

# CANDOUR

News and Views for Ministers

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## Failure: How do we cope with it?

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## Noticeboard

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### Contributions

We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:

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### Advertising

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## Worship Resource Bank

Many of us who prepare worship are interested in both having access to other people's ideas and to sharing our own resources with others.

One way in which we can do this is through the worship resource bank which is being developed at [www.presbyterian.org.nz](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz).

Our hope is that worship leaders will e-mail us the worship resource(s) they have created. We will post it under what seems like the most appropriate category so that others can access and use it. We would also be happy to receive recommendations of worship resource websites which we can also post as a link on the site.

If you go to [www.presbyterian.org.nz](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz), then to "minister's resources" and then to the "worship resource bank" you will see the topics which we are hoping to stock with resources and web-links.

- a. Theology of worship
- b. Calls to worship and benedictions
- c. Prayers
- d. Worship and sermon preparation
- e. Communion
- f. Baptism and confirmation
- g. Music
- h. Youth
- i. Children
- j. Drama
- k. Funerals and memorial services
- l. Wedding
- m. Alternative worship
- n. Ordination/induction services
- o. Blessing and other service liturgies

Seasonal resources will also appear on the resource bank. Any resources you would be willing to share with others on these themes would be gladly received.

Contributions can be sent to Sharon Ensor:  
[ministerwpc@xtra.co.nz](mailto:ministerwpc@xtra.co.nz)  
(04) 472-6402.

# What is failure?

Amanda Wells

When I was putting together the previous issue, I kept thinking that failure would be a much easier topic. So many things to say about it! It would be hard to fit everything into the editorial. Perhaps I should write an article...

But here I am, again, a couple of hours away from sending *Candour* to the printer, looking at a blank screen. Perhaps the failure to plan can be one of our greatest difficulties. I don't mean not making lists, or not having a clear idea of every task that must be done; what I mean is an inadequate assessment of what is possible. None of us have limitless capacity. Yet we so often act as if we do.

We can choose to believe that placing limits on what is achievable means concomitant failure in some areas. The expectations of others, whether real or imagined, contribute crucial fuel to this fire. And those with an emotional commitment to their jobs, like ministers, are particularly vulnerable to stakeholders' great expectations. But a failure to set boundaries and limit the parameters of achievement can only result in more earth-shattering failure in the long term.

Failure has become a contemporary sin, unacceptable in a world of shining celebrities and sports heroes, where we're all encouraged fulfil potential and strive for success. Perhaps we need to make more of figures like Job, who fails again and again by conventional measures. "I am sick of life! And from my deep despair, I complain to you, my God."<sup>1</sup> Perversely, I find this comforting, even encouraging. Likewise, Ecclesiastes: "nothing makes sense! Everything is nonsense. I have seen it all – nothing makes sense!...All of life is far more boring than words could ever say... I have seen it all, and everything is just as senseless as chasing the wind... The more you know, the more you hurt; the more you understand, the more you suffer."<sup>2</sup> (I've always liked Ecclesiastes; the perfect antidote for those of us prone to entanglement in worldly anxieties.)

Surely any theology of failure must take this as a starting point: it's when we think we have everything under control, when all elements of our world appear ordered, that we have made a fundamental mistake. We are not in control. To admit failure is to acknowledge this, for who really intends to err? Some combination of factors derails best intentions, resulting not only in non-achieve-

ment but also guilt, which twists our approach to future attempts.

Guilt means people don't want to talk about failure. Unsurprisingly, it was not easy recruiting contributors to this issue. The fear of perceived judgement is real enough, especially when you don't know where you'll be called in the future. But to present a failure-free front curtails opportunities for empathy. We all know the psychological truth that it's much easier to feel warm towards others when they too appear human.

Failure is not some anomaly in the perfection of life. It is to be expected.

In January I was reading Iris Murdoch's *The Bell*, a succinct exploration of a religious community's breakdown. At one point (I fail to remember the exact reference), one of the characters says something like "our real failures are failures in love". This struck me at the time and lodged unusually in my brain. Is it true? When I think "failure", it first evokes exams and work disasters. But these details interestingly fade over time, with my reaction becoming far removed from that initial "it's the end of the world" panic. Thinking of broken relationships evokes deeper emotions and stronger regret, which can grow rather than diminish. I like the Murdoch quote because it slots into that worldview-realignment championed by Ecclesiastes and Job. For me, it chimes with Jesus' ethos.

Jesus spent a lot of time with perceived failures. But I don't need to tell you that. Or about the approach he took to his society's high flyers. I don't need to suggest that we all too often adopt a Pharisaical mode of behaviour.

But then we're never going to get it right all the time, as the Bible comfortingly reminds us. It's interesting that people unconnected with Christianity tend to perceive the Bible as a morality rulebook. Perhaps we're selling some of its most resonant stories short. A sense of futility and amorphous despair is the background music of many in our society. Surely we have much to share, starting not with stories of success but our own reconciliation to failure.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Job 10:1, Contemporary English Version

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2, 8a,14, 18, CEV

# Applying work psychology to failure

Peter MacKenzie\*

Tiger Woods was interviewed about his “failure” to win a tournament and commented that golf is a game of few successes in the form of tournament wins. Golfers lose more games than they win – by a huge percentage. Just recently Tiger hit a miraculous shot out from behind a cactus and onto the green; when congratulated he commented that the great shot had come directly after a shocker of a drive that had put the ball behind the cactus. He put it all into perspective.

In ministry we are called to play a lot of shots, and a few tournaments (think about how you want to use that image for yourself) – and in the end we will have failures. There will be times when an innovative service falls flat or a community outreach gets no further than the church door. The effect that those failures have on us is a matter of perspective, and the ideas that I share here are not some great wisdom from above, but an opportunity for some to gain an insight into their own way of dealing with failure.

Two concepts of relevance from the field of work psychology are *self-esteem* and *self-efficacy* – our perception of who we are and what we do. Our self-esteem is built up when we find a place where we can be accepted for who we are. Self-efficacy is grown by accomplishment and affirmation. When we experience failure, both esteem and efficacy are challenged.

It can sometimes be difficult to separate our individual identity and that of being the minister, so that when ministry shows elements of failure it impacts on the individual.

Protecting our self-esteem is often about understanding the role-ambiguity that ministers live with. That is the ambiguity of being both the spiritual leader (minister) and a fellow traveller (individual). When a person forgets how to make that distinction, failure in ministry begins to eat away at the individual’s self-esteem.

This means that people get personally caught up in an organisational problem. Our Church is working in a society that has different values from 20 years ago and it

is hard work preaching the gospel. It is not easy to grow a congregation or to please all the people all the time. In another occupation it might be acceptable to accept lower profits or reduced quality, but when it comes to the spirituality of people, ministers are given a greater responsibility – and are more likely to take the burdens home with them into their personal lives. Our own esteem can be battered by the failure of the world to see the light and it can burn our energy away to nothing.

One of the key coping strategies when facing failure in ministry is to reflect on parts of your life where things are going well and realise that God is still with us. Having outside interests, looking after family relationships, being creative – these are ways that we can have success that builds up our self-esteem even when ministry is proving difficult.

Self-efficacy is similar, but relates to our perception of what we can do. Success breeds success; and failure breeds hesitancy, doubts and procrastination.

When an innovative service idea doesn’t come off, we are less likely to try something different, and fall into a safe mode. The same is true for other areas of ministry. Unfortunately one negative comment from the congregation needs to be balanced out by five positive ones for most of us. That means that if the grizzlers are noisy and the affirmations are few, the minister thinks of failure.

My studies are showing that feeling appreciated is the number one reason for being engaged with ministry – and when we don’t feel appreciation, we can be on the road to burnout. A large part of burnout is the loss of self-efficacy, or a diminished sense of our effectiveness as ministers. So we give up trying and that in turn leads to a greater sense of failure. It’s a vicious spiral.

So what to do in case of failure? It’s easier to write about it than to actually do it. Firstly take stock – ask what the failure has meant to your own self-esteem, and how it affects who you are as an individual and as a minister. Keep those two separate. Then focus on your effective-

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## A large part of burnout is the loss of self-efficacy, or a diminished sense of our effectiveness as minister

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ness as a minister and look at how you can become more effective from the experience. Every failure is an opportunity to learn and as preachers of the gospel we must learn for ourselves the power of grace to give new life and new hope.

I guess there are no great pearls of wisdom on this issue – let's face it, you are going to have things that fail in your ministry and you will have times of disappointment. It is how you reflect on them that will make an impact on

your self-esteem and self-efficacy, and that reflection is a key to coping with what life and ministry will throw at us.

*\*Peter has just concluded is term at Johnsonville Uniting and is currently completing a Masters thesis in Organisational Psychology.*

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# Failure: How do we cope with it?

*Beryl Anderson, Wellington\**

Coping with failure can be a very lonely and personal journey – no two people have identical journeys. In this brief article I will share some of my journey and what helped along the way. For me, my daily (well, almost daily) Bible reading has been a lifeline and my guide for the day ahead. This morning I was reading Jeremiah 32:26-44, and I thought it was amazingly relevant to failure. “God uses his power to accomplish his purposes through his people (you). God doesn't give you the power to be all you want to be, but he gives you the power to be all he wants you to be. The people of Israel had to learn that trusting God meant radically realigning their purposes and desires toward him. God gave them ‘singleness of heart’ toward him. (32v39). We must develop that singleness of heart and action to love God above anything else”. (*Application Bible*). I will look at three areas of failure – education, personal experiences and relationships.

## Education

My first real sense of failure was when, as a 16-year-old, I had had a “mountain top” experience at a Crusader Camp (ISCF), making the life-changing decision to follow Christ. The following day I arrived home to the news that I had failed School Certificate – that was pretty devastating (though one teacher had tried to warn me that she didn't think I would pass). How did I cope? I returned to school, grew as a Christian, strengthened friendships, which have endured life-long, and the following year passed the exam

While we were working in the Discipleship Training Centre in Singapore, from 1968-77, I felt like a failure ,or

maybe inferior is a better word. Although a Registered Nurse, I was the only person in the community – staff and students – who did not have a university degree. Then one day I realised that a university degree was not a prerequisite for heaven; God had given me other gifts. I later discovered that many with Oxford and Cambridge degrees found me and my gift quite threatening – where I was able to relate easily to people, they found it much more difficult.

A doctor friend, who at 35 years of age had never failed an exam, was afraid of failure and I can still remember the state she got herself into as she prepared for an advanced exam in Anaesthetics.

Micah 6:8 is one of my favourite verses: “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” As full-time workers for God, we are not to build up our little kingdoms, rely on our academic achievements; it is not a number-crunching game. People have tried all kinds of ways to please God and these often lead to failure. God has made his wishes clear he wants us to be just, merciful and walk humbly with him.

## Personal experiences

As a single missionary, in an isolated situation in Vanuatu, I learnt a very valuable lesson in coping with frustration. I wrote down what was bothering me in the form of a letter – but I never posted those letters. I burnt them instead, but the frustration and feelings of failure also went up in smoke! I learnt the importance of a listening ear; I also

recall many hours of being listened too with empathy, often late into the night. This prevented a lot a failure as “I chewed the fat”, got it out of my system, and developed my own personal philosophy towards becoming an empathetic listener.

When I was a young mother, it was very easy to feel a failure when people kept asking me, “are you not going to have any more children?” We appeared to have an only child. Many people do not know of the emotional trauma and sense of failure that a young mother goes through when there is difficulty in conceiving or frequent miscarriages. How did I cope in this situation? I tried to avoid any one who was pregnant – impossible! Gave thanks to God for the one child we did have. Kept myself busy with parish work etc. You help yourself when you are helping someone else. No room for pity party.

One of my mentors at this time was a senior missionary Amy MacIntosh. I still pass on her words of wisdom to anyone who will listen - viz: “This too shall pass”. When you feel a failure, your teenage children are rebelling, some people in the parish are being a proper pain – take comfort that: “This too shall pass”. I often add the words “the world will still go round”. It is so easy to have tunnel vision and thus we often fail to see the bigger picture. There is the wonderful illustration of the tapestry. On the right side up there is a beautiful picture (what God sees) and on the underside, which we see there is a mass of threads and so it is very difficult to see any purpose or sense of beauty.

## Relationships

I work part-time in our local hospice, so I am aware it is very important to have your life in order, that there is forgiveness, for we have all sinned and fallen short of God’s ideal. We can all make mistakes and fail, but there is life after failure and relationships can be restored.

This was the message of Gordon MacDonald, who in the 80s was the minister of a large Presbyterian Church in the USA, a popular author with IVP, wrote *Ordering your Private World* and his wife Gail wrote *High Calling High Privilege*. Then Gordon fell from grace, and had an affair with his secretary. I heard about this in Singapore! I was very interested to see that he was speaking at the Baptist Assembly in 2005; he was flown to Wellington for a few hours. I attended his seminar (one of the few grey heads) because I wanted to know how he had overcome his failure – by a ton of GRACE. I found the four sessions recorded on DVD “The Private World of a Very Public Leader” –very relevant and helpful and at times

quite humorous: Where have I been? Where am I headed? Where am I right now? Who’s travelling with me? I also have the DVD of Gail & Gordon sharing the pearls of wisdom “Balancing Relationships and Ministry” as I wanted to hear her side of the story. These can be ordered from Faith Tapes, PO Box 12357, Hamilton ([www.faithnet.co.nz](http://www.faithnet.co.nz)) for \$90 for both sets. This is the best \$90 you will ever spend, and there will be lots of laughing out loud as you identify with their experiences of parish life. I would also recommend *A Resilient Life* which Gordon MacDonald published in 2004. More than a million copies have been sold and no wonder when you see the subtitles – “You can move ahead no matter what. Finish what you start. Persevere in adversity; Push yourself to your potential”.

Last week I went to see the film *Notes on A Scandal*, which I found great to watch because of the two actresses Judi Dench and Cate Blanchett but the sad theme reminded me of a book I read, and sold in the 80s, *Sex in the Forbidden Zone*. This now appears to be almost normal: doctor/patient, teacher/pupil: priest-Minister/parishioner, (if we look at the newspapers today), but as the film portrayed, it shows what happens when one person uncovers another’s secret – deceit and lies and failure abound. For the best results – follow the Maker’s instructions – to avoid failure it helps if our lives are daily tuned into God’s instructions found in the Bible.

How do I cope with failure? Attempt to have a close walk with God, surround myself with friends who I am accountable too, and read helpful books and watch inspiring DVDs and have the ability to LOL, Laugh Out Loud.

\*“*Opportunity Knocks Again*” (1994) and “*Smoothing The Rough Edges*” (2003) are two books that Beryl Anderson has edited, recording stories of people who have struggled with life and with failure here in New Zealand and overseas. Two for the price of one - \$15; contact [dandbanderson@paradise.net.nz](mailto:dandbanderson@paradise.net.nz) for more information.

# Did you ever fail, Lord?

Norm Habel\*

Forty years ago, during the seductive sixties, I worked with youth groups across America. I came to a point where I felt my presentations were failing. Kids were no longer really interested in Moses or Jeremiah from an Old Testament Prof! So I began a time of listening, collecting the thoughts, feelings and hopes of teenagers in their own language. I collected these “listenings” into a book which became a musical entitled: *For Mature Adults Only*.

One of the youths I met was David, a clumsy kid with a lumpy face that always looked dirty. He always seemed to be falling down, or tripping over someone, or getting in the way.

His teacher was always yelling at him for something. His parents yelled at him and his friends yelled at him. He was just David, bothersome David.

But David was not a fool. He knew how others treated him and it was hard to take. These are David’s thoughts about being a failure:

No one pays any attention to me,  
Or what I say.  
I’m nobody, I guess,  
I haven’t done anything important,  
Or made anything  
Or won anything.  
No one listens when I talk.  
No one asks my opinion.  
I’m just there  
Like a window or a chair.

I wrote some articles for our school paper,  
But they didn’t want them.  
I even tried out for the school play,  
But the other kids laughed  
When I read my lines.  
I seem to fail at everything!

I don’t try much anymore  
Because I’m afraid to fail.  
And no one likes to fail  
All the time.

If only there was something I could do,  
Something I could shout about,  
Something I could make  
That was mine, only mine.  
And people would say,  
‘David did that!’  
And my parents would say,  
‘We’re proud of you, son!’

But I can’t do anything.  
Everyone else is so much better  
At everything than I am.  
The more I fail  
The more it eats away at me  
Until I feel weak inside.  
I feel like I’m nothing.

Lord, the world seems full of heroes  
And idols and important people.

Where are all the failures?  
Where are they hiding?  
Where are people like me?  
Did you ever fail, Lord?  
Did you?  
Do you know how I feel?

Do you know what it’s like  
When everyone looks at you and says:  
‘He’s a failure!’

How do we respond to a boy like David? We could try to assure him that he is not really a failure. We could point to people who finally made it after failing as youths. We could promise him that God loves him anyway, even if others laugh at him. We could point out that even God’s ministers fail sometimes.

One cue is already in David’s cry. “Did you ever fail, Lord?” That cue opens the door for David to identify with Jesus, the crucified, whom most of his contemporaries saw as a failure. Does this Christ free us to fail? To capture that possibility David helped me write the following song:

## Ballad of a failure

Refrain:

Take a look at that man who is standing up there!  
That broken young man with the blood in his hair.  
And tell me, young folk, as you slowly walk by,  
Do you know what it's like when the innocent die?  
Can you feel for this man?  
Can you identify, with a man, with a fool, with a failure?

1. All the red of the dawn was like pain in the sky  
And the dark of the night was a friend in disguise  
For that prisoner and traitor called Jesus the fool,  
A man who had claimed to be wise!
2. All the men who had vowed they would die for his cause  
Seemed to merge with the dusk and a blood thirsty crowd.  
There was no one to answer, "this man was our friend".  
A man of whom no one was proud!
3. At his trial he was damned as a rebel and fraud,  
And they laughed in his face when he said, "I am King!"  
So they gave him a crown made of interlaced thorns,  
As worthless as paper and string!
4. He was strung up to die by some rough Roman men.  
He was scorned by the world that was watching that day.  
And his life seemed to fail as he cried out to God,  
"Just why did you leave me this way?"

Refrain:

Take a look at that man who is standing up there!  
That broken young man with the blood in his hair.  
And tell me, young folk, as you slowly walk by,  
Do you know what it's like when the innocent die?  
Can you feel for this man?  
Can you identify, with a man, with a fool, with a failure?

*\*Biblical scholar and environmental theologian the Rev Dr Norm Habel is based in Adelaide. He is Co-ordinator of the Season of Creation project ([www.seasonofcreation.com](http://www.seasonofcreation.com)) If you would like suggestions of music for this song, please email him at [nlabel@esc.net.au](mailto:nlabel@esc.net.au).*

# We don't want to talk about it...

Mary-Jane Konings, Mosgiel North Taieri Presbyterian, Dunedin

**[Tuesday morning.** Congratulations! You've been asked to write for this issue of Candour because someone thinks you are a failure!]

Great.

*(Wry and ironic introduction setting the context.)*

It has been fascinating to be a part of this issue of Candour, as I asked myself "Which of the many failures I know could write on this theme". As it turns out, not many were willing, citing the pressures of ministry and study. I suspect this is just an excuse, however. Is failure too frightening a topic or was there something wrong in the way I asked them? Why did I fail? How do I feel about that?

*(Oh bother, starting to sound whiny, get back to the topic.)*

Why aren't we willing to talk about failure?

Or at least, how can I talk about failure in a successful way? Without getting stuck in a mire of self pity and finding a way to convey that I have moved on, and am now a much wiser, fully integrated, competent and self-aware person? And without fatally scuttling any future employment prospects within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand...

*(Right, so don't go near the personal failures, like the Speech exam I failed in Seventh Form that threw me into a two-week funk, or that disastrous service last year, quick, change the subject.)*

I've been reading Bruggemann again, *Praying the Psalms, Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology* and *The Prophetic Imagination*. He reckons that Mowinkel had it right and worship is a world-creating act, not just sociologically but theologically as well. Worship is ontologically constitutive. Praise and lament subvert the world's idolatries and ideologies.

*(Hiding in theological vocabulary, what is this, a Master's thesis? Translate to alternative idiom. Use smaller words.)*

Lament is a significant force in worship because it pro-

vides a forum to acknowledge and access pain and to face the reality that all is not as it should be. If we do not grieve and face failures in all their many forms – personal, ecclesial and institutional, then we are fooling ourselves. I don't think we lament well. There is more to it than a formal liturgical acknowledgement or a special service.

*(OK, think I'm onto something here.)*

Failure is an inescapable reality of life.

*(Well, duh!)*

We've all developed coping strategies, some conscious and some unconscious. Churches have them too, and like all coping strategies, some are healthier than others. Not talking about failure is one of the unhealthy ones. Assigning blame is pretty unhealthy too. *(Although I really did fail my drivers license the first time because of the dodgy car I was driving.)* Sometimes we try desperately to recast failure in positive terms, you know, a "learning experience". *(Although I really have learnt a lot from failing. It's character building. Does that mean that the biggest characters around are also the biggest failures? Eek. Need to move on.)*

Sometimes we just want to move on.

This is a particularly favourite strategy of mine, partly because I don't enjoy feeling like a failure and partly because I am afraid that I will get stuck. I find confronting my own failures depressing, disempowering and disheartening. I don't mind confronting failure in other areas, but when it is personal? It is hard to feel good about failure. Life becomes forever Tuesday morning.

*(Too personal. What is going on here? Time to make appointment with my spiritual director. Have I completely lost the plot. Am I a failure at writing on failure?... Sigh.)*

**Wednesday morning.** A wise person said to me yesterday that theodicy has to be lived. I think that failure has to be lived too. When we cope inadequately, we cut something off, something that is important to our identity and our being, something that is important about being human and alive.

Failure isn't much fun. It is tempting to take shortcuts. It is a step of faith to recognise and work through our failures, trusting that our identity is based in God rather than in anything we may have done or not done. It is a step of faith to embark on the journey of working through failure without knowing what lies on the other side.

Failure hurts and we live in a world that anaesthetises pain. To live through a season of pain, grief and loss is no easy thing. It takes time and energy and patience and feels like a great big waste of time when you could be out there in ministry.

*(Careful, sounds like a personal experience, what will people think?)*

There is an awful temptation to keep failure private. Failure erodes our identity and our self-esteem. Pride keeps

us silent in front of our congregations and our peers. Funny really, because whenever I have been privileged to be with someone as they confront a failure, they have met with support and respect. And sadly, that doesn't make me any more willing to share any more of my failures with you.

*(Could finish on a more cheerful note. How to be a successful failure. How to succeed at failing. Failing with style. Perhaps be spiritual. Perhaps mention Jesus?)*

People thought Jesus was a failure. I take great comfort in the fact that Jesus was a complete success in the only thing that mattered. He was obedient to his Father.

"There's no success like failure and failure is no success at all," Bob Dylan.

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# Ongoing failure — A reflection

Kevin Finlay, OSP2, School of Ministry, Dunedin

From differing stages in my life, words are remembered that hit like a sledge-hammer blow at the base of a shaky foundation:

"We don't think you've got what it takes" – slam.

"If you'd made that tackle we would have won the championship" – slam.

"We affirm your call – but not in this place" – slam.

"Good things have happened while you've been here but they've come through other leaders" – slam.

"Didn't you foresee the youth were going to do that much damage?" – slam.

The response might either be to fight back, lash out, become defensive, say thoughtless things, generate offence, cause more pain. Or be paralysed into inactivity: a fog as thick as a Waikato pea-souper descends, it crushes creativity. What if it happens again? It might be better not to try.

I am my worst enemy, my harshest critic, as I fume and mumble my way home after another "difficult" meeting. "Why didn't I see it coming? If only I had more wisdom, more insight, the right word, more back-bone?"

Later, other thoughts creep in:

How can this be? If you read the Bible, pray, tithe, live a moral life... (whatever tape plays in the mind) your ministry will go well. A + B + C + D = Success! Blessing, numbers, people being saved... right? If only it was so simple. If only rational positivism, cause and effect actually worked, if only we could manipulate God into being our puppet to do as we want. If only, if only...

"What about God? Where are you Almighty God, who promised never to let my foot slip, you who have called me appointed me to go and bear much fruit? The ache inside rings with: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" This is not some academic question or a rhetorical teaser from the Cross, but one of genuine anguish, forsaken, alone...

Paradoxically it seems the comforting voice of God comes – “my grace is sufficient for you”, “faithful is the one who calls you”, “I love you.”

What of the call to ministry? I have given my life too often at the altar and the call of God has sunk so deeply into the marrow it won't let go. I couldn't leave it – whatever the future holds.

Facing the future and the prospect of ongoing failure: as a part of being human. Can I face this? I am fallible – I make mistakes; my capacities are finite – the task is too big; I am sinful – I have and will continue to behave badly. All of these will be with me till I die. An infinite number of self-improvement books and leadership seminars will never fix me. Even walking as closely with Jesus as I can will not insulate me from it.

Out of the shaking of ongoing failure comes a glimpse of hope and a re-framing of how ministry is viewed. What if Christian ministry is less about giving answers and more about walking with people in their pain: which includes their ongoing failure? What if vulnerability and transparency are good qualities for a leader's CV?

I've been both encouraged and challenged by these words from Henry Nouwen:

“...no one can help anyone without becoming involved, without entering with [their] whole person into the painful situation, without taking the risk of becoming hurt, wounded or even destroyed in the process. The beginning and the end of all Christian leadership is to give your life for others. Thinking about martyrdom can be an escape unless we realise that real martyrdom means a witness that starts with the willingness to cry with those who cry, laugh with those who laugh and to make ones own painful and joyful experiences available as sources of clarification and understanding.”

“...the paradox of Christian leadership is that the way out is the way in, that only by entering into communion with human suffering can relief be found.”<sup>1</sup>

So as I face new phases in ministry, I do so with a different framework from before, one which I hope will be more grace-full: to myself as I continue on the path, towards others who God places around me and towards the God of the harvest.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Henry Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York: Image Books, 1979), p72, 77

The **2007 YEARBOOK** is currently at the printer and distribution will occur during the second half of April.

Copies are being sent to those in active ministry and to every parish.

Please email [info@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:info@presbyterian.org.nz) or telephone (04) 801-6000 to correct or update any details in the Yearbook.

Assembly Executive Secretary Martin Baker has initiated a **PASTORAL EMAIL** to help ministers keep in touch with important happenings. These will be sent periodically as news is received.

If you haven't received the first two emails, please email [tracey@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:tracey@presbyterian.org.nz) to be added to the list.

Please email [martin@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:martin@presbyterian.org.nz) with any news you think should be circulated.

# Succeeding and failing

Glenn Livingstone, *St Andrews at Rangī Ruru & St James Presbyterian, Christchurch*

I'm into failure! Well, actually, I'd rather succeed, and "succeeding" in parish ministry is all about where you have your starting points.

I think that we need to have a grounded theology of failure because failure is a necessary part of life, and vital if we are to derive meaning from it.

Carl Jung's insight into the place of opposites is helpful here. Working along his lines, he would suggest that we embrace failure, so as to embrace, and know, success. Together, both give us meaning.

Along with many of you, I've failed spectacularly in parish ministry from time-to-time. I've come up with brilliant ideas that have cost parishes money, put my foot in it in pastoral situations and cracked jokes in worship at the wrong times. (Even this article could prove fatal in future years should one of you as a Nominator somewhere decide to call me).

It's what we do with our "failures" that's important. Beginning with ourselves, we have a choice. We can either choose to let them get to us and make up our minds to never have another go at something again, or we can choose to try again but do it differently and with what we learnt from last time in mind.

I heard at a conference a few years back that 'faith' is spelt "RISK". It certainly is - the risk to either fail or succeed in ministry, whether that means initiating a pre-school music programme or not, an after-school group, or crazily like me, a parish promotional video that cost a lot of money, was quickly out-dated and generally got us nowhere.

I'm into failure and that's why I'm into success as well. We need both and we need to embrace both".

I can't wait for an edition about "success" - I've got quite a list...

## St Paul's, Timaru

### Stated supply

St Paul's Timaru will have a vacancy for a minister from 31 May and is seeking someone for a period of six months (with possibility for extension) to assist in leading worship, supporting pastoral care and guiding the Child, Youth & Family ministry which is delivered by a paid team.

St Paul's is one of four Timaru parishes discussing possibilities for providing team ministry for the city, and a term appointment will give time for a cooperative venture to be fully investigated. The person appointed would ideally support the parish as it works through the challenge of deciding on, and if appropriate implementing, this different form of ministry in Timaru.

People interested in this position should contact: Alison Linscott, Acting Session Clerk (03) 688-4317 or apply in writing with a brief curriculum vitae to the Interim Moderator, St Paul's Church, 28 Seddon St, Timaru, by 16 May 2007.

# Eating with publicans and sinners

*Maurice Andrew, minister emeritus, Dunedin*

Many people in New Zealand today see Christianity as a failure. For some people indeed, the very word “Christianity” has one connotation only and that is sexual abuse. It is actually understandable that people who have no connection with Christianity might think this because much of what they see or hear on the news media is connected with such matters. There are, however, people with more knowledge and experience who must know that sexual abuse is not of the essence of Christianity, but who still define in that way. A kind of rage has taken over, which projects a comprehensive failure.

A comparable example is some people equating Christianity with killing. Some Christians have killed or do kill for their faith, but again this judgment is like throwing on a blanket that is too short for its body. I once heard a New Zealander state in a radio interview that his Christian friends kill for their faith. It is extremely unlikely that this was literally true. A general belief has suffocated the particulars and again projected a total failure, which is perhaps seen as such here in New Zealand more than anywhere else.

Until quite recently, Christians often saw their failure in terms of others being indifferent. But it is questionable whether this now gets at the heart of the matter. It is becoming ever more evident that many New Zealanders are not merely indifferent to Christianity (or religion in general) but overtly hostile. They no longer regard Christianity as merely misguided but see it doing actual harm. In as far as this is in fact the case, it is a failure indeed. It is then illogical, however, when such critics dismiss Christianity as irrelevant, a phenomenon that every sensible person knows will soon disappear. For something that does harm is not usually irrelevant, and certainly will not necessarily disappear. This view is again usually based only on what critics see happening with some kinds of Christianity in New Zealand, and it ignores the many kinds of Christianity in different parts of the world and even in New Zealand. Not that we should be too hard on outside critics in this respect. It is part of our own failure as Christians that we tend to ignore different kinds of Christians or assume that only those who are like us in our own time and place are Christians. Christians can also assume that another kind of Christianity is so absurd that it will die out (as I thought of fundamentalists when I was a student). It can be counted a failure when Christians who disagree with other kinds than their own do not at least try to understand

not only the reasons for differences but also the nature of the people they disagree with.

In relation to critics from outside Christianity, Christians cannot overcome failure simply by objecting that not all Christians are sexual abusers or killers. They have to be, say and do more to express Christianity: live in a way that reflects lives in and with the spirit of Jesus, part of which is to accept and affirm that he ended up as a failure on the cross. In relation to sexual abusers, for example, it means facing them up with the nature and consequences of their conduct, but also continuing to live with them, struggling with them if necessary.

Christians who have committed sexual abuse may have to struggle themselves to have this continuing life extended to them, claiming from fellow Christians that they still belong as those who seek forgiveness and the accepting life that follows from it. Whatever they have done or are, Christians should resist being shamed out of the Church. “Have you no shame?” Yes, the Church does have shame.

When Christians do continue to live with sexual abusers, however, and do not give up on them, this may be further cause of Christianity being seen as a failure. But it is still be possible for Christians to live with such criticism, even abuse, if they know why it is necessary to do so: it is of the very nature of Christianity to continue to respond both to those who criticise Christians and to those who commit abuse, identifying with them as fellow creatures of God, even if this is seen as the failure of giving way to evil.

It may be seen as a failure to face up to its own responsibilities when Christianity insists that it is more than what Christians do. But that which is more above all, the one who is more, is God, and God may be in this very thought that Christianity is more than what Christians do, taking them beyond their own achievements and deficiencies. It is crucial that Christians have a theology of failure, knowing how God is related to failure. In relation to failure, God is known in its opposite, in God’s effectiveness. God is known as effecting acceptance within the very struggle with others and ourselves. For when Christians are struggling with others and themselves, challenging abusers without rejecting them, God’s effectiveness is realised in the conviction that they are able to go on even when their

struggles with themselves and others are failing.

God's effectiveness is all the more evident when it is recognised through combinations of factors. Those able to go on even when they are abused for not giving up on abusers can also combine this with knowing that they are being abused for the equivalent of "eating with publicans and sinners" (Mark 2:16) - another sign of Jesus' failure. That is, Christians do not know God's effectiveness only in their going on now, but it is all the more real to them in realising that what they are doing is not only their own effort, but also Jesus' life being repeated through what they are doing. Their knowing Biblical tradition (more than knowledge of it) becomes an effective part of Christian lives now. Since an essential part of Jesus effectiveness was to witness that it was from God, this witness also conveys God's effectiveness to Christians today as their lives continue with failure and struggle.

God's effectiveness is known in a further dimension when going on with abusers is combined with response both to the Biblical tradition of God's effective life with Jesus, as well as with response to the critics of Christians for what they are doing. For the very reason that it is also a response to Biblical tradition, the response to critics will concede that some Christians do commit abuse - a response grateful indeed that someone has brought into the open what some Christians may have been trying to cover over.

In making such a response, God's effectiveness is confined neither to knowing that Jesus ate with publicans and sinners nor to making a grateful response to critics, but comes through the realisation that they are working together. God's effectiveness in responding both to Biblical tradition and to its critics lies in the potential both for critics to receive a different view of the tradition, and for Christians to be questioned about their own view of it. God's effectiveness is there in the confirmation that it is salutary to press on, whether or not it be ultimately judged a failure. Critics may still persist in their view that Christianity will disappear anyway.

I conclude: many New Zealanders see Christianity only in connection with sexual abuse and killing and therewith as a total failure, particularly when Christians continue to live with and struggle with this failure. But it is of the nature of Christianity to continue to struggle with failure. It is a struggle combined with continuing to challenge and transform those who commit abuse, while at the same time realising one's own deficiencies and considering to what extent they also constitute failure. The combination of acknowledgement of failure with challenge and trans-

formation is a channel for God's effectiveness already known through Biblical (and Church) tradition. God is effective not only in Christians knowing this tradition or only in their present circumstances, but in the way they combine and interweave.

God's effectiveness is realised when knowing Biblical tradition is combined and interwoven, not only with acknowledgement of one's own deficiencies, and not only with continuing to live with those who commit abuse, but also with response to those who criticise Christianity. For, though these different strands tear different people apart in different directions, God's effectiveness is in the persistence that never entirely rejects any of them, and is confirmed in the acceptance that they may all continue to contribute to each other. Even if such contribution is not obvious, God prods at our failure in the very thought that Christianity is more than what Christians achieve. In the end it is a matter of going on with the failure. It is a question of what the failure is for.

## ***Bush Telegraph***

### **Are you on the list?**

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# A response to “Growing up”

Crawford Madill, minister emeritus, Dunedin

The article “Growing up” (by John Mills) in the March *Candour* was both interesting and good. Yet it left me wondering how we arc across from evolution to thermodynamics to spirituality etc. And it may have claimed too much about (against?) Darwin in saying organic evolution eliminated a Creator God.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin wrote, “there is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms, or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed laws of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved”. (Incidentally, Darwin’s only degree was Theology!) What are the essential differences between Genesis “without form and void”, John Mills’ “primeval soup”, and Darwin’s “one primordial form”?

In section six, Darwin wrote, “have we any right to assume that the Creator works by intellectual powers like those of man?” He through God ordained that Creation operate, without interference, through natural laws. Changing natural circumstances therefore saw changes in varieties and species. I do not intend this to be ammunition either for evolutionists or divine creationists, merely to be fair to Darwin. John Mills wrote of a great dilemma: “Chance” or “Creation”. In a sense Darwin said “both”. Did not John Baillie write of chance sitting comfortably with our knowledge of God? Darwin warned against making God in our image, and see Him as creating, making, adjusting and fiddling as humans tend to do.

A young man came down from a mountain-top experience to tell his people not to “iconise” God, or think they could make Him like anything on earth, including man. This God had no name, except the great “I AM”, or as my OT professor taught, “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE”. This God is only known and served in activity, especially loving activity (agape). I think this man’s name was Moses.

It should be clear that overenthusiastic disciples of Darwinism may not be right in applauding him as anti-deist, any more that creationists would be right in claiming his expressed deism is like theirs.

It is interesting that in our English-speaking culture we either lean heavily in Darwin’s theories, or energetically oppose them. Some other theorists as to how things came to be as they are: Lamarck, de Vries, Weismann, and the modern Sir Charles Birch (Sydney) who modified the natural selection theory. In his book, Darwin deals with some fellow naturalists, not Biblical scholars. But in his final chapter he writes, “I see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feels of anyone”.

While Darwin does use terms like advancement, retrogression, extinction, and descent, in general they are rare. But many assume that when he said “descent” he really meant “ascent”, as if evolution leads on and up to perfection. So we find ourselves being urged to get rid of what is old and worn out. This may show some blindness to Darwin’s more neutral style of writing. And more dangerously it may blind us to the vast waves of selective forces in the flow from ice-age to global warming, back to ice-age.

In addition to the problems John touched on, there is that of free will. Laws of natural selection, gravity, thermodynamics, and genetics may seem to leave no room for human reason, decision, and responsibility. I wonder if modern science is aware of the implications of a determinism so profound there is no place left for freedom of choice. The old defence before the magistrate of “it’s not me Lord, it’s the drink”, is becoming “it’s not me Lord, it’s my genes” (to coin a phrase!). A deep debate may have to break out in our society over the interface between religious belief and practice and the new hidden determinism in the sciences on which we are so dependent.

A good place to begin is in John’s listed gifts: creativity, empathy, language and music, love and spirituality. They suggest there is a whole world to explore. Even there, science would like to capture everything for its rational, ordered, controlling and deterministic laws. There is a world of human life – and, for us as Christians, life in Christ. The article on “Growing Up” needs to be supplemented by others, leading us on into full witness to, and service of, others in agape love.

# A call to prayer for the Church

*Catherine Hollister-Jones, minister emeritus, Bay of Plenty*

Some weeks before the 2006 General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church, I had an unexpected nudge in my spirit to attend the Assembly. When I questioned the “why”, I was given the reason. Even so, I wasn’t very keen, but the word ‘obedience’ was becoming more and more important to me, so I went.

From the time of my entry into the registration area I felt a great warm welcome. It was beautiful and the response in me was a great up-surfing of love for this dear Church that had nurtured and loved me for 80 years.

My journey to the visitor’s gallery was slow. I wasn’t a stranger. People wanted to share with me. One was about the very things that I had been thinking about. As I watched the preparations for the opening, the love kept increasing. It was as if I was watching a DVD of where my journey of faith had begun. I remembered myself as a little girl of seven, on the back of my Father’s bicycle, after our arrival in New Zealand. Some Welsh friends had found him a job near Hawera. On the first Sunday, my Father and I went in search of a church. I remember my father pondering – Methodist? Presbyterian? In Wales we were Calvinistic Methodists. Presbyterian was a new word, but we did get it right!

Those first months were exciting in spite of my uncertain English. I still recall the thrill of learning to count. Those early months in New Zealand weren’t easy. My gorgeous baby sister fell off the gate and broke her leg and I still recall her big frightened blue eyes. She couldn’t understand English, but she became everybody’s darling. Six long weeks in hospital and no car! Some months later, brother Gwilym, only five years old, got acute appendicitis. Was it the food on the ship? Was our coming to this land a mistake? But we couldn’t go back! The rides on my father’s bike were exciting. Church was the big event of the week.

The scene changed to a farm on the wild coast of Taranaki. Church was a big dance hall. I remember my Mother giving me the last shilling, and I knew that there was no more. I marvelled at her courage. It was only a few months since my Father had lost his job for refusing to work on Sunday. Miss Muggeridge who was probably only 16 years old was my Sunday School teacher. I couldn’t get into the older class quick enough. I wanted to grow up.

The little tickets were so beautiful but I wanted the booklet, I was learning to read.

When the milking machine wouldn’t go, I helped to milk the 32 cows. Back in Wales I had learned to milk when I was four years old. My father gave me a calf for the calf competition, and I remember both of us trying to get it into the Ford Model T. School was fantastic. “Quinquaginta of Ninevah”. What big words! Church was now in a nice building in Manaia and I loved it. After church my father sealed the huge letters that my Mother wrote to her only sister in Wales. Life was amazing for me. A new baby had come. I would question my Mother about her involvement in the Welsh revival. I sang the old Welsh hymns. Now I could read my Bible, and I felt related to Mary Jones of Bible Society fame!

We moved to another farm. It was then that my Father’s asthma became very serious, and the word on everybody’s lips was “depression”. We made St John’s Church in Hawera our church home. It was more like the church in Wales. The ministers were my heroes. I attended an adult group with my father. I was about 12. They all prayed, so I thought that I had better learn. I wrote an essay on love for which I was commended. I sat the Sunday School exams and won a silver medal and the Presbyterian symbol was so inspiring. One day the minister said to me, “wouldn’t you like to join the church? You love Jesus don’t you?” I said, “yes” but I knew that there was more to it than that. My decision day was on 11 June 1933. The special word that day was “follow me”! The minister, the Rev Archie Irvine began to lend me missionary books and the zealous teenager began to dream. China... Egypt... South America! One Sunday a man called Reverend Evan Harries visited Hawera. One night he looked at me and said, “one day you may be a missionary”! Wow! How did he know my secret? These dear ministers of our church were foundational in my life. Scene after scene flashed by as the final preparations were made for the Assembly opening.

Over the years I had been to many Assemblies, especially since I had become part of the team in India. Some Assembly openings were very grand. This one was going to be simple. I remembered the final Assembly for me, after I had said goodbye to 35 years in India. It was emotional. How could I express my gratitude for all that

## *A response*

this dear Church had meant to me? I remember taking a deep breath and telling the Church to abound in hope. A new day was coming and I remember Neil Churcher's big hug. I didn't anticipate the wonder of the new day that was dawning for me. It was an invitation to encourage the Church in prayer as the Church entered 10 years of growth evangelism. This was my life's great dream. I had done many things in India but prayer had been like the great River Ganges. It affected everything I did. The source was away back as I had listened to my mother in Wales and in the early years in New Zealand, this is until I learned to read. She had been part of that revival and I knew that it has affected my life too.

This call was an "Oscar" that was beyond my dreams. Invitations came from all over New Zealand. Some of you will remember the water buffalo story. The song we sang together "I Pray for New Zealand, I Call Her By Name!" Those years were full of joy. My message theme was "The power of the Blessing Prayer". There was not any part of New Zealand that I didn't bond with.

Scenes from the past came. This dear Church had made me a hero after I became a deaconess. They trusted me to establish St Columba Church almost opposite where I was sitting, and before this, the Point England Church. They even made a movie about me in Point England, but the Rev Stan Murray, our Missions Secretary, saw beyond St Columba and called me to India. Well, it wasn't Stan, it was God!

A silence fell on us as the opening of Assembly began and my dreaming had to stop, but something was stirring within me. The DVD wasn't finished. The Holy Spirit was on Pamela, our Moderator. The picture was big. There was a "move" for each of us. I began to understand why I was there. Kerry Enright illustrated Pamela's message of what our reaching out must be.

I began to ask myself, what my reaching out should be to this dear Church? Did I have a legacy to leave? I wrote to Pamela suggesting that perhaps our whole Church could have a plan of praying for our nation. As I have thought about it, I feel that each church will respond to her message in a different way.

It will mean prayer, in some places saturation prayer. Already I am becoming aware of what the call is for me. I am finding that "obedience" is an important word. It will lead to things beyond our dreams.



## **Ministerial Vacancy – are you up for the journey?**

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For more information contact:  
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(04) 478-9073  
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### Performance Review\*

EMPLOYEE NAME	DATE	COMPLETED BY
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Jesus, son of Joseph	Passover	
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#### ADDRESS

No fixed abode, contact can be made through his father.

#### JOB ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*List the employee's job accomplishments during this review period as compared to your expectations. Provide an overall rating for the period.*

1–Unsatisfactory       2–Satisfactory       3–Average       4–Above average       5–Outstanding

While we have seen some outstanding achievements in the past (water into wine, walking on water, feeding crowds numbering into the thousands, healing the sick), more recently, there is little of note to report, plenty of talk, not much action. However, an excellent reception was held on entering Jerusalem, a great deal of positive feedback. Suggest he find alternative transport for the next major event.

#### STRENGTHS

*List the key strengths that the employee exhibited during the review period as compared to your expectations.*

Key strengths: has made an effort to be mobile, has built a team, although there are doubts about their loyalty and effectiveness, fine preacher and teacher, excellent rapport with people on the margins. The “parables” are very popular.

#### AREAS FOR DEVELOPMENT

*List the areas of improvement or development.*

Must work on building a rapport with key religious and secular establishment. His critique has not been well received. The authorities in Jerusalem are particularly upset by that upset in the Temple courts. Suggest he attend a course on conflict management. Can be less than diplomatic at times. Must work on his rapport with the rich as they could be a significant source of financial support.

TEAM BUILDING SKILLS				
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*Describe the strengths and weaknesses of the employee's team building skills. Provide a rating for the review period.*

While he has built a team which has enjoyed some success, we have serious doubts about their longevity. There are some concerns about a personality cult developing and rumours he thinks he is the Messiah.

1–Unsatisfactory       2–Satisfactory       3–Average       4–Above average       5–Outstanding

## A diversion

<b>GOAL ACCOMPLISHMENT</b>				
[Describe and rate the employee's degree of success in meeting predetermined goals.]				
We see no signs of the so-called "Kingdom of God" he keeps talking about. Frankly, we don't believe him.				
<input type="checkbox"/> 1–Unsatisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> 2–Satisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> 3–Average <input type="checkbox"/> 4–Above average <input type="checkbox"/> 5–Outstanding				
<b>TIME MANAGEMENT</b>				
Does the employee seem to manage his or her time well? Provide a description and a rating.				
After three years in ministry, we see little evidence of achievement. There are some concerns about the amount of time he spends "withdrawing", hanging out with prostitutes and sinners, and of course, traveling with his disciples.				
<input type="checkbox"/> 1–Unsatisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> 2–Satisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> 3–Average <input type="checkbox"/> 4–Above average <input type="checkbox"/> 5–Outstanding				
<b>OVERALL PERFORMANCE</b>				
Provide a summary of the employee's overall performance. Rate his/her overall job performance.				
We do not see a future for this person in Jerusalem at this time.				
<input type="checkbox"/> 1–Unsatisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> 2–Satisfactory <input type="checkbox"/> 3–Average <input type="checkbox"/> 4–Above average <input type="checkbox"/> 5–Outstanding				

\*Circulating on the Internet, kindly supplied by Mary-Jane Konings

## Letters to the editor

Dear Editor

There is a little note in Candour inviting us to write letters to the editor. You have changed it so that we now have to write re someone else's article, not about the publication. This must be editorial armour? Good! [Actually literate letters on any subject will be considered: ed]

Generally I've read so many forums from different editors, outlooks and more recently *Candours*, over the years. My first praise must go to you as current editor, irrespective of others as I read nearly all of every issue, which does not mean I agree with everything, that's an impossible route. I was once an editor small time, and welcomed "feedback".

I will conform by praising John Murray's article as somehow it helped me feel more enlightened about the ori-

gins of secular state historically than before. One thing I would honestly like to hear about is the "politics" inside the Church. Does it reflect what we value as democratic? Is it not related to the politics of the state or appear to operate the same way? Is it sociocratic or theocratic? In practise I cannot get very enthusiastic about the Church as a model. The state pretends impartially and pretends to be better at it than the Church. The Church also pretends, but not even with God the omnipotent on its side can religious power be more impartial than the state.

The social and cultural warp in both areas is usually less than impartial.

May God be merciful to all humanity nevertheless.

Boyd Glassey



Presbyterian Church  
of Aotearoa New Zealand

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