I was younger, one of my friends would deliberately arrive late to the Baptist church I then attended, in order to miss the singing. Now I’m starting to understand why.

Perhaps statements of belief are intended to inoculate against those subconscious, personal collections of theology. They bring carefully considered words and phrases together into a coherent whole, summarising complex theological argument in a couple of handfuls of lines. In this issue of *Candour*, Richard Dawson, who has spent many years helping form a contemporary Confession of Faith for the Church, writes about where they have got to now, and seeks your feedback on the latest draft.

Usually November is the final issue of *Candour* for the year. However, we’re going to do a special December issue (internet only) to share the ideas and thoughts that came out of the Volunteering NZ conference attended by 10 of our churchgoers in later October. Each will be sharing their reflections on the event. This issue will also function as a trial run for redesigning *Candour* for online purposes. If you have any reflections you’d like to share about volunteering, they would be welcome; please email them to candour@presbyterian.org.nz by 30 November.

Why a new confession today?

Richard Dawson, Leith Valley, Dunedin

In 1649, the Westminster Confession, its two catechisms, and its documents on worship and organization were adopted by the General Assembly in Scotland, replacing the Scots Confession of 1560. Since that time, the confession has remained largely unchanged, so that for 360 years we Presbyterians have vested a large part of our self understanding and certainly our theology in this document. However, as fine as it is and as comprehensive as it is, it is both intellectually and emotionally no longer ours.

There are at least three very good reasons why this is the case and why we should be moving, as soon as possible, to update our confessional heritage with a confession that speaks both to us and of us. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of a confession is to reflect the immanence (closeness) of God to the confessing body and to the world. This may at first seem counter-intuitive in that confessions seem to have as their major theme the nature of God and God's dealing with humankind and this usually reflects the holiness (otherness) of God. But if you think about it, the whole aim of all this talk is to draw us close to the transcendent (far away) God; to understand God in God's immanence. It is precisely God's holiness, in the end, which enables God to draw near us, because the Holy God is the only God who can and does act graciously towards the world. Grace is and can only be the product of a truly Holy God.

So confessions should act to draw us near to God; to embody the sense of God-with-us that a faithful community has. How does this work practically?

A significant part of a confession's role is to announce and promote the unity of the body of Christ but this must still take into account the culture within which the particular part of the body is found. It must do so because the community that makes up the body will tend to see and understand through the eyes of the culture from which it has come and of which it is still a part. If the confession no longer speaks the language of the culture or if the culture has moved on, then the confession loses this function simply by virtue of not being able to speak the same language as those whom it purports to represent. One problem some have with this notion appears to arise from the presumption, spoken or not, that confessions should be free of such cultural concerns; that if their true subject is God then their statements should be ageless.

However, this is to make both theology and, indeed, language into something they can never be, namely, free of their humanity. Theology is, in the end, still a human endeavour. It will always reflect our deep cultural assumptions about life and God even as we attempt, as we should, to correct those assumptions based on our understanding of the Bible. And this is not to fall into the trap of the early liberals whose application of this understanding took them to a point where they replaced faith in God's Word with faith in a scientific world view or, more specifically, faith in an arbitrary starting point for their interpretive paradigm. They were right to understand the very human nature of our theological endeavours but by making this the over-riding concern of their work they effectively created a hermeneutic of unbelief.

This is not the case for the Westminster Confession but the problem is that its cultural milieu is so remote now that many of the assumptions it makes are no longer relevant or accessible to today's readers. What remains is the theological material, much of which is strong and sound. It is, however, expressed against a background of neo-Calvinism. This contains some precious truths but also some inadequacies and these lead to a confession that while faithful in much is compromised by this background. Furthermore the format and language of this theology also serve to make it less accessible today. While a case can be made for possibly retaining the Westminster Confession in some way (as suggested by one of the resolutions of the last Assembly), there is no doubt that we need a contemporary new confession made in Aotearoa.

A further role is to acknowledge our identity; to say who we are. This may, at first, appear to be a rather trivial pursuit. Again, isn't the main aim of a confession to define who God is? Not if we understand the Gospel aright.

Jesus comes and acts in a manner that does not obliterate either human or individual identity but which offers to renew and redeem such identity even though that identity has been greatly scarred and obscured by sin. So Jesus respects the "God-giveness" of all whom he meets and deals with whilst calling them forward into a place of renewal of identity in him. In Christ we are honoured and valued *a priori*. As Paul reminds us, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us". (Romans 5) This *a priori* valuing of identity is reflected in an acknowledgement within the confes-

sion of some of the concrete realities of our life together. This reflects God's care and concern for our identity. The Westminster Confession clearly reflects the identity of a people who, while faithful and to be honoured in their own right, are not us. A new confession will rightly speak from a point of view that is more clearly ours and with which younger generations can identify.

Finally, a confession acts to affirm a vital and living connection with the Word of God. The theological statements form the core of the work and will reflect the heart of the community's understanding of God, God's relationship with humankind and, indeed, all history. However, while this may be the primary role of a confession, it is not achieved, as it were, in a vacuum. The language used and the metaphors employed will all reflect a groundedness and a concreteness that is vital for a Reformed understanding of such work. Such an understanding holds to the "Magna Carta" of reformed hermeneutics - "*Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda* - The church reformed and always to be reformed" - in that it admits to an ongoing need for the work of confession.

This will also ensure that two important functions of any theology are clearly articulated. The first is its concreteness. As Christians, we base our whole understanding of God on the incarnation. It is the incarnation that assures us that God is interested in and involved in history and therefore in us. Without this, all theology dissolves into the abstract world of human thought. Jesus' life, death and resurrection rescues theology from this wide gate by ensuring that theology must deal primarily *within* the historical and the concrete. The second is its provisionality. All theology must accept that it is limited in terms of whom it is attempting to describe. Theology will always be an exercise in approximation even though we may say some things with great confidence about God. The great danger always is to become over confident in our formulations; to replace a living relationship with a dead letter. God will always be greater than the words we use to describe him, even if we are called precisely to use language in aid of God's mission.

It is time to do this work together; to struggle again with imperfect words so that we might express together our great hope in a living God who has not forgotten us and who is not offended or repulsed by our history but who has taken all of history into the scarred hands of His Son and renewed it for our salvation and His glory.

**Richard Dawson is the convenor of the Focal Identity Statement task group, which is developing a contemporary confession of faith. This group is currently seeking*

feedback on the latest draft, which can be found at www.webelieve.org.nz

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Creeds, confessions and faith

*Stuart Lange, Massey-Riverhead Presbyterian, Auckland**

To make a “confession” of faith in Christ is something well grounded in Scripture, for example, 1 Timothy 6:13 (referring to Jesus’ own confession of faith before Pilate), or Romans 10:9-10. In early church times, that faithful confession of Christ might also cost you your life.

A creed – from the Latin word for “I believe” – is not meant to be an impersonal, detached thing, but a personal statement of committed belief. To affirm a creed is to take a stand, and by implication to deny all alternative views of how things are.

When a church as a body recites a creed (“we believe”) individuals are identifying themselves with the faith commitment of the whole Church, and the church is reinforced in its unity.

From the beginning of Christian faith, there have always been “creeds”, or summary statements of belief. They were brief affirmations encapsulating the key meaning of the faith in a few memorable words. Some apparent credal statements embedded in Scripture include: 1 Cor. 15:3-5; Phil 2:5-11; 1 Tim 3:16; 2 Tim 2:11-13.

From the second or third century, longer creeds were in use in the early Church. They probably developed out of the formulas used at baptism, perhaps the words learned and recited by the person being baptised. Hippolytus’ Apostolic Tradition in the third century contained detailed credal questions for baptismal candidates, arranged in a trinitarian framework. The old Roman creed later known as the Apostles’ Creed seems to reflect such a background, with several key phrases added in the sixth century.

A key function of authorised Church creeds is to protect the integrity of the faith once delivered, against both individual confusions and identifiable false teachings. The creeds were intended to set the “standard of belief” (kanon tes aletheia), the rule of faith” (regula fidei). As such, they need to be succinct enough to be memorised.

The environment in which the early Church lived and expanded was swirling with competing religious forces. Quite apart from Judaism, Graeco-Roman polytheism, and the mystery religions, Gnosticism posed a major threat. The Gnostics were especially dangerous, because so many of them were within the Church, and claiming to

represent Jesus’ true message. In such a situation, it was essential for the defence of the Gospel that the Church could authoritatively and concisely state its key beliefs. Creeds were thus one of the key strategies used by the Church in resisting a false or hybridised gospel.

Heterodox teachings can force the Church to examine what it believes, and new heresies can provoke new formulations of orthodoxy. So some creeds and confessions were quite polemical; deliberately composed to address specific new heretical challenges. When Greek philosophical presuppositions predisposed much of the eastern Church to accept Arian teaching, thus compromising the unity of God and the divinity of Jesus, the creed adopted by the Council of Nicaea not only asserted a Biblical understanding but also expressly denied Arian views. Much later, against the background of Nazi ideology, the Declaration of the Barmen Synod (1934) asserted the sovereign revelation of God in Christ the Word.

Sometimes people think of creeds (and the Christian dogma or teaching behind them) as somehow curbing our freedom. But one can equally think of creeds as proclaiming and preserving our freedom: our freedom in the Gospel of Christ, and our freedom from false worldly ideologies – and perhaps the freedom of the Gospel itself. A non-dogmatic Church has nothing to say, and cannot hope to sustain its existence.

Creeds and confessions are not intended to stand above Scripture, but to point back to it. They always remain subject to Scripture, and – in Reformed thinking – also provisional. They must always be so, because human beings are sinful and fallible, and because the Holy Spirit can always give us a deeper understanding of Scripture. The Westminster Confession, for instance, asserted that “all synods or councils ... may err” (including, by implication, the Westminster Confession itself). The Word of God remains the real authority.

The confessional statements of the Reformation era – for example, Luther’s Small Catechism (1529), the 2nd Helvetic Confession (1566) or the Heidelberg Confession (1563) – shared with the earlier creeds the same dual intention: the articulation of what was seen as authentic apostolic faith, and the exclusion of what was seen as the false teaching of late medieval Roman Catholicism. They were essential strategies in pulling together the Protestant

cause, in instructing its followers, and in drawing necessary boundaries. The Reformation confessions were not designed for liturgical use. They were designed to be printed and distributed, studied and taught. By the seventeenth century, brevity had been traded for doctrinal comprehensiveness and precision.

In many instances the Confessions were important politically, as clear statements of what the Protestants stood for, and what they stood against. The Lutherans' Augsburg Confession (1530) was deliberately conciliatory in tone, as it was to be read out to the emperor (who reportedly fell asleep during the reading) and all the princes and authorities of Germany. The 1560 Scottish Confession was a key manifesto intended to shape the Reformation in Scotland. In the aftermath of Mary's attempt to reverse the Reformation in England, the 39 Articles (1563) were intended to settle what the church in England would believe.

Likewise the Westminster Confession mapped out what it meant to be Reformed and Presbyterian in the context of the 17th century, against the backdrop of various alternatives. The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with their question and answer format, show how instruction was an important part of the purpose of confessions.

How relevant are creeds and confessions today? They are still quite useful, in my view. The Gospel always needs clear and authentic expression. Creeds and confessions remain helpful, not to replace Scripture or stand above it, but simply as useful summaries and guides.

In our multi-faith, pluralistic, modernist and post-modernist context, the articulation and defence of the faith is more necessary than ever. There are so many competing religious views, and so many who think that "all that really matters is what I myself think and feel". Even within the Church, there is much vagueness, subjectivism and individualism. The appropriate response to such a situation is not to embrace it, or to capitulate, but to continue to articulate and explain the faith, as clearly, persuasively and faithfully as we can. Creeds and confessions remain useful tools in that task.

The Westminster Confession of Faith remains an impressive exposition of the reformed faith, the key founding statement of faith for the Presbyterian presence in New Zealand, and an integral part of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand's constitution. For almost a century, it has been neglected within the Presbyterian Church in this country. Sure, its language is now dated, and some of its emphases and constructions are no long-

er helpful. The Declaratory Act rightly gave liberty of conscience on some points, such as the double decree.

Constitutionally, the Presbyterian Church is not at liberty to devise a new confession from scratch, simply reflecting whatever some might feel is acceptable to believe or say in today's climate. Our church has constitutional liberty to modify or even replace its confessional standards, but only "always in agreement with its supreme standard and the fundamental doctrines of the Reformed Faith contained in its subordinate standards" (Reg. 1:1). Conceptually, this poses a challenge for all attempts to modify or replace our subordinate standards, that is, we cannot on the one hand claim for a new confession genuine consistency with the existing subordinate standards and on the other hand argue how good it would be to get away from them. If a proposed new contemporary confession is truly "always in agreement" with the WCF, in principle the old and the new should be able to stand alongside each other. The 2008 Assembly passed a clause (08.080d) which recognised that. If, however, some still argue that such a situation would be "confusing", then what does that say about the integrity of the claim that the old and the new standards would be "in agreement"?

Such are its depths and solidities, and its unique role in our church's heritage, it would be sad to see the Westminster Confession relegated to a merely historic role. I believe it should be retained, either in parallel (i.e. with a new contemporary confession added alongside it), or in some sort of honoured "confession emeritus" status (i.e. under Scripture, as the key historic component in our church's doctrinal whapakapa). I would also like the Presbyterian Church to steer people towards modern-English versions, some of which are now available on the net.

Understandably, from the 20th century onwards, there have been many attempts in various Presbyterian churches around the world to supplement – or replace – the Westminster Confession with a contemporary expression of the faith. For some years the Presbyterian Church has been engaged in such an exercise, with a Confession (Kupu Whakapono) brief enough to be recited, and a Commentary detailed enough to be studied.

It will not be easy to get such a new Confession right. It is important that such a new Confession faithfully and clearly confess the apostolic faith, in today's Aotearoa context. It will need to be genuinely in continuity with the apostolic and reformed traditions, but also sensitive to our own setting in time and place. It will need to guard

against the false gods and –isms of our own day. It will need to avoid obscure theological emphases or oddities. Its language should be crisp, moderate, and memorable. The associated Commentary will need to be accessible enough both in content and in language for elders and home groups to be willing to study it. Both Confession and Commentary should point readers back to Scripture. For such a major change, there will need to be widespread buy-in. Thus far, successive Assemblies have been encouraging about the task, but have not yet been convinced by the drafts placed before them.

A new Confession will not solve everything, but it should make a useful contribution. It will not have to be recited every week, or known by every member of the congregation, to have a significant impact. It will be something to be referred to, and studied. It may also be realistic to hope that ministers and elders will be familiar with it, before they publicly subscribe to it.

On week-by-week basis, creeds and confessions have not been prominent in the life of our local church. Beliefs and values are usually modelled and caught in other ways - through worship, songs, scripture, preaching and fellowship. But I think it important to have faithful creeds and confessions readily available in the background, informing and guiding the church's leadership, and useable for instructional purposes and also in worship. For a congregation to say together the Apostles' Creed can be a moving thing, and it is to be hoped that the final Kupu Whakapono may also reach a high level of acceptance.

**Stuart teaches church history at Laidlaw College, and since earlier this year has been a member of the Dunedin-based Kupu Whakapono Taskgroup. He has recently been awarded his PhD.*

Retain the Westminster Confession

*Kim Francis, St Andrews, New Plymouth**

A German, General Nagel of the OKW (the high command of the armed forces), in September 1941 stated, “what matters is not what is true or false, but exclusively what is believed”. It is to be hoped that those within the Church are less concerned with what is believed, and whether it is put in politically correct genre, than with the question of whether or not what is believed is in fact truth or falsehood. Whether in the case of the Church it is Biblically solid and well founded, or merely a mythological *adiaphora*, which is an embellishment of truth or a tradition that somehow assumes authority and legitimacy.

Jaroslav Pelikan in his book *Credo* says that “a Christian creed or confession of faith, like the Church to which it belongs and the Christian tradition of which it is a primary expression, is easier to describe than it is to define.” He further writes “the distinction between creeds and confessions of faith is somewhat arbitrary and historically inconsistent”. Over the years, they have been used to defend the faith, and as a means of attacking those with contra views. They have been used as an internal statement of belief and as a public confession of faith.

It is interesting to note that the “liberty of opinion” clause that is used to step outside the bounds of a confession states also that liberty of opinion is about “matters not entering into the substance of the Reformed faith”. It is not

an open book to deviate from anything, stand for nothing or be picking and choosing what we stand for. Liberality of opinion is not over the foundational beliefs of our faith clearly articulated by the statements of faith and the creeds. These are non negotiables.

Pelikan in *Credo* states, “the future of creeds is of fundamental importance for the future of belief and for the future of the churches as well, even of churches that might not be thought of as ‘confessional’ in the usual sense.”

In the face of the oncoming and rising threat of Islamisation of the world, and of the decline of the Christian Church in the West, in light of increasing doctrinal and Scriptural illiteracy in so many churches, it is essential that we know what we know, and that what we know is well grounded in Scripture, our supreme standard. The solid historical creeds of the Church, especially those of the early Councils (the Apostolic Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, etc) have stood the test of time, have endured for hundreds of years and have proved invaluable in simple formulae of what in fact the Church believes, without worrying about political correctness or inserting token cultural phrases to “indigenise” them.

Certainly this is the intent of the Westminster Confession of Faith, especially in its fullest proof text version, de-

scribed by Margaret Thompson in *Reform*, January 2009, as “the classic statement of faith amongst Presbyterian churches”. Such a “classic statement of faith” cannot be lightly dropped as a subordinate standard of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand unless something infinitely better replaces it. Kupu Whakapono fails to come even close to a comprehensive statement of faith that encompasses the Reformed faith. In contrast to the WCF, it is a lightweight and incomplete theological statement of faith, leaving out specific and foundational theologies of our faith that are central to a Reformed faith. It could not be claimed as a confession in the true sense, nor as a statement of faith, but as a prayer that encompasses only some of essentials of the Christian faith. As such it would be a theological and spiritual disaster to have this as a subordinate standard for a Church that prides itself on the centrality and authority of Scripture in its teaching and preaching.

Yes, the WCF was written for an historical epoch in the life of the Church in the early days of the Protestant Reformation when the Presbyterian Church faced Rome, and later the power of Anglicanism, seeking to assert its dominance; and sure work needs to be done to update and revise it so that speaks again with power and potency to the 21st Century. But to drop it in an era of Scriptural illiteracy and weak theological understanding would be a disaster. It would start a decline into relativism and even greater liberality of opinion that would extend well beyond the bounds of the “substance of the Reformed faith” into an “anything goes” syndrome.

That they need modification and updating to remove historical anomalies is beyond doubt. That they need to be put in the vernacular is beyond doubt. That they should be actively used to avoid the danger of blind belief without ascertaining its truthfulness, correctness and Biblical authority is also beyond doubt.

Zwingli in 1523 produced what was the first Protestant confession that outlined the “Reformed faith” in a clear and precise manner, arguing for the supremacy of Scripture for faith statements. If we are to have a statement of faith as a standard of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, if it is in line with the substance of the Reformed Faith, it also must be solidly Biblical. For his part, Luther in 1529 published his catechism to help the ignorant pastors and Scripturally illiterate laity. He also warned against those who would alter Scripture to make it say what they wanted it to say. He wanted a schematic, systematic teaching to build faith knowledge and awareness of faith. The early statements of the Protestant faith charged at those Roman Catholic traditions, which Mark

Noll’s book *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* calls “repugnant to the Word of God”.

In a world that increasingly has vague notions of the person of God, what Christianity is and what the Church is, it is important that the Church can articulate clearly and unequivocally what we in fact believe and why we believe it, that is, what is the Biblical foundation for this belief. Then perhaps they will earn the right to stand in the Reformed tradition besides Luther, and say “here we stand”.

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**Kim spent April to June 2009 at Cambridge University on study leave, exploring the topic “the relevance of the ancient creeds and professions of faith for the contemporary church,” with particular focus on the Westminster Confession of Faith.*

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Who me? No way!

Kevin Finlay, *St Andrew's Howick, Auckland*

Creeds are not important to me. I am not a church chopper, but the circumstances of my life have meant that I have worshipped in Presbyterian churches in seven different presbyteries, from Northland to Southland. Maybe I wasn't paying attention, and I am prepared to be corrected by those ministering in the churches I once attended, but my experience has been of churches where, in the flow of normal Sunday worship, the reciting of creeds has not been a major component. The times I remember reciting creeds would have been at special events in the church's life, like inductions. Even in confirmation, membership or baptism or confession of faith classes, I don't know that there was a strong catechetical emphasis on learning the theology of a particular creed.

A convenient piece of information I remember from Church History lectures is that the creeds are contextual documents. They were constructed in a context as a response to the key issues with which the church was struggling at the time. They are not balanced, systematic treatments of the key things for someone to understand about being a follower of Christ. Pulling them out of their context is then somewhat like lifting a fish out of water.

It was then an uncomfortable experience to grasp, when at the School of Ministry, that as a Reformed church we are a credal church. I guess my surprise to learn this shows the diversity of what it means to be Presbyterian.

Unfortunately, in the minds of some, the SOM did not complete its work on me because even today, while I appreciate the place of creeds in history in their context, I see little value in continually reciting them in our services of worship. When we read the Bible we take time to explain the text, putting it in its context. When we recite a creed I feel an urge to do the same: to explain lines in it and to put it in its context. Otherwise it seems to be quite out of place.

But then I consider: have there been other creeds at work in the worship services that I have grown up in? Do I live by a series of statements of faith that have shaped my life? As I scratch away the surface I realise that I probably do have creeds in my life.

I am one who is engaged in worship through music. My memory is not good, but tunes spark recollections of lines in songs for me. Some of my earliest memories of wor-

ship are of singing in church: in the Christmas Pageant, or standing in "our row" in the pews between mum and dad as I learned to read the words of the hymns. I think these songs have stuck with me and shaped my faith.

These have been mainly a good building block for my life, though there are some that have not been helpful. "Away in a manger no crib for a bed... the little Lord Jesus no crying he makes" – yeah right (I so wish we could stop singing that.) I prefer a dirty smelly noisy barn with baby Jesus crying just like any other baby in the world than a sterile, idyllic scene. "There is a green hill far away" – um no, I don't picture Golgotha being a picturesque scene out of rural Waikato or Southland! These hymns then also come out of a context that might not fit today's environment.

So let's say most of the songs have been helpful and have formed for me statements of belief that have helped me through the years. As well as traditional hymns, I have especially been influenced by the phase of church worship characterised by Scripture in Song. In fact I would say that I have memorised many scriptures through the repetition of these simple songs (only mostly I don't know where they come from). Yes, all the criticism of that era of music holds weight: scriptures out of context, inadequate breadth of subjects, simplistic tunes... but for me they were significant songs. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases", "This is the day that the Lord has made", "Come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our God our maker", "He gave me beauty for ashes". These and many others have been foundational for me and have been helpful in times both of celebration and difficulty.

Even now that "contemporary" worship has moved on and operates somewhat differently, still I find myself using these Scriptures when leading worship. Maybe in a traditional call to worship or as a link between two songs in a more "contemporary" style, I find these phrases coming to mind and useful.

So, for the worship settings within the tradition I have experienced, no, I wouldn't say creeds are actually held to or have great importance, but under the surface, I do think there have been and are still credal statements that shape my worship.

The wonderfilled world of 'TR'

Scott Thomson, minister emeritis, Wairarapa

I found the theme of Candour's August edition ("Interaction with contemporary culture") fascinating, raising for me as many questions as it answered. Kevin Ward asks, "does art reflect life, or life reflect art?" Like Winnie-the-Pooh, I respond: "Both please". Take just the Bible stories – they are so true to life. Take some of the kindest people I have known, consciously being Good Samaritans. Take a woman who was empowered by the story of her fore-sister and the unjust judge. "Contemporary culture" – per Candour – could take us lots of places. We are driven along and shaped by culture – like that or not. But we are also pointed to enrichment and enchantment – contemporary film, for example.

And we are not powerless culture victims or surfers. We influence contemporary culture. Martin Stewart's contribution directs us to the total ninny stereotype that a "nice minister" routine too-often reinforces. I shudder with Martin, but I do not stay there. We are the myth makers of our own time. Even the smallest person can change the perceptions of those around them.

I encounter contemporary culture regularly, not least with a group I mentor as part of their Education for Ministry distance-learning course. I recently accepted a part time job as co-ordinator for New Zealand, largely because I am still passionate about "this world - our time" insights and answers from systematic study of Scripture and church history.

"Theological reflection" sounds heavy and elitist but in fact all Christians do it, though most do it unconsciously, not terribly well and with inadequate support from their churches. In EFM groups, entry to the world of theological reflection – "TR" to EFM folk - is through a badge the regular study group creates - one badge per session. TR badges tend to be a bit quirky, because though these are sane and serious folk, they are also, for the most part, joyous and confident in each other's company. The badge could be almost anything: a burst balloon, a dunce's hat, a distorting mirror or a spring flower.

Each badge is chosen by the group to symbolize their feelings about some aspect of contemporary culture; some incident a member has just recounted. The badge is an essential step because it helps the group move from an individual's incident to a general culture that all the members have experienced. So the group moves from the thing that

happened to Kate at the supermarket, to the shared experience of living in a culture where that sort of incident (or attitude) typically takes place. Having established an image/badge, the group records everything popular culture has to say on that subject. People come up with jargon, corny folk wisdom, or an iconic book or film. Perhaps they allude to a well-known personality or news item. That's all what you'll hear down the pub or in the staff cafe.

As Christians, we have an alternative wisdom, gathered from scripture and our religious tradition. So on the other side of the sheet, down goes all every member can come up with from recent study, regular worship or long-remembered teaching. TR is about banging our Christian tradition together with our popular culture. Or should I say tradition(s) and culture(s)? In many cases, Christian tradition amplifies or enlarges cultural stereotypes. In some cases it challenges contemporary culture. Sometimes, the two are diametrically opposed.

Now comes the personal choice. Amanda Wells suggests in her August editorial that the many choices available through contemporary culture have led, more than anything else, to the decline in church attendance. If Amanda is right, then what we have is the failure of the church to provide individuals with the ability to think theologically in a multi-culture multi-choice world. Of course, churches do provide some pointers. Churches repeat Biblical teaching, promote good causes to support, or contentious issues to oppose if the leadership has built up a head of steam about some matter. Many churches are weak in helping and supporting individual choices.

EFM students are encouraged to establish their individual position on a key issue that has emerged from the group TR, and also to declare, in their own mind, what they will do about it. These are not group decisions, but entirely personal, though arrived at through the group process, frequently shared, and acknowledged, without judgment, by the group members.

Facility in theological reflection does not come overnight. I am struck with the way in which superficial though sincere faith is deepened by the regular reflection on the cultures around us and the traditions of the Church. TR, is a great cure for the closed or lazy minds that are too often besetting sins of the church. We are a part of culture – not apart from it.

Looking around the room I think perhaps one or maybe two people could have fitted the clothes they wore back in 1984. Whether they would have wanted to wear them or not would have been another question, but on the last Saturday night in October I sat around with about a dozen of my class and their spouses, celebrating 25 years of our ordination as ministers in the Presbyterian Church.

Words like “privilege” and “fulfilment” were the first that came to mind when we reflected over those years. Two of our class had died, a couple of others had resigned, but over 20 had served pretty much continuously in one form of ministry or another, since the end of 1984.

I was 17 or perhaps 18 when I was accepted for ministry training. From that time, in the second year of my first degree in psychology and politics, to the completion of my BD five years later, the Church provided me a generous bursary. I spent three years in Dunedin, most of that time flatting with two of the four unmarried students in a class of 25, plus another eight, in a very large house in Leith Street (385 - it still has a beautiful magnolia tree out front).

In those days “the Hall” also acted as the faculty of theology for Otago University. There was teaching staff of about six or seven and a student body associated with the Hall of, at a guess, around 100. For me anyway, getting through the degree was really the big deal. Pastoral studies and associated bits and pieces were very much of a secondary concern, though these subjects were starting to become more a central part of the training. The idea of placing leadership skills as a core quality in a minister’s skill base, or arguments about the Church in a post Christendom world, were not high on the agenda of anyone’s thinking – or at least not expressed in that way.

While I can’t speak for anyone else at last Saturday’s event, I suspect that if we had longer together we would have also heard more about the difficult times in ministry. Times when those gathered had wondered about their role and their calling and gazed with more than a passive interest over the situations vacant column of the newspaper. I think some would have reflected on the years spent living next to the church in manses that were often not that well maintained. The cost to children and spouses of shifts to places where they knew no one outside the congregation. The realisation too, of the difficulties of living on one stipend, in situations when both husband and wife felt a call to commit their lives to ministry and service in a congregation.

I also suspect that if we had more time together we would have shared many stories of the mistakes we have made. Or the very funny moments. The intensity of funerals being broken by all the things that can go wrong at funerals, the wedding where the groom fainted or the ring got lost or the bride gets the groom’s name wrong. There are stories far more embarrassing, incriminating and funny than these, that we could share.

And then there are the indescribable moments that we could have talked about, that we have only made it through with God’s help. The suicides, the young deaths, the tragic accidents. Perhaps we all carry some accumulated burden for the things we have seen and the real suffering with which we have been involved.

When people came knocking on the door of the manse in my first ministry, they would take one look at me and ask to speak to my father. What would a 25 year old who looked like a sixth former know about anything of any great importance? No one has asked to see my father for a long time now, but I am still not sure that I have any more answers to give. Maybe it is easier now for me to share with others the fact that life at times is terrible and unfair. That our world at times does start returning to the formless void, and things happen without meaning and the only thing left for us to do is ask God “why have we been abandoned?”

More of us are being asked to be both pastor and manager. I am not sure that we can do both at the same time. More training and more responsibility do not result in higher incomes, and yet we are not employed and have no civil laws protecting our terms of call. While the Beneficiary Fund is really very good, there is no possibility that it could provide me with a house and a liveable income at the end of even 40 years of ministry service. But, as I said at the start, we gathered with a sense of being blessed, of feeling that we had, at least for the most part, pursued a calling, a vocation, which has been the source of enormous richness.

We all have to do what a couple of our more enterprising classmates did. Whether you are an ordained minister or not. Whether you are leading your congregation’s commitment to young people, children, families, music or administration. Whatever ministry you are in. We have to do it for ourselves, and our congregations, but it is important and worth it. Pick up the phone, email your colleagues, find some excuse (reunion, full moon or whatever) and get together. Eat and drink.

