

CANDOUR

News and Views for Ministers

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General Assembly 2006

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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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To enquire about vacancies, please email glen.innis@xtra.co.nz or telephone 06 855-4889. Ministers are welcome to inquire regarding vacancies due to cancellations.

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.

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, 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. With Advent and Christmas approaching 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 or 04 472 6402.

General Assembly 2006

News and images of GA06 are now online.

Visit www.presbyterian.org.nz/ga06 to see the archive



What can we expect from the media?

Amanda Wells

Media management has a lot to do with luck. Rather than having an intrinsic and stable level of newsworthiness, stories rise or fall in importance according to other news swirling around.

Don Brash's affair quickly pushed the sticker issue from the headlines on 15 September, a fact for which I felt guiltily grateful. While no responsible professional would condone the approach of the London public relations person who advised bosses to release controversial material on 11 September 2001, you can see the point. The fact that the GA06 decision on sexuality and leadership lead the One News bulletin on Friday 29 September was more to do with a lack of harder news than its fundamental importance to the nation.

Having said that, there are ways in which we can ensure better coverage. Part of this involves deciding what outcomes we want. With General Assembly 2006, there was little point of setting the objective of generating positive publicity. It is my view that no coverage of the issue of sexuality and leadership benefits the reputation of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. If you're tempted to disagree, try playing a word-association game with non-church goers and slip "Presbyterian" into the mix. The results will depress you, as they do me.

Why then, you might ask, did we not close GA06 to the media and refuse to give them any information? Because that would have achieved more damaging coverage than the mildly negative coverage that we got.

I was hoping for mildly negative coverage. Brutal honesty impels me to say that this is the best we can achieve on this issue, whatever decisions are made. GA06 could easily have been presented much more damningly than it was.

How do I come to that assessment that the coverage was "mildly negative"? By considering the values that the coverage imputed to us. Being seen to be open and accepting of opposing viewpoints is not a bad thing. Neither is permitting negative reactions to decisions. Pamela provided a strong and gracious tone of authority that affirmed the Church and its decision-making processes. Other spokespeople came across as poised and credible. All of these things reflect well on us as an organisation with which people might want to be associated.

For me, this is the crucial factor: whether reading an article or listening to a report will make someone less likely to consider walking in the door of their local Presbyterian church. Taking this approach means contemplating community reaction is all-important. I know that not everyone reading this will want to evaluate General Assembly decisions in this light. But seeing through this lens is a key part of my job as we attempt to ensure that our communications create a positive bridge with the community, both internally and externally.

If you're not confident the media will fully present the nuances of a situation, internal communications assume even more importance. At GA06, we devoted considerable energy to reaching Presbyterians unable to attend, as well as keeping those onsite informed. We saw a huge spike in traffic to our website, particularly on the day of the sexuality and leadership decision, when we served 16,540 pages. Visits to the home page were 50 percent up on the previous highest figure ever recorded. This represents a many-fold increase on the normal daily average. Increased traffic was sustained throughout GA06, and levels have remained abnormally high last week and this week, perhaps as people go back to parishes and refer others to the online information.

Does this internal communication counteract the effect of a day of saturation media coverage? Perhaps not. But it offers a forum that people, including those outside the Church, can refer to and receive authoritative answers.

We will continue to engage with the media as new angles inevitably arise. We have no other option. But the best way we can build up our reputation is by engaging at the local level in our communities. Earlier this year, Jose and I ran a number of workshops around the country that focused on how to engage positively with your local media and get your stories told. This was possible thanks to a grant from the Council for World Mission.

We have another CWM grant awaiting some consideration of its parameters, which will occur once the GA06 backlog of work is cleared. I am very hopeful that, early next year, we will be able to put this towards providing some other training that equips and enables parishes. Watch this space.

GA06: A positive experience?

Anne Thomson, Ordinand, Dunedin

For me, Assembly has not been seen as a penance to be endured, but an experience to look forward to with some pleasure. I blame my father for this: it was one of the highlights of his year and so during my childhood “going to Assembly” was always positive.

Once during my time as a student in Dunedin, Assembly met here, and I went along to listen from the public gallery. Of course, this was back in the olden days when all

Assembly business took place on the floor of the house, when all 20-plus Assembly committees had their

own chance to report, perhaps even when all contributions began “Moderator, fathers and brethren” (Actually, I don’t think that last bit is true –Joan Anderson was elected Moderator at that Dunedin Assembly, and everyone must have realised that “fathers and brethren” had long passed its use-by date.) I found it fascinating to watch the Church do its thing, and sometimes it was downright inspiring, like when Jim Veitch brought the plight of Cambodia/Kampuchea under Pol Pot’s regime to the attention of Assembly, and an offering was taken up in response.

The first Assembly I attended in full was 1985 as Moderator’s Chaplain to Ian Cairns. (I am fairly sure I have been the only pregnant Moderator’s Chaplain in our church’s history...) And I have attended the last four Assemblies, twice as an Associate, once as Commissioner, and this year as “go-fer”.

One of the things I value most about General Assembly is the sense that this is a place where we all belong. We disagree about much, yet we worship together, we work together, we pray together, we eat and talk together. Thank God no one said to anyone else “you have no right to be here”. Oh, our decisions implied that for some, but no one said it, and no one acted as if it was true. It is that context of relationship that makes Assembly a place that I am glad to be part of. That relationship means that people speak to one another face-to-face and with respect.

(I was not at the 1995 Assembly at which I believe that was not always true. I am very glad that the Church meet-

ing in Assembly has quite deliberately stepped back from such inappropriate behaviour.)

One of the most difficult aspects about reporting on Assembly to those who were not there is that “you had to be there”. The decisions of the Assembly conveyed on paper lack the context of relationship. Those who can only read about what Assembly has decided have not seen the grace with which people continue to be part of the

Assembly even when decisions have hurt them to the core of their being. They have not heard the conversations

which happen over meals or in the foyer between people who disagree deeply and who vote very differently on some issues. They have not heard Assembly sing.

Words are tricky things. They can convey so much, and yet not enough. I want to take very seriously God’s means of communication: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son.” (Hebrews 1:1,2) Words were not enough – it took personal relationship for God to speak with us. At Assembly we have the opportunity to speak in a context of personal relationship, and it makes a difference.

Is this papering over our differences; a dealing with false reality? Or is it acknowledging that our life together is a gift of God, and that God’s gift has greater reality than the constraints we would want to place on each other? We are together in the body of Christ because it is *Christ’s* body. We are together at Christ’s invitation. We are together, in the end, not because we accept one another, but because God has accepted us.

Am I being impossibly naïve? Perhaps. And yet I do believe that our understanding of what it means to be church, our understanding of who we are as church, our understanding of God’s intentions for us as church, are limited and incomplete. God has the last word – we are *God’s* church. By grace, sometimes we live that reality better than we say it. By grace, God continues to call us and claim us and make us church.

At Assembly we have the opportunity to speak in a context of personal relationship, and it makes a difference

A mike-runner's reflections

Chris Purdie, Ordinand, Dunedin

Coming to GA06 as a soon-to-be graduating ordinand was interesting. It was my sixth Assembly but a quite different experience for me in a new role. I find Assemblies are events that produce a wide range of contrasting feelings and impressions.

First off; there are all the people! For me, being a pretty serious extrovert, going to a location that has captured upward of 500 people for me to talk to is a wonderful experience. Being able to have significant conversations all the day with people who have a common interest in ministry in all its forms is energising and stimulating. Then there is meeting up again with friends and people who have being significant in my ministry journey. It reminded me what an amazing community of people we have in our Church and how the power of our relationships as colleagues does help to see us through the times which test us.

Second was the high calibre of the input that Assembly received from the keynote speeches of the Honorable Winnie Laban, and of the outgoing and incoming AES, the Rev Kerry Enright and the Rev Martin Baker. These were hugely inspiring and prophetic. They, along with the Assembly's worship times, called us to look out, and step up to the new challenges that face us as a Church and people of the Christian faith in our time. They were calling us to focus on:

- the higher principles of our tradition and the higher principles of civil society;
- a permission-giving church; a "yes!" Church;
- a missional church, one of real tangible support and solidarity with partner churches like those in Myanmar and Vanuatu;
- higher principles, where our first concern would be one of seeing and responding to the needs and concerns of the other.

For me these were truly inspiring and hope-filled; these are what I took away from Auckland this year.

Of course, there are always bizarre moments in every Assembly, those moments that leave us all blinking and looking at each other and saying "what just happened there?" Taking the prize for that at GA06 was the acceptance of the new Book of Order. Some nine years of work, hundreds of pages in the larger A4 page layout,

passed through the house in less than five minutes. Not one question of clarification, not a peep from anybody in debate, and then passed unanimously, motion agreed. Bizarre!

By way of contrast were the actions of the collective Assembly mind, which in different ways profoundly reinforced the realisation of the fallen nature of our humanity and the fragility of our human processes and structures. There was the two very clear moments in GA06 that punctuated that for me. They were, (1) the closing of the long debate over the leadership within our church of those people who are in gay, lesbian or defacto relationships, who are now seen as not being fit for leadership in the parishes of our denomination. (2) The contradictory messages that the Assembly has sent by seeking on the one hand to support those organisations that work to reduce violence in our communities, while on the other not opposing the repeal of Section 59 of the Crimes Act. Ironically those very same people doing the hard yards in our communities where violence towards children is prevalent see that section 59 is part of the very problem that they seek to address.

In the past two years, our mission and leadership studies at the School of Ministry, as well as my own work at looking into the spirituality of New Zealand men, has brought me to the conclusion that there needs to be a radical change in the ways in which we "be" the church today. When our church was established in the context of reformation Christendom, it was supported, confirmed and reinforced by the community and societal structures. The nature and place of the church was part of the fabric of Western society. Those structural reinforcements are no longer in place for our Church in our postmodern society. We therefore need to change fundamentally at a structural level. In short, to be outward looking rather than inward. Part of that radical change will have to be a substantial reengagement with our communities.

We will need to enter into strategic partnerships with the influential organisations and the key people who have their fingers on the pulse out there. It is these people we need to be in partnership with; the social workers, the early childhood educators, the community liaison people, community youth workers, the victim support, youthline, our school teachers and their boards of trustees, local doctors.

These will be the people who the Church actually needs to help us rediscover the Christ out there in our world.

It is into this wider context that the decisions on these two issues have left me profoundly saddened and disappointed, and somewhat fearful for the future of our Church. Why? Because I believe that in this, the Church is in error. But also because of their flow-on effects. The danger is that these people, our community co-workers, will look at the Church's stand on leadership

I have a sense that these decisions will undermine our future mission work in our communities

and on violence and Section 59, and will consider that Presbyterians are philosophically opposed to the very nature of their work, and will quietly dismiss us out of hand because of these decisions. These decisions, while making a stand, do not I believe help us do the work of making Christ known in our corner of the world.

As I say, Assembly produces a wide range of feelings and impressions, and these have been some of mine from this year.

A personal reflection on GA06

Wayne Matheson, St Andrew's Uniting, Whangarei

So what do you write about General Assembly? What do you write when you get an e-mail saying "would you write something, I am desperate and that someone has suggested that you would be a good person to ask"? You laugh ... and then reply saying "thanks Amanda Wells and your team for the communication work done for us at Assembly". Thanks is always a good place to start. I find it changes the way I see things when I begin by being thankful...

Thanks to St Kent's for making your place available to us; the local arrangements team; thanks to the many folk who worked behind the scenes; thanks to the students from the School of Ministry; thanks to the nominating committee; thanks to the business committee; to the Council of Assembly; to Kerry Enright and Heather McKenzie; thanks to our Moderator Pamela Tankersley; our outgoing moderator Garry Marquand; I am sure there are others I have missed – thanks to you as well...

As I look outside, there is a strong wind blowing – a gale actually. Have you ever been at the beach, and sat on the sand... looking out to sea... watching wind surfers or yachts? Then... slowing... you realise that the wind is blowing from a direction and that change is happening? People are moving in a different way. That is an image I have of Assembly. Sure... the sea is still choppy, and there are white caps, and direction needs to be set and a

million other things. The times they are a changing...

Some personal reflections...

At this Assembly we said that, in the future, Assembly is going to be built around three things: inspiration and equipping, connecting and business. While all three were present this time, we will have to work smarter for those priorities to be in place going forward. I think that is going to require a great deal from those attending future Assemblies. Is it possible... yes!

Is it possible to dream of the day when people will be queuing to attend Assembly and people will be booking in for the next one, years ahead? Yes.

We discovered that we can be inspired by those amongst us. I have never had the privilege of hearing Kerry Enright preach. After Kerry's address at Assembly, I wanted to hear more... Passion, energy, humor, enthusiasm, yes! Go well in Australia, Kerry. I don't think I had ever met Martin Baker before this Assembly. I heard him speak before I had the opportunity to introduce myself. Yes! The baton has been passed and a new day is dawning...

I observed at times in our discussions and debate that we don't trust each other. I wondered if at times it went deeper than that. I was not impressed when that became personal. I observed that I shut down when that happens.

Maybe that is something that happens when you reach your mid-40s – or maybe it has to do with how much sleep you get – or maybe it is my personality type – or maybe I am longing for us all as followers of Jesus to model something different. Debate the issue with vigour and passion; yes... leave the other stuff out of it.

I enjoyed meeting people from all over the country and hearing their stories; I caught up with people I have not seen in years. I heard (again) about Connect from those who attended and wondered why we didn't have folk attending this event before Assembly? I met new folk. I was impressed with what I saw and heard from the youth delegates. I met folk who are recent graduates from the School of Ministry – and are experiencing the joys and frustrations of ministry. That reminded me to pray for those concluding studies this year; for the staff there and for the changes we agreed to in terms of leadership training. Yes.

I heard stories about new life in the church, new mission ventures, transformation, evangelism, community-facing ministry. I also heard stories of people who are tired, worn out, nearing burnout, wondering where to turn, facing huge challenges and wondering what the future holds. I heard that it was alright for me as I was part of a "large" church. I heard that the church I am a part of is an encouragement to others in churches outside main centres. I was excited, concerned and challenged. I came away thinking about our responsibility to continue to forge partnerships and to offer more to others. Yes.

In terms of our business together...

It seemed inevitable a focus was always going to be the leadership and sexuality debate and decision.

I am not sure we have grasped the issues around national funding. I think we all have a responsibility to fund the national church. I am not so sure our process is there yet. Our new Book of Order indicates that national funding rates third in our priorities. I struggle to understand how if a church pays its ministry costs, pays other running expenses and if it is then unable to pay its full Assembly Assessment, it is in debt. It seems we have part of the equation right and then shoot ourselves in the foot. Maybe my bias and passion for the local church and the mission of the local church shows through. I think we need theological reflection about these matters – including what it means to hold each other in debt.

I listened to the discussion about ministry remuneration. Throughout this I found myself giving thanks for the team that look after personal, policy and procedures here. They champion well the needs of all our staff. In all the recommendations we passed, we already had those things in place. Yes.

I didn't hear a great deal about growing healthy congregations. I didn't hear stories about how that is looking in different settings around the country. I would have enjoyed hearing about that in rural Southland, in North Otago, in Nelson, in Gisborne, in the Waikato, etc. I don't know if there are stories from those places, or other places... I would have enjoyed hearing some of that. I didn't hear stories about new congregations and church planting – stories that encourage and cause us to dare to dream. I did hear "us" and "them" in terms of church size and money – especially relating to Assembly Assessment.

As I listened, I wondered if some of that related to "the days when" – those good old days – when a national church provided this and that; and that if some churches paid more assessment then those days would return. What I didn't hear was how can our church increase its impact on our community; how can we be and share Good News; how can we be Kingdom builders. That reminded me to pray for John Daniel, the National Mission Enabler, and the work he does. I was reminded about one life at a time; one church at a time...yes.

For the first time that I have attended Assembly, I shared accommodation with others attending Assembly. Debriefing at the end of the day, eating breakfast together, praying together, travelling together. Thanks guys for the privilege of doing that. Yes.

I find Assembly taxing. It drains me a different levels – physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. One thing that filled my tank was spending a day after Assembly with some colleges sharing about life, ministry, hopes and dreams. That was an inspiring time. Yes.

I came back sharing the privilege of belonging to the Presbyterian movement. I came back proud to be part of that. I came back to a great group of people with whom I have the privilege of sharing ministry. Yes. Thanks...

I observed at times in our discussions and debate that we don't trust each other

GA06: Money, sex and power

Margaret Mayman, *St Andrew's on the Terrace, Wellington*

The Moderator, the Right Reverend Pamela Tankersley, hoped that the Assembly would be “Christ Centred, Community Facing.” While we behaved nicely toward one another at the Assembly, and Pamela did a fine job of moderating a difficult debate, I am very clear that we turned our back on the community in a way that will take us a generation to recover from. The foci of our five days together were primarily money, sex and power. We engaged in some serious ecclesiastical navel gazing.

Returning to Wellington and St Andrew's on The Terrace after General Assembly is like returning to the real world after five days in the twilight zone. The people of the city who live and work around here have spoken to me about the Assembly. At the salon where I had a lovely post-Assembly massage, at the coffee shop across the street, the MP on the aeroplane who stopped to talk, complete strangers on the street, the gay people who don't usually come to church who have started coming to St Andrew's, seem to be uniformly appalled and puzzled by the Presbyterian Church's decision to ban from leadership people in gay, lesbian, or opposite-sex de facto relationships. And this reaction is not just to be found in cosmopolitan Wellington. An editorial in *The Timaru Herald*, the day after the decision, described it as “out of step with society”. Having been born and educated in Timaru, I can assure you that neither *The Timaru Herald*, nor Timaru itself, have a history of liberal thought on these issues.

Most of the people who live in our community believe that sexual orientation is part of the order of creation, acknowledging the growing scientific evidence that there are biological factors involved. They work with gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. They share their lives as families and friends. On the basis of lived experience, they know that gay and lesbian people have the capacity to form relationships that are loving, good and worthy of respect and protection. The last poll taken before the Civil Union Act was passed indicated that 64 percent of New Zealanders supported Civil Unions. I imagine that number would be even higher today. And even more people know heterosexual people living in de facto relationships.

The message that Assembly received from conservative Presbyterians that this decision was necessary for the peace and unity of the church. They may be correct because the threat on the part of conservatives to leave was

widely known and provided the implicit background for the debate. I even heard that one young commissioner, whose gay father was also a commissioner, considered voting for the legislation because she didn't want the church to split. For years we've heard that a ruling is necessary to keep people in the Presbyterian Church. So now we have done it. But we have done it at the expense of our engagement with the communities in which we live out our mission. My question is why Christians would ever have decided that the needs of our members, who have already experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ, could outweigh our mission to “go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16.14-18).

The distinction between leadership and membership is meaningless to the wider community, which sees only discrimination. It is meaningless theologically too. It is by baptism and grace that we are members of Christ's church. What makes for leadership is a call tested by the parish in the case of lay leaders, and the parish and the presbytery, in the case of ministers. This decision has placed a huge stumbling block in the path of people who might have been open to the Christian faith (Mark 9: 42). While the youth within conservative churches might welcome the decision because they want clear guidelines (even while admitting that they won't live up to them), the youth and generation X and Y outside of the church are thinking very differently. As one young commissioner said at Assembly, this decision will prevent young people from having an opportunity to come to know Christ.

I am also saddened to hear stories of people who are already in leadership offering their resignations from Sessions and Parish Council despite the fact that the legislation pertains only to the acts of licensing, ordination and induction. Some of these are not gay or lesbian or in de facto relationships, but have children who are. What is even worse are the other stories: of people who are being pressured to resign because they are in de facto relationships; of a gay lay person being told that they can no longer lead worship in their community; and of a married lay leader being anonymously phoned and read a statement saying that having a different surname from his wife was a bad witness as people could think they were in a de facto relationship. We were assured that there would be no “witch hunts” and yet they started within a week of the decision being made.

The other issue is the weakness of the legislation in terms of clarity and interpretation. The Book of Order and Judicial Reference Group said that the meaning of the decision would have to be interpreted by Presbyteries. The homosexual exemption seems to suggest that any person who is gay and was ordained at the time of the 2004 Assembly will not be affected. Presumably this means that a gay elder can train for ministry and be ordained? Presumably it also means that a married minister could have a homosexual affair and not be subject to the ruling. What a minefield for Presbyteries and what a massive distraction from mission.

As Joanne Black pointed out in her *Listener* column on our “Great Leap Backward,” a person who is having serial sexual encounters will be able to be ordained or inducted because that is not a visible behaviour, while someone living in a committed *de facto* relationship will not. Black was clear that there was another way between the Presbyterian decision and “Shortland Street” (which two speakers at Assembly referred to as the alternative to the ruling). The church is saying heterosexual marriage=good, everything else=bad. However, most New Zealanders are clearly capable of more complex ethical thinking than the “Shortland Street” speakers at Assembly. Meanwhile, the church pays no attention to the responsibilities and qualities that make a sexual relationship good and right: consent, respect, mutuality, equality, and faithfulness.

So what will do in the face of this? There is a progressive minority within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand that sees this decision as one that must be disobeyed in order to be faithful to the Gospel. Some churches have already made public statements that they will continue to choose their leaders based on calling, gifts, and passion for ministry, and without regard for sexual orientation or marital status. This is not just happening in lefty-liberal places like Wellington, but in provincial towns like Timaru and Palmerston North. Yes, the majority of the Assembly has made its view clear and I recognise that many conservatives believe that we should all abide by that decision. However, there is within the church a strong tradition of dissent and those churches that engage in ecclesiastical disobedience are willing to face the consequences, whatever they may be. They will do so because of the *missio dei*. As some Christians in South Africa denounced apartheid and took part in “illegal” actions to end it, while other Christians defended it as God’s will, so too will we stand for the dignity of all people created in the image of God.

I see signs of hope in the significant numbers of “neo-orthodox” and “evangelical” Presbyterians who have

changed their theological thinking about homosexuality over the past 10 years. I do not believe that legislative change will come quickly but it will happen eventually. Maybe we will end up with a situation like the PCUSA, which left its similar ruling on the books, but this year allowed congregations and presbyteries to decide if it is applicable in any given situation. My hope is that there will be a growing body of people who will realise that while there are major differences about Biblical interpretation on these issues, any attempt to solve these differences by exclusive legislation is bound to fail.

I am also committed to continuing to bear this witness within the church, staying in relationship, however difficult, with those who disagree with me. While it is not politically correct, I understand what Martin Luther meant when he said, “the church is a whore, but she is also my mother.” The sentiment is expressed more poetically by Petru Dumitriu: “it is impossible to be a Christian. It is impossible not to be a Christian. It is impossible to be a Christian outside the Church and the Church is ‘Impossible’. Jesus is crucified, but he has left us, too, torn to pieces, torn between what we are and what we are called to be.” And even so, there is resurrection.

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Communicating the intensity of GA06

Amanda Wells, communications manager, Assembly Office

As I sit at my desk again, the week after Assembly, writing about it feels difficult. The following verges on a personal response from someone in a professional role, which is not always a comfortable balance. Why am I writing about it? Mostly because I have a dire shortage of content and because there's no one you can hassle like yourself. But also because it's an experience that has shaped my work for much of this year, intensively so for the past four months, and its outcomes have left much on which to reflect. And perhaps because you might want to read an article in this issue of *Candour* that does not once mention the leadership and sexuality debate.

There's a song that I will always associate with GA06, one that had filtered into my consciousness via the radio and that I listened to on my laptop early every morning as I checked my email at my hotel. Some lyrics:

*Don't know how much time has passed, all I know is
that it feels like forever
No one ever tells you that forever feels like home,
sitting all alone inside your head.¹*

To my sleep-deprived brain, this seemed an apposite summary of my experience of GA; the uneasy opposition of overwork and worship; managing crowds yet also grappling with new levels of personal accountability; and the time-bending nature of those five (five??) days. I'm playing the song again as I write (it's early and the office is empty, just in case you were wondering about the distraction factor).

*And while you're outside looking in, describing
what you see,
Remember what you're staring at is me.²*

In the mornings I ran around the mangrove-fringed lake (or lagoon?) next to my hotel as the sun came up. Normally I don't run every day, but it felt like the only way to manage intensity of the experience. At the start, I was listening to my usual running tracks (bizarre German dance music) but by the end of GA I had switched to a mix I used to listen to a lot while commuting last year. Most of this is Christian music: Delirious, Switchfoot, and random tracks off a worship compilation. After the final service on the Monday at St Kents, one of my friends came up to me and asked me if I'd experienced God during GA. At some points, I said. But mostly I found God by the lake,

especially with Delirious on Sunday morning;

*This mountain's high; too high for us
Your ways are high; too high for us.³*

This was my first Assembly. But I'd heard a lot about Christchurch in 2004, particularly about the number of things that went wrong, especially logistically, for the communications team. This led to a strong desire to check and double check that our set-up would work, particularly in terms of technology (a desire perhaps viewed as paranoia by some members of the local arrangements committee, with some justification!). When I arrived on Wednesday afternoon, it was a relief to see that our PCs and printer were being set up and to get my laptop connected to the network, in conjunction with the helpful and impressively competent St Kents IT people. Nightmare number one looked like being averted.

Nightmare number two was Friday and managing the media. It went as well as it could have gone, I felt, which doesn't mean I view the coverage in a positive light (see the editorial). As an ex-journalist, it's weird to be on the other side; although I wouldn't want to go back there. It's thought-provoking to consider the questions reporters asked, and where they were coming from. The media is an interesting place in which to be a Christian, and not a comfortable one. Equally, the Church is an interesting and uncomfortable place in which to be a journalist. Perhaps if we provided better encouragement to our young people, we would be better pleased with the unexamined positions that the media adopts (if you attended the media courses run by Jose and me earlier this year, this refrain will not sound new!).

Nightmare number three ended up being getting home. Wellington was shut on Monday night due to fog. We found this out somewhere in the vicinity of Levin. Perhaps doing a approach made our failure to get in even worse; we dropped out of the cloud halfway along the runway then immediately powered up and away. I had never realised that a domestic plane could stay in the air for two and half hours... On arrival in Auckland, energy came from somewhere to sort out accommodation, transfers and rebook flights. Sadly there were a number of familiar GA06 faces in a similar position. Once Juliette's luggage had been re-found, and we had managed to persuade the hotel to invoice us for the rooms, things

almost seemed better. The fact that Air NZ lost Juliette's luggage again the following morning beggars belief. As does the fact that Tracey, having chosen to come back on the Wednesday instead, experienced the de ja vu of Wellington being shut again and another unplanned night in Auckland, which lead to her contracting food poisoning the following morning, from which she is still recovering as I write...

So this has been a memorable Assembly for staff. Many lessons have been learned that we are keen to ensure are not relearned in 2008. For me, meeting people with whom I had previously only corresponded via email or phone was a highlight, as was talking to those who took the time to provide helpful feedback on our communications. The resulting squeeze in deadlines means life won't be back to normal for us till at least the end of October, which is not always easy. But I wouldn't have missed the experience. I will always remember it, especially when I hear my song. It's hard to imagine the week surrounding GA06 being topped as the most intense seven days of my life.

References

¹ Stone Sour, "Through Glass", *Come what (ever) may*

² *ibid*

³ Delirious, "Mountains High", *World Service*

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To change or not to change?

Martin Macaulay, St Paul's, Katikati

Of course, Assembly's answer was "yes" and "no". On some things, Assembly introduced radical change, while on others Assembly was conservative. I came away from Assembly with real hope for the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and the renewing work of God in our midst. I feel positive not simply because of any single decision made over that weekend, and I don't particularly want to continue the debate on any particular issues, but it seems to me that overall, the meeting wrestled well with the difficult decisions of what needs to change in the Church and what needs to remain the same.

These kinds of decisions are crucial if our mission is to be faithful to Jesus Christ, and yet also connect with our community. It's about not losing our distinctive Christian message ("for I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you..." 1 Cor 11:23), and yet adapting new structures and forms in order to effectively present this message to the world. I believe this is a good expression of the theme "Christ-centred, community facing". I also believe good change choices will lead to a Church that is healthy in mission.

Can I illustrate where I saw this principle or theme working out at among us at Assembly?

The sexuality and leadership decision clearly reflected a growing conservative (I generally use the word "evangelical") theological position. On this matter, Assembly clearly did not want to bring innovation, but remained in continuity with a 2000-year stream of orthodox Christian faith and practice.

The Focal Identity Statement was a more complicated situation, because suggested improvements have kept coming into the task group even after initial Assembly papers were printed. I believe the FIS is receiving widespread acceptance as a statement of faith, but again I observed a considered caution about making changes that speak to the core of our faith. Assembly did not want to rush in bringing change to our doctrinal standards.

On the other hand, radical change to structures is occurring. It seemed to me that the Council of Assembly had listened to the grassroots through the Focus on the Future process and had taken significant steps to focus the Assembly's operations on core functions. I think the reduction in expenditure and consequent reduction in Assembly Assessment is a good sign. I am encouraged that the national functions are making good progress toward becoming leaner and more efficient. Although Assembly did not support the overtures calling for a 5 percent or 10 percent limit on Assembly assessment, the decision to refer the 10 percent target to the Council of Assembly for consideration says to me that Assembly is serious about further reductions in expenditure. This will allow more resources to remain in the local parish at the coalface of mission.

I am encouraged that there appears to be openness to exploring change in our structures

Assembly even carried (63 percent) the overture asking Council of Assembly to appoint a Task Group to research, explore and promote discussion of a federal model of

interrelating among church councils in the Presbyterian Church. This federal model would be a radical change in structure for the Church. Some constitutional and ecclesiological concerns were raised. Had the overture asked for the federal model to be implemented, I suspect it would have failed to gain sufficient support. However, the willingness of Assembly to research and explore such a model suggests a desire to change structures where this can bring improvements, coupled with a caution about compromising our theological core. I think that is a good place to be when exploring change.

I know there is a danger of restructuring for restructuring's sake, and we are not going to find a perfect structure for the Church, but I am encouraged that there appears to be openness to exploring change in our structures. In his book *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix*, Brian McLaren comments:

I used to think I could find the perfect structure for my church, the right balance of power, terms of service, checks and balances and so on. But now I realize that the

perfect structure is just about any that is flexible enough to become a better structure tomorrow. Conversely, the “perfect structure” that claims to be *the* right one, immune to improvement, is actually one of the worst structures possible.

The change introduced by the Assembly that I am most interested in, and perhaps also most nervous about, is the decision to transform the School of Ministry into the Centre for Christian Leadership. I am excited at the possibilities this brings. McLaren again, on the kind of leadership training we need for the church on the other side:

New approaches to training will be needed to produce this new kind of leader.

Because seminaries train scholars, and because scholarship and leadership require very different kinds of people and gifts, traditional seminaries will either shrink to the size needed to provide scholars only, or they will die, or they will retool themselves to become the seedbed of leadership development. Scholars will increasingly see themselves as valued consultants to leaders – as will leaders.

Because change will be continuous, learning will also be continuous, not concentrated in a few years at the beginning of one’s career. Study sabbaticals will become more common. Books and libraries and teachers all will be available online, so “virtual schools” will deliver their services without dependence on campuses. School will come to the students more often, and the reverse will happen less. Increasingly, training and internship and granting credentials will become local church-based. Seminaries may become more like consultant agencies to local churches facilitating creative thinking through think tanks, troubleshooting and assisting with crisis management, and - even more useful - anticipating tomorrow’s problems in advance. In the new church, seminaries could once again find themselves exciting places to be.

I think our New Zealand training institutions, including our School of Ministry, have already moved to address the kind of issues McLaren raises, but the new Centre for Christian Leadership will have the potential to carry this further. I believe leadership training and ministry formation occur best in an action/reflection model. I think the Centre model will make better use of the growing, effective churches of the Presbyterian Church and our

experienced ministers (which are one of our greatest resources) in the mentoring and development of our new leaders. The Centre seems to be picking up on the largely positive experience of the Community Based Ministry Training model from the 1990s. I think a small national ministry training staff can coordinate training and ensure standards for training for ordination are maintained. And, I think the Centre could further assist the new initiatives of LOM and LMT.

Why am I nervous? I know from contributing to the Bible College of NZ’s internship programme that constant effort must be given to maintaining standards and the moderation of grading and assessment levels. Assembly’s

decision to develop a new system of licensing (or certification) for ordained ministers has potential to be one helpful means of “quality control” here. I still wonder about the cost of run-

ning the Centre model. I wonder whether providing lay training is really part of our core business when there are many other established training providers already offering quality ministry training for lay people in NZ. I am aware of the potential for a crippling workload to be laid on ministry interns. I am conscious, as the task group acknowledged, that dropping a residential programme makes creation of community and involvement of family more difficult.

But at least we are having a go. I have confidence that the establishment board will carefully consider the concerns that have been raised. There is risk but, going back to my theme, not a direct risk to the core of our faith.

Perhaps most important of all, I felt there was a tremendous amount of prayer at and for Assembly. It is hard to quantify, but the prayer meetings I attended, and the ones I heard about out in parishes had a real sense of enjoying the presence of God and doing business with God. In addition, I understand that the whole Church of Uganda (some 8.5 million people) was also praying for us at Assembly.

All in all, I came away from Assembly feeling very hopeful. In the words of the upcoming Presbyterian Affirm Conference, it made me feel that we are a “Church with a Future”.

Because change will be continuous, learning will also be continuous, not concentrated in a few years at the beginning of one’s career

Expressing anger: An immediate reaction

Geoff King, Knox, Christchurch

I couldn't wait to get home from Assembly. I was surprised by the intensity of my reaction to what took place at St Kentigern's College in Auckland between September 28 and October 1, the more so since I thought I was prepared for it this time.

It wasn't the content of the debate over leadership and sexuality per se that upset me - I gather from Assembly old hands that this was much less vitriolic and much more respectful than in previous years. What upset me and shook me to the core was the tacit assumption that we can, by means of our decent and orderly Presbyterian process, "resolve" such matters of faith and life.

I think I made it through "that Friday" with a reasonable amount of equanimity, but found myself becoming angrier and angrier as Assembly wore on. As a non-voting associate who'd been roped into presenting a report and recommendations from a Task Group, the seemingly interminable notices of motion, amendments, questions of clarification and points of order that impressed and reassured some people simply frustrated me. I kept thinking of the ministry I could be doing instead of being stuck in a hall with several hundred people who (to paraphrase a comment made by a first-time Assembly attendee) seemed to be concerned chiefly with money, sex and power.

It frustrated me that with one or two notable exceptions (such as the Global Missions presentation), the theme of "Christ-centred, community-facing" did not seem to get much of a look-in. It saddened me that in a world filled with needs crying out for attention, we spent most of our time and energy talking with, about, and among ourselves. Somewhere in the middle of the debate over the motion from CASI to urge the government to repeal Section 59 of the Crimes Act, I left and tried to process my emotions by walking back to the motel. I was only partially successful.

By the time I got home on Monday, my sadness and frustration had turned into anger, and that anger found expression in the following words:

When Jesus came to Assembly
they would not let him come in
Since no-one had said he was married
He might have been "living in sin".
They wanted their church to be holy

on that final and glorious day...
Surely Jesus would not want His leaders
to be de facto, lesbian, gay...
Surely God could "change" them, and bisexuals
And transgendered - what could that mean??
No!!! Anything less than hetero-marriage
was considered debauched and obscene.
So Jesus sat outside Assembly
And he greeted me there, at the door.
We talked of his unmarried parents,
Of his friends - prostitutes, and the poor.
We wept at the thought of God's children
being told that they do not belong.
We raged against sanctioned injustice;
We tried hard to sing the Lord's song.
We parted with warmth, and with sadness
For as Jesus went on his way
The Assembly passed one more amendment
And the Pharisees won the day...

I want my colleagues reading this to know that it was written in the aftermath of an experience that has profoundly shaken my faith in the institutional church. I'm aware that the "they" and "we" may sound combative, and want to note that I'm not pointing an accusing finger at individuals. I'm not equating the Pharisees with any particular commissioners or even groups. I suppose I am - with sadness, disillusionment and anger - accusing us all of pharisaism, by following our decent and orderly processes to the letter of the law, and in my view, to the detriment of grace.

As part of the closing service of worship, the Moderator asked us to reflect on what we would take home from GA06. For me, those reflections crystallised around three questions: can we continue to talk meaningfully of peace and unity when our processes seem to tend inevitably towards discord and division? Is this what it means to be Presbyterian? If so, can I remain with integrity within this Presbyterian Church?

By the grace of God, through prayer, work and worship with friends and colleagues from across the theological spectrum, I hope to come up with some positive answers to these questions before I'm asked to attend another General Assembly - but at the moment I'm not at all sure.

The search for the mythical Jesus

Scott Thomson, minister emeritus, Wairarapa

Is the church missing out while authors and actors express the Gospel world wide? I'm encouraged that an unchurched generation is receiving ethical/moral values through the mythology/fantasy/epic of acclaimed books and films.

My grandchildren relish CS Lewis, George Lucas, JK Rowling, and JRR Tolkien – with the last name leading the popularity stakes by a wizard's mile. Good vs Evil is hardly a new plot line. What I find more significant are the insights to the nature of good and the nature of evil – insights the church seems less able to communicate.

Incarnation – In our likeness

We need a combination of familiar and unfamiliar to engage with imaginative fantasy. These stories give us characters that adults and children can identify with. The entry point into Narnia is a wardrobe, and still more little Lucy. Luke in "Star Wars" may be one heck of a jet-jockey but he is also a sensitive and troubled young man. Harry Potter is the ultimate geek in glasses. I feel for him. In incarnational theology, Jesus saves us because Jesus is recognisably someone like us.

Incarnation – In his likeness

"Types" of Jesus have been around since New Testament writers got busy digging them out of the Old Testament. In *Lord of the Rings*, for example, we have characters who ring true to ourselves and also display Christ images.

Wide-eyed Frodo Baggins is the essentially innocent victim, taking the burden of The Ring on himself. A messianic theme works out in Aragorn – the returning king who brings healing. Bishop Moxon suggests Christ-like significance for the elven princess Arwen. Echoing Philippians chapter two, Arwen gives up immortality and is justified. And what about Tolkien's personal favourite – Sam the gardener?

At first glance, Gandalf, the grumpy wizard, is no more "gentle Jesus" than Lewis' roaring lion. Who is Gandalf? He is a servant of the secret fire, a messenger on an angelic mission, "sent" to help the peoples of Middle Earth. On film, he falls to his death in an attitude of crucifixion.

The characters of these stories face odds more daunting than shrinking congregations and growing secularism. They give us role models. They can travel with us.

Resurrection images

"Resurrection" was once core business for the church. What might resurrection be like?

"If you kill me," prophet figure Obi tells the sinister Vader in Star Wars, "I will become more powerful than you can imagine." So is resurrection the legacy of a good person, a martyr, a Jesus, a Martin Luther King?

Lewis seems to suggest resurrection is also connected with liberation. The immediate mission of the resurrected Aslan is to release the victims frozen to stone by the white witch. Peter Jackson – following Tolkien – explores similar ground in the movie tour de force of Gollum. It's important to Frodo that Gollum, once a hobbit like himself, can come back from his malice-driven, guilt-ridden, ring-corrupted past. Gollum doesn't make it. If he had, would that equate to resurrection?

In the extended DVD of "The Two Towers" – highly recommended – there are contrasting images of life beyond death. Elves equate it with life unchanging – something Arwen will forsake if she accepts morality. In another sequence, Gandalf speaks of a "spirit finding its way to the halls of your ancestors" – a culturally appropriate work in the essentially Anglo-Saxon (pre Christian) context of Rohan.

Galdalf himself undergoes something very like the Biblical resurrection. He falls into the depth, overcomes a demon, and dies. He enters eternity, but is sent back, clothed in white "for a little time until my work is done". Task accomplished, he sails into the west, to "a fair country under a swift sunrise".

These stories of our time offer images of resurrection rather than road maps. Maybe we have to rest content with Paul's groping speculation that there are different kinds of resurrection.

Good and Evil

"The Force be with you!"

Reflection and letter to the editor

The enigmatic greeting blew away clouds of Hollywood cynicism and hordes of anti-heroes. But what precisely is the Force? Who “sends” Gandalf back? There is a unique benevolent power, real, active and at the same time intangible. The Force works out through ordinary everyday virtues like friendship, loyalty, courage and hope. Good – God – is mysterious, working through good choices of people like us. Choices by the littlest person can change the course of the future – and there is also “luck, if luck you call it”.

When the good does take form, it is awesome. Aslan’s enemies taunt him as a “pussycat”. which the majestic lion most certainly is not.

The fantasy stories are more specific about the nature of evil – something psychologically driven correctness finds it hard to be. Like Good, Evil is a force, reinforcing individual or collective evil. But Evil is inherently unstable, tripping itself up and even doing good that it does not intend.

Evil is absence. The dark side in Star Wars, the shadow in Tolkien or the whiteout of unthawed winter for Lewis. The Force nourishes hope. Abandoning of hope is submission to the Shadow. In the final LOTR film, the Steward of Gondor gives up hope, renounces his culture and resolves on suicide by fire “like the heathen kings”. The unfashionable word “heathen” makes it from the book to the film. The Steward is unwilling to abandon the familiar so that the new may come. He would rather have nothing.

Evil knows what buttons to push. Evil plays to our weaknesses and insecurities, whether greed for property or power, or just the way things were. Orphan Harry Potter comes on a mirror and sees the presence of his late parents. His chum, Ron, looks in a sees himself as head boy and team captain – honours we suspect will not come his way. The kindly headmaster appears and cautions the boys against wasting time and effort on longings that will do no good.

To ancient greed and perennial insecurity, modern fantasy adds the very modern wile of disinformation. For all his high-tech, Luke Skywalker frequently has only half the story on his radar. The same is true of Tolkien’s seeing stones, which lead the viewer to mistake the meaning of what they see. How like our television, which attracts and shocks when it could inform and advise.

Tools or tangents?

What we make of all this in parish ministry is up to us.

There is material here for study groups, talks, for sermon illustrations and perhaps for a camp or retreat. Professor Colin Gibson has lead the way with his university course, Bishop Moxon of the Waikato has done serious work and I have attempted trial programmes.

The main thing is to use our imagination and encourage our people to think imaginatively. We should not think of the world as unavoidably alien and uniformly hostile. Many years ago I was struck by the hopefulness of that lonely prophet, Teilhard de Cardin:

“Jerusalem, lift up your head.... All over the world men are toiling – in laboratories, in studios.... The ferment that is taking part in art and science is for your sake.... Embrace it!”

**Scott Thomson is a retired Presbyterian minister and a graduate in English and History, including the University of Otago paper “Word and Image” that considers the work of JRR Tolkien. He can lead programmes exploring life and faith issues through the images of Middle Earth and Narnia that are suitable for study groups, café churches, retreats or all age camps. Email bjtandjst@xtra.co.nz*

letter to the editor

I suppose I am wasting my time, but I want to give it a go. Our poor silly old Church! It no longer knows how to walk on its crutches. It can hardly sit in its wheelchair. I am ashamed of our Church. But I served it with all the passion of my heart and will continue to do so.

Our poor Church rumbles along telling the world who it doesn’t want. Its poor little voice squeaks its message of life, hope, victory and salvation, but I am going to help push the wheelchair to some place where it renews the vigour of youth.

You won’t want to publish this, but I don’t care a damn. Being literally its oldest minister I won’t be annoying it for too much longer.

The thunder of the Word will come through at last. I believe!

Ian Dixon
Christchurch