

GA10 Outgoing Moderator's Reflections

The Very Rev Graham Redding

Two years ago, I chose as my Moderatorial theme, 'Reformed and Reforming'. There was a certain aptness to this theme, insofar as 2009 was the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth, and was marked by conferences and commemorative services all around the world, including here in New Zealand.

At its heart, 'Reformed and Reforming' was about identity and direction. In this pluralist, increasingly post-denominational age, is there anything distinctive about our standing within that part of the Church known as the Reformed tradition? Are there doctrinal emphases and ways of being church that we would still say are important? And at a time of continued institutional decline, what might it mean to ask about the relationship between restructuring and reform, between the pragmatics of organisational change and discernment about where the Spirit is leading us? If the organisational question is, "What must we do in order to grow the church?" surely the missional question is, "What kind of church is God calling us to be in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit?"

This is a question about the church.

It is also a question about mission.

We talk a lot about mission of course. In the Presbyterian context, we refer to the five faces of mission – all of which are 'doing' words intended for the church – proclaiming, caring, serving, transforming, nurturing and teaching.

Through these activities and commitments, we say we make Jesus Christ known.

My question is: To what end? Just what is it about Jesus Christ that we are seeking to make known?

In 2 Corinthians 5:19, Paul boldly declares that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

The key word here is 'reconciliation'.

Reconciliation, of course, implies a state of alienation. The Bible contends that we are in a state of alienation from God – as individual persons, as communities and nations, and as creation as a whole. Evidence of that alienation is all around us and within us – in the hurt and guilt we feel in our innermost being; in the fragmentation of relationships, personally and collectively; and in the brokenness of creation, seen also sadly in the life of the church of Jesus Christ.

The message of reconciliation with which we have been entrusted is directed at each of these levels.

What does Jesus say to those whose souls are troubled? “Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” There you have level one: Good News on a deeply personal level for all who are in need of healing and forgiveness.

What does Paul say to a community divided sharply along lines of ethnicity, social standing and gender? “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3). There you have level two: A new reconciled and reconciling humanity. A resurrection community. A community of inclusion rather than exclusion.

And what does Paul say in his letter to the Romans about creation? “For the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Thus understood, creation is no mere backdrop to the drama of salvation.

When Psalm 148 calls for the sun and the moon, the mountains and hills, and all living creatures to praise the Lord, there is a sense in which creation itself is called to add its voice to the chorus of praise being directed towards the Creator.

Building on this theme, Revelation 4, in a manner reminiscent of Isaiah 6, presents us with a vision of worship in which living creatures of every description join human beings praising God day and night without ceasing, singing, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.”

While the dramatic intensity of this biblical vision might be somewhat removed from what we experience Sunday by Sunday in our more mundane gatherings, could it not be said that a key aspect of worship is to give voice to creation's praise, in joyful anticipation of the day when the vision of worship in Revelation 4 will come to pass?

There is something profoundly expansive about this view of worship, lifting us above a natural preoccupation with ourselves and our own spiritual needs and myriad forms of self-expression. Worship is not just about me and my needs; nor is it about preserving something which we might call 'Presbyterian'. It is about taking our place, through the Holy Spirit, in something far bigger than ourselves. It is about growing into an enlarged understanding – of life in and with the Triune God.

Worship is integrally related to mission. For how can we give voice to creation's praise in worship, and not address the unsustainable plundering of the world's resources and, of course, the pressing challenges associated with climate change? Never has the fifth face of mission – caring for creation – been more urgent than it is right now.

Moreover, how can we gather around the Lord's Table and experience a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that draws all people together in a reconciling union, and not strive for reconciliation, justice and peace in our time, and not strive to serve the apostolic call to make the unity of all Christians persuasively visible to a divided world?

The unity that our Lord prayed upon his disciples in John 17 is a missional prayer – "I in them and you in me (Father), that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me."

The unity to which Jesus refers allows for a celebration of diversity, but it cannot abide divided witness.

I have pondered this notion of unity in relation to Cooperative Ventures and uniting congregations, which comprise around 20% of our churches nationwide.

For many people, cooperating parishes are a visible sign of the unity which Jesus prayed upon his disciples. Born at the height of the movement towards church union in the 1970s, they embodied the hopes of that time.

However, because church union never eventuated, a good deal of energy has had to be concentrated on managing relationships with and between the partner churches that gave the cooperating parishes birth, defining structures and procedures, and honouring in equal measure the contributing traditions of Anglicanism, Methodism and Presbyterianism.

This has amounted to a balancing act: Honouring all, favouring none. With the passage of time, however, the balancing act has proved difficult to sustain. Many cooperating parishes feel disconnected from the partner churches. Some have become quite independent, parochial and idiosyncratic in their ways of being church. Some parishes resent traditional denominational labels and lines of connection and accountability. Ironically, the very independence these parishes covet undermines the unity they allegedly represent.

Part of the Moderator's role is to represent the Presbyterian Church in ecumenical discussions on these and related matters. These discussions have been taking place on two levels.

The first level is *functional*, consisting of ongoing discussions within the Standing Committee of UCANZ on redefining the oversight of cooperating parishes following the dissolution of several Joint Regional Committees.

The second level is *theological*, and consists of twice-yearly meetings with national church leaders to talk about the nature of Christian unity for Aotearoa New Zealand today. A paper has been written. It has the support of church leaders from across seven traditions, ranging from the Roman Catholic Church to the Assemblies of God. It identifies the need for an "ecumenical space" whereby, even in a state of division, churches can witness to their common allegiance to Jesus Christ and cooperate together to further the visible unity of the church. The creation of a Forum for Christian Unity in Aotearoa New Zealand is being talked about to serve this purpose.

Because these important discussions extend beyond any one Moderatorial term, I believe that consideration ought to be given to the formation of an Inter-church and Ecumenical Affairs Committee. Such a committee will provide cohesion and continuity to Presbyterian input, and assure cooperating parishes that the Presbyterian Church is committed to these sorts of discussions.

One of the subjects likely to be discussed in the forum of church leaders is the nature of Christian worship. There is a feeling among many that it is time we moved beyond thinking in terms of Presbyterian worship, Anglican worship, Methodist worship, and talk about that which lies at the heart of *Christian* worship.

Such a move is to be welcomed. We must always be open to learn from other churches and traditions and eager to participate in conversations with them that could lead to mutual correction and reconciliation, for none of us has a monopoly on the truth.

What might we Presbyterians learn from others?

Part of my 'Reformed and Reforming' theme has been to advocate a recovery of a proper Eucharistic theology, practice and imagination.

Talk of such a recovery inevitably leads to the charge that we are becoming Anglican.

In fact, the recovery here envisaged is that of the worship of the New Testament and early church. As Luke informs us in Acts 2:42, the first believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the *breaking of bread* and the prayers." Moreover, our own theological forebear, John Calvin was adamant that the celebration of the Lord's Supper was an integral element of weekly Christian worship, alongside the ministry of the Word as the principal act of worship on the Lord's Day.

Such a recovery is not just about how often we celebrate the sacrament; it is about how we see ourselves in relation to it. Travelling around the country, I have noticed that communion tables in many Presbyterian churches have the words,

“Do this in remembrance of me” engraved on them. This indicates that, for many of us, the Lord’s Supper is primarily a *memorial meal* – we do it in remembrance of Jesus.

Now, while the Lord’s Supper *is* a memorial meal, it is not *only* a memorial meal. One cannot read the story of the risen Christ breaking bread with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) without noticing that the Lord’s Supper is also a *resurrection meal*, in which the risen Christ is present. It is a joyful feast of the people of God. It is a sacrament of the church.

I am convinced that a recovery of a Eucharistic theology, practice and imagination will bear much fruit for the Presbyterian Church, not least of which will be a strengthening of the link between worship and mission. For it is as we gather around the Table that we are reminded in a very tangible way that the sending God is the hospitable God, and that the *missional* church is a *hospitable* church.

But note this: It is not *our* hospitality we are talking about here. It is *God’s* hospitality. And God’s hospitality is *Eucharistic* hospitality, with our risen and ascended Lord as Host. Eucharistic hospitality is much more than making newcomers feel welcome at church and serving plunger coffee instead of instant. It redefines how we view others – and ourselves.

In her remarkable book, *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles describes the experience of early one morning in New York, for no earthly reason, wandering into a church, receiving communion, and finding herself transformed – embracing a faith she had once scorned. Before long, she turned the bread she ate at communion into tons of groceries, piled on the church’s altar to be given away. Within a few years, she and the people she served had started nearly a dozen food pantries in the poorest parts of their city.

For those who feel confused or overwhelmed by all the talk around being a missional church, I would say, concentrate first on being a hospitable church. Properly understood, this will not make your church inward looking; rather, it will sharpen you for witness and mission, just as it did for the two disciples who sat at table with the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus.

I would now like us to turn our attention from mission and Eucharistic hospitality to ministry. I think we have some major issues to address here. I will highlight just two.

Probably the question I am most often asked in my capacity as Principal of the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership is, “Do you teach your ordination students about the importance of pastoral visits?” Behind this question is a feeling that many Ministers no longer prioritise this aspect of ministry. We should not be surprised by this, for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament is in grave danger of being overloaded with other expectations and demands. Today’s Ministers are expected to be mission leaders, change agents and social workers. By default, many of them serve also as parish administrators and property managers.

Many of these roles seem to require a disproportionate amount of time in front of the computer and on the internet. At times it is hard to know whether the amount of time spent on the computer is a necessity or a distraction. But one thing I do know is that routine pastoral care – the glue that holds a parish together – is often the first thing to be sacrificed to overloaded schedules – and many of our parishes are suffering as a result.

Moreover, many a ministry begins with the hope that it will be the catalyst for reversing decades of congregational decline; and many a ministry ends up being blamed when the hoped for growth fails to eventuate.

There is a need, I think, to clarify the role of pastoral ministry. In order to fulfill its mission the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within a multiplicity of gifts and callings, a focus of its unity. The ministry of Word and Sacrament serves this function.

The World Council of Churches document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), puts it this way:

As Christ chose and sent apostles, Christ continues through the Holy Spirit to choose and call persons into ordained ministry. As heralds and ambassadors,

ordained ministers are representatives of Jesus Christ to the community, and proclaim his message of reconciliation. As leaders and teachers they call the community to submit to the authority of Jesus Christ, the teacher and prophet, in whom law and prophets were fulfilled. As pastors, under Jesus Christ the chief shepherd, they assemble and guide the dispersed people of God, in anticipation of the coming Kingdom.

Understood in this way, ordained ministry has a strongly missional mandate without detracting from its core tasks of proclaiming, presiding and pastoring.

The second ministry-related issue might be referred to as the professionalization of ministry. One of the biggest problems afflicting the church is the perception that there exist two classes of ministry: the clergy, who through their training and remuneration have become a kind of *professional* Christian or minister; and the laity, who are the *amateurs*. This perception is reinforced at Presbyteries and General Assemblies, which tend to be dominated by the Ministers.

The distinction between clergy and laity might be convenient, but it is a distortion of the New Testament teaching that the 'kleros' are part of the 'laos' (the whole people of God), not a separate, elite group.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of specialist ministries in the church, many of which are paid positions. Examples: Children and family workers; youth leaders; pastoral visitors; music directors; community coordinators; administrators; and office secretaries. This is an understandable development, and many of these positions have job descriptions, employment contracts and codes of ethics.

But is this accentuating the move towards the professionalization of ministry? Are we reinforcing the perception that real ministry is done by the paid professionals, and that everyone else is there merely to support the professionals in their work? And does it reinforce the perception that ministry is what happens inside the church, while the Reformed emphasis on the priesthood of all believers being worked out in the community and in secular vocations is being lost?

There is a need to reacquaint ourselves with the significance of baptism, through which all Christians are commissioned for ministry through prayer and the laying on of hands. In that sense, every Christian is a minister, called by God to a life of faith and service and baptised into a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). Our confidence in being a missional church will, in my view, be utterly bound up with the extent to which we rediscover the force of our baptismal calling.

How well do we encourage and train elders and others in representing Christ to, and in, the secular world? I believe there is considerable scope to strengthen our formational processes and catechetical instruction at a local level, and Ministers have a crucial role to play in this task. It is a disciple-making role.

These, then, are my main observations and concerns. You will note they are primarily theological rather than organisational.

Now for some closing observations, comments and acknowledgements.

It has been a privilege to serve you as Moderator. Thank you for your trust and your prayers. Despite the concerns I have mentioned in this address, my travels have allowed me to meet some wonderful people and see some encouraging signs of God at work in our church.

I single out the following things for special mention.

Firstly, I want to acknowledge with immense gratitude the collegiality and friendship offered by the Moderator of Te Aka Puaho, Millie Te Kaawa and the Moderator Designate and Director of Te Wananga a Rangi, Wayne Te Kaawa. There are many good things happening within Te Aka Puaho at present. Two personal highlights for me were accompanying Te Aka Puaho to numerous events, including the Waitangi Day celebrations, and being a signatory to a new covenant between the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership and Te Wananga a Rangi.

Secondly, I want to pay tribute to the work of Presbyterian Support in each of the seven regions around the country, and to the thirteen schools and colleges that are affiliated to or associated with the Presbyterian Church. Commitments to community care and education are part of our Presbyterian DNA, and it is

heartening to see these commitments still being honoured with such passion and dedication. During my term as Moderator I have given particular attention to strengthening our church's relationship with the Presbyterian Church schools. Over 9,000 young people attend those schools nationwide. For me, this constitutes a significant missional opportunity. I am pleased to report that, at their recent AGM, the schools gave unanimous and enthusiastic support to the proposal that a Presbyterian Church Schools Resource Office be established under the auspices of the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

Thirdly, I want to pay tribute to the Council of Assembly, and to its Convenor, Emma Keown. Only those who have served on Council will know the pressure this Council has been under from a range of internal and external forces. The vitriol that has, at times, been directed at the Council and the Assembly Executive Secretary has been unwarranted. That is not to say that the Council has always got it right and is above criticism. But it has done the best it can under difficult circumstances, approached every challenge with integrity, and learnt from its mistakes. Emma, who was thrown into the deep end in terms of her convenorship following the resignation of Rhys Pearson for reasons of ill health, has grown into the role admirably, with good support from the Deputy Convenor, Lisa Wells. I wish Emma and the new Council well for the future.

When elders and ministers in our church are ordained, they promise to seek the unity and peace of the church and to submit to the governance structures of the church. At times each of us will disagree with certain decisions. Seeking the peace and unity of the church does not mean suppressing disagreement, but it does mean respecting the processes that the church has for making decisions and hearing appeals as we collectively seek the mind of Christ. It means listening with respect to those with whom we disagree. Making rash allegations, threatening legal action and using the media to scandalise the church does not serve the unity and peace of the church. It simply creates a climate of distrust and anxiety, and fragments our Christian witness. I suspect that if the Apostle Paul were able to write a letter to the Presbyterian Church, he would rebuke us for our fragmented witness. All of us would do well to remember our ordination vows the next time we are tempted to lash out in anger at our colleagues or at the church at large.

That said, I firmly acknowledge the many good things that are happening in the Presbyterian Church. We should all be encouraged by what is happening among our young people through events like Connect and Going Further. Kids Friendly and StudentSoul continue to go from strength to strength. Congregations are finding new ways to engage with their communities and despite what the statistics tell us about continued decline overall, there are some significant pockets of revitalisation and growth. Many congregations are thriving. PressGo is gaining traction, and Presbytery reform is gathering momentum. We have some outstanding ordination candidates who in due course will assume positions of leadership in the church. It would not be possible to have a more dedicated and effective group of people making up the Assembly Office and National Service Team. The stewardship of resources at a national level has, in my view, never been better, and the church's relationships with Presbyterian Support, the Presbyterian Savings and Development Society, our Presbyterian Church schools, Knox College and Salmond College are in very good heart. Given my position at the Knox Centre, a personal highlight of my Moderatorial term was taking part in Knox College's centenary celebrations in 2009. Another highlight was participating in the centenary celebrations for the Presbyterian Church's mission in the Punjab region in Northern India.

Finally, I want to thank and pay tribute to my colleagues at the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, who have done a great job maintaining the momentum of the Centre during my Moderatorial term, to my wife Jenni and our children for their unwavering support, and to the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand for trusting me to serve as Moderator.

A number of people have asked me in recent weeks whether I think my term as Moderator has been successful. That is the wrong question. I have not sought to be successful. I have simply sought, with God's help, to honour the trust that has been placed in me and to be faithful to the charge laid upon me. It has been a privilege to serve the church I love in this capacity. Thank you. Ma Ihowa koutou katoa e manaaki.

Graham Redding, 1 October 2010