



Small groups

Contents

| | | |
|---|-------------------|----|
| Editorial..... | Amanda Wells..... | 3 |
| Essays | | |
| Being a church of little communities..... | Ian Pimm..... | 4 |
| Nurturing GEL groups..... | Helen Harray..... | 7 |
| Response | | |
| The purpose of preaching..... | Susan Jones..... | 10 |
| AES column..... | Martin Baker..... | 12 |

About Candour

Candour is a monthly magazine about ministry and leadership.

ISSN 1171-1027 (Print)

ISSN 1179-402X (Online)

The articles in *Candour* reflect the views of individual ministers or contributors writing in a personal capacity. They are not representative of the Church's official position. Please approach the author for permission if you wish to copy an article.

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:
Amanda Wells (editor) on (04) 381-8285 or candour@presbyterian.org.nz

Advertising

One-quarter page: \$80 plus gst (87mm x 117mm)

One-third page: \$95 plus gst (87mm x 160mm)

Half page: \$130 plus gst (184mm x 138mm)

Any artwork must be supplied electronically and in a high-resolution format. Measurements are indicative only and subject to layout requirements.

The next deadline (for the April issue) is **30 March 2010**.



Search for Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, or go to:

www.presbyterian.org.nz/about-us/contact-us

and follow the link.

Glen Innis Vacancies

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| March 22 - 29 | Cottage |
| March 29 - April 5 | Cottage |
| April 5 - 12 | Homestead / Cottage |
| April 12 - 19 | Homestaed / Cottage |

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.

There is **refundable \$50 booking fee** for Glen Innis. This fee is payable to Margaret Black and refunded on arrival at Glen Innis.

Small group challenges

Amanda Wells

It's a small issue on small groups. Commissioning *Candour* is an interesting business: sometimes I ask multitudes of people and they nearly all decline; sometimes I ask few people and they all accept. Remember that spontaneous contributions are always welcome!

However, small groups are at least a topic on which I feel well positioned to comment. I've been part of lots of small groups; some good, some bad, some mediocre, and I've even lead a few of them. Belonging to a small group has been a significant feature of nearly all my (somewhat itinerant) adult life. Most of the churches I've been part of have placed a strong emphasis on joining and contributing to a small group (even if that ministry has not been particularly well supported – more on that later).

Perhaps it's helpful to get some of the negative stuff out of the way first. What makes a bad small group? For me, the most obvious answer is when going to the group makes you feel bad about myself. Not necessarily because of its teaching, but because of the subtle dynamics at play. Perhaps everyone else in the group appears to be part of a closed social circle: others can come along, but they struggle to cross that subtle line of acceptance or share the in-jokes. Feeling you're the odd one out never aids belonging. I can remember at the age of 20 being part of a group where everyone else was engaged or newly married and all post-group supper discussions focused on weddings. Or what about a "happy Christians" group where the studies might be interesting but no one ever reveals anything meaningful about themselves and their life. A group that consistently starts late and finishes later will lose some members over time; not everyone's a night owl. People do leave groups for doctrinal reasons, but 99 percent of the time, theology has nothing to do with it.

In the best small groups, that commitment to be there every week translates into friendship-based accountability and growth. You look forward to catching up, having a meaningful discussion and you aren't afraid to be challenged when appropriate. Good small groups are a safe place where people can go beyond the superficial and openly express questions or doubts, as well as being able to share the challenging events of their lives. Real friendships are formed and spontaneous social events arise, but there's always room for someone new, and that "annoying person" is welcome too. Everyone's not

homogenous, and they don't feel pressure to be so. Differences in theology or world view are useful starters for discussion, and the group's breadth of experience and stage makes each individual feel more free to be themselves.

Leading a small group brings its share of challenges, including what to study. Good resources are few and far between, with many American offerings pitched at a level Kiwis find patronising. Every now and then, you find something really good, but then what next? You can try coming up with your own studies, but it's a lot of work to do well, and very easy to do badly. I would be remiss not to mention the social issues resources that we have produced, the most recent of which is about parenting and will be in parishes in early April (see www.presbyterian.org.nz/speaking-out/resources-for-speaking-out for a full list).

It's rare to find much support for small-group leaders from church leadership. People just tend to make it up as they go along, with varying degrees of success. Perhaps churches with flourishing small-group ministries, of the kind Ian Pimm describes in this issue, do the support thing better. Unless your church has a small-group culture, changes in leadership or just Christmas holidays can result in the disappearance of even successful groups.

Success itself presents a difficult challenge for small group leaders. What do you do when you've got 12 people coming along and it's just too big? Splitting a group is very difficult because it alters what attracted people in the first place. Other people need to be prepared to assume leadership roles, and sometimes they aren't. Without some support for this process, one or even both of the splinter groups can wither, with a sense of grief for all concerned.

In this issue, Ian and Helen Harray talk about how they have tackled both the challenges and successes of small groups in their respective contexts. The next issue of *Candour* will have the topic "Have we lost the next generation", with some reflection on what's happening in the world of youth and youth adult ministry. Contributions are always welcome; please email them to candour@presbyterian.org.nz by 30 March.

Being a church of little communities

Ian Pimm, *St Andrew's Central Hawkes Bay, Gisborne-Hawkes Bay*

I firmly believe that the key building blocks to church are little communities. I would go as far as to say that these little communities need to be understood as primary to the worshipping congregation. This led us a number of years ago to make an ecclesiological shift in the way we do church. We shifted from being a church with little communities (small groups) to being a church of little communities. This is not to say we view the corporate gathering of the worshipping congregation as of lesser importance, but rather as playing a quite different role. This means it's both/and, rather than either/or. However, if a person had to make a choice between one or the other, which is often the reality, I will usually encourage them to make the small group their first priority, and join with the worshipping congregation when possible.

Why? The heart of the matter is that in little communities people are able to be disciplined in ways that are not possible through the larger gathering of a congregation. Remember, the injunction of Matthew 28:19 is to make people disciples of Jesus. A disciple is more than a follower of Jesus, or a member of a worshipping congregation. The Acts 2 church reminds us of this. Jesus says in Matthew 7:24, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock." It is the small group that best enables this. We are not talking about Bible study groups (often knowledge-centred), but groups where truth meets life in authentic ways. At present we are using Willow Creek's six marks of a Biblically (authentically) functioning community to achieve this. They are:

1. Self-disclosure: Know and be known
2. Care-giving: Love and be loved
3. Humility: Serve and be served
4. Affirming: Celebrate and be celebrated
5. Maturity: Shepherd and be shepherded
6. Truth Telling: Admonish and be admonished

We believe that every healthy little community will express these six values well in its life together, and where the little community is unhealthy or dysfunctional, it is because they are not being expressed well, or at all. Where these values are expressed well, people grow towards maturity in Christ in tangible ways.

My experience is that the worshipping congregation misses the point on all these simply because it is not de-

signed to achieve them. The problem is that we have tried to make it fit this role, and scratched our heads about why our people are not growing to maturity in Christ. In my experience, congregations without a small group foundation are mainly shallow relationally and spiritually. We try to use them as our main teaching mechanisms but they fail dismally because modern teaching needs to be far more interactive and participatory. And relationally they are too impersonal. Even small congregations of 50 or less fail in this regard. In fact they can be the worst at it, because they can be lulled into a false sense that they are a "little community" and think they function like one. But most often they don't!

I believe this is one of the key reasons Alpha has been so successful for us; it introduces people to a way of being church based on little community. Some churches can't wait to integrate people from Alpha to Sunday church, but the difference between the two is often so marked that they drop out altogether. We tend to encourage people to transition from an Alpha small group to a post-Alpha small group, hence extending and developing their experience of the little community as church. Over time many have integrated with the worshipping community, but to a large degree that is helped because we have also made changes to the way we worship to accommodate them. Single strategies very rarely work by themselves. But that's another subject in itself!

We are using our corporate gatherings (the worshipping congregation) to achieve the things that cannot be done as well, or as rewardingly, in the small group (for example, corporate worship), and to celebrate the sense we are part of a bigger body. We view the gathered community as a time of worship (meeting with God), celebration, focus (vision) and encouragement. But it is not our main event; it is one part of the greater whole.

Our vision for Central Hawke's Bay is for a small group (we call ours Life Groups) to be meeting in every one of the 15-20 communities (geographical areas) that our region is comprised of. Why? So the local church, represented by the small group, is part of the fabric of every community. Our intention is that the small group serves the individuals and families of that community. Idealistic? Well, yes! But our aim is for the "local church" to be the salt and light, or yeast that Jesus talks about, in every community and every life. No big deal really!

So what's the reality of this for St Andrew's CHB? Well, to tell the truth it's really hard work! We employ a person, Sally Huggett, 16 hours a week to facilitate our small group ministry, and she has, I believe, by far the hardest ministry of us all. She says:

"Life groups ... what can I say? Yes, they are definitely hard work. As in all leadership roles, it can be so challenging and frustrating at times to continually have to: sell vision to inspire; walk with reluctant leaders on their journey; bring teaching that will equip and empower them as they lead their groups and bring others along on the journey; encourage interaction and discussion amongst the leaders to bring a sense of being on the same team so they're not doing it alone... I think I have done this well at times and poorly at others times. Any number of times I have thought of offering my resignation. At times I have felt totally out of my depth and wondered if God in his profound wisdom had someone better equipped for this role ... or perhaps he has done the unthinkable and made a mistake! People can be so frustrating, but then, as a group "expert" once said to me, "If people didn't have problems and the church ran smoothly, we wouldn't need the church!" People would already be mature and have become the people God has created them to be, and we wouldn't need to sell the essentialness of community to help complete the process.

"So why am I still doing what I do? Because God hasn't removed me and placed me elsewhere! But seriously, with all the heartache, frustration, loss of hair and short fingernails, there is nothing so rewarding and gratifying as seeing lives changed. I long for it, and live for it, and it is the one thing that God can always remind me of for me to know it's worth the hard work. When I hear of people for the first time praying out loud in a group; coming to faith in a small group of people (because large numbers are too scary); sharing for the first time a hidden fear, to discover others have been there and conquered the same fear; coming to a revelation that the Bible actually is helpful in their life situation and not irrelevant; changing character traits that have caused them to trip up in their day-to-day relationships; lives being inspired as they hear of how God has met with others over the previous week, and been present in real and profound ways; seeing group members surround, and draw out, and min-

ister to each other as God has prompted and guided them; seeing groups love and care for each other through the hard times. Could anything be better...?"

Over the last seven to eight years I too have led one of our life groups and share similar sentiments to Sally. The group started as a post-Alpha group with five to six people exploring faith in Jesus. Today, every one of those people is still involved in the community of St Andrew's. I have seen them grow, at times, hesitantly and cautiously, but other times, in leaps and bounds. We have walked with a number of the group through some very hard times and seen faith make a very real difference. We pray for one another, share life together and laugh a lot. We've added

people to the group, and importantly I have apprenticed a leader from within the group, who now leads the group, and is in the process of apprenticing a new leader so I can leave the group (regretfully) to lead a new

post-Alpha group. I firmly believe that if it wasn't for the group, a number of them would have never made it this far in their faith journey.

Recently, we had to reinvent the way we were a church of little communities because of the realisation that we had put too much emphasis on the role of the life group. Inadvertently, we had elevated them to a superior role to other forms of little community, namely the task groups (for example, our management and governance teams, worship teams etc). In doing so, we had undermined our attempt to be a church of little communities by trying to become a church of life groups. This was eventually drawn to our attention through the struggle of people to be committed to both a task group and a life group; we were burning people out! We now recognise every little community, group or team as a growth group with equal value. We are working with them to help them figure out how best to express the six marks of authentic community mentioned above, and what specific leadership requirements are needed to achieve them. This is not an easy task because some types of groups are better suited to this than others, but we are working our way through the issues.

If you were to ask us what the key issues were in developing as a church of little communities, I would name at least three among the many:

Asking whether preaching is dead is also like asking if people have anything to learn or whether people can be inspired to closer intimacy with God

1. To win the heart of the leadership and people to the reality that authentic community is not just a good idea, but God's plan and purpose for us all. And that authentic community can only really be discovered and expressed through committed involvement over time in little community. We define little community as between four and 10 people. Once they get to eight or more, we encourage them to multiply, if this is suitable (it may not be for task groups). Over time, research has shown that New Zealanders, along with many other Western cultures, are notoriously hard to integrate into little communities that express the six marks effectively. This is due in part to our independence and individualness, and the accepted "aloneness" of many people, and especially our older people. We battle with these cultural values all the time. Also, there is still a huge cultural value in the church of being Sunday-centred, with the worshipping congregation being the main event. We are still trying to crack this one!

2. Leadership development is the key to successful small groups. Our experience is that if the leader has not bought into the vision, or doesn't have a learning heart to up-skill, the group suffers accordingly, and will eventually die. This in turn can result in the unrewarding experience acting as a stumbling-block preventing people's future participation in a small group. Sounds a lot like

some people's experience of Church, doesn't it? On the other hand, a good leader will get the best out of the every member of the group of team; they are worth their weight in gold! Effective leadership development continues to be an on-going issue for us.

3. The comfortableness of little communities with their own company is also a huge stumbling block to growth, both individually and corporately. Most groups of people who like sharing life together are hard to break into (like some congregations), or resist breaking up to multiply. We have had groups that have said "no" to a new person coming along because it threatened their comfortable space. And most of the life groups have resisted multiplying for similar reasons. We are still experimenting with ways of achieving these things constructively, because if we fail we will never be the outward-focussed, mission church we are called to be by Jesus.

We are very much on a journey of exploration and discovery with being a church of little communities. We have had wins and losses, and will have them in the future. If you can learn something from our journey we would love to share it with you. Likewise, if we can learn from your journey, we would love to hear from you.

Ministers' study grants

Are you a Presbyterian minister planning on further study? Do you know that you can apply for a study grant from the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership?

Applications are invited in March and September each year for post-ordination study grants for ministers in good standing of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand. These grants are made possible through the generosity of the Mary Ann Morrison and M S Robertson estates and are administered by the Senatus of the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

What are the rules?

1. The proposed course of study will aid the applicant's professional development.
2. There is a potential benefit to the Church and the probability of significant service to the Church.
3. Parish and presbytery approval has been obtained for the study, where appropriate.

In normal circumstances grants do not exceed one-third of the study costs involved and may be held in conjunction with other scholarships and grants other than the Postgraduate Scholarship. Grants are not made retrospectively and relate only to costs to be incurred by the scholarship holder themselves.

How do I apply?

Enquiries to: The Registrar, Knox Centre for Ministry & Leadership, Knox College, Arden Street Opoho, Dunedin.
registrar@knoxcentre.ac.nz Closing date for the next round of applications: **31 March 2010**



KNOX CENTRE
FOR MINISTRY
& LEADERSHIP

Nurturing GEL groups

Helen Harray, Studentsoul, Dunedin

The topic of small groups is a vast one, so I am focusing on some particular resources that we have developed at studentsoul that are aimed at helping us out in this area. While having a student focus (young adults 16-25) these resources could easily be adapted to a far wider age range, particularly if you consider that the theological literacy in our culture, both inside the church let alone outside it, is very low.

At studentsoul we have had a long-term focus on leadership development, which is worked out in a small group context and expressed in a wider one. Over several years this training has been gathered into a manual, which we call the *GEL group manual*.

GEL stands for *growing emerging leaders*. The concept of the GEL began with a need to train effective small group leaders for church life, and then

was influenced by the discovery that young adults often don't have the social maturity that you might expect of them nor a clear understanding of themselves and what they will do with their lives. It also developed out of my observation that churches are not always healthy institutions when it comes to interactions in groups, on committees or even in the church service. There is a need to promote wholeness in all these areas and not to assume that there is a high level of understanding of basic human processes.

It is my belief that many social institutions and social situations, whether church or secular, flounder for poor human interaction. People are poorly skilled when it comes to group process, good listening skills, basic interactions, dealing with conflict and even feeling good about themselves in those processes. People are always wondering about unspoken expectations, or whether the right thing was said, or whether someone was offended or will these people like me, hear me and will I have something valuable to contribute and how will that be measured? This is before anyone stands up to take leadership and very often leadership is poor because of the neglect of these very principles. We are simply not taught how to do it.

Many students participate in group learning in their courses at a tertiary level. An assignment is given to the group and it is left up to them to organise themselves and to deliver the outcome. As an introvert at 19 I would have dreaded this type of assignment for several reasons. Firstly I would have waited for the louder person to make suggestions and held back because I would have felt overpowered and intimidated. Secondly, I would not have judged my opinions as being that important or right and so would likely have withheld them until later or not at all. Thirdly, I would have noted that there were others in the group who didn't get heard and that most likely we ended up doing something just to get it done rather than feeling as though we were doing the best thing and really enjoying the process.

It is my belief that many social institutions and social situations flounder for poor human interaction

Participation in a GEL would have otherwise equipped me. Firstly, it would have enabled me to understand my introversion and value

and work with it rather than against it. Secondly, it would have given me much needed insight into social processes and enabled me to feel more confident in my personal interactions. It would also have raised my self and other awareness, helped me see others' perspectives and made me more able to listen carefully. Thirdly it would have given me some basic tools for facilitating group processes and empowering others to find their place in the group. This kind of leadership influence is the work of peacemaking, mediation and grace that Christians may successfully model in their interactions with others in many situations.

The 10-week GEL course is designed for young adults to learn about the above in an active/reflective way. In an action/reflection model, the focus is not so much on information giving as on experiencing and reflecting on the information as it works itself out in the group process and in real or simulated situations. Each individual brings habitual ways of thinking and acting towards every experience. These habits may need to be transformed if the person is to learn from the experience. Growth comes through reflecting in a deliberate manner on what just happened. Reflection does not just happen. It requires a commitment of time during which the person either individually

or in a group can debrief from the experience. Debriefing is most effective as a learning tool when the participants have definite intentions. The interactive nature of GEL group sessions and the mix of activities and information are designed to facilitate this kind of reflection process.

The GEL dynamic is driven by relationships and experience, empowering self discovery and modelling a collaborative and facilitative model of teaching. It requires the leader to be astute, emotionally intelligent and to recognise and be comfortable naming and at times confronting group dynamics or individuals. He or she must be able to establish a safe group whereby these things can be examined in the open.

As its name implies, the long term aim of the GEL system is to grow emerging leaders. Emerging leaders may have a natural bent towards leadership in an extroverted manner or may be those whose leadership is more likely to come from behind in terms of influence. Essentially I am trying to develop a leader who will give away power and not proffer a *power over* style of leadership. Words that might go along with this are facilitator, empowering, peacemaker not doormat, mediator, gracious, astute, having emotional intelligence and able to lead collaboratively. I also seek to develop leaders who are *spiritual* and who have a sense of God with them and behind them, influencing their style of leadership. The model of the *servant leader* is implicit in this system.

The GEL experience gives the participant permission, space and the tools to learn about what makes them tick. It covers personality styles, leadership styles, learning styles and several aspects of spiritual makeup as well. By valuing how they are uniquely wired and by facilitating the experiences that give personal insight, young people develop a whole new level of confidence and therefore leadership capacity. It comes in the form of a **students' manual** and a **leaders' manual**. Parts of the manual can be used for specific situations, but the whole concept over 10 weeks is best presented by someone who has also experienced a GEL Group in operation. For this we offer some training.

Comments from GEL group participants:

I have reassurance that I am normal after doing Myers Briggs

I have confidence in saying what I think and trying out new things in terms of personality.

I am more allowing of other people's difference in a group.

I am stressing less because I feel reassured.

I am aware of the kind of leadership I enjoy.

I understand my spiritual connection better.

Permission to know who I am and being valued has freed me.

I am more sensitive and not such a self sufficient leader. This has been releasing.

I enjoy the honesty of relationships in the group. It's wholesome and refreshing, has some depth.

I have been able to empower others.

The second of these resources is a manual for training small group leaders. This is a mammoth attempt to put together in one place all those components that make small groups function in a healthy manner. Designed for training in the philosophical and theological rationale for small groups the manual also gives numerous how tos, examples of group studies, ice-breakers and skills for developing great

group process. While not the final word on small groups, it does bring together a wealth of resources that have been around the Church for a while, as well as giving the opportunity for small groups to develop a more interactive feel. It follows the basic GEL manual and builds on the skills learned there. It is best used as a resource, with parts to copy and use to develop skills as they are needed for a particular context.

There are two final resources I would like to offer to the church: **EXPLORE** and **DEEPER**.

Once again these courses have been designed with an interactive focus, valuing community building and participation, fun and a few right-brained ways of learning as well as discussion and input from the leader. They can be adapted for any age group.

Essays

EXPLORE is a 10-week course that explores what Christians believe. Similar to Alpha, participants look at who Jesus is, what he did and what our response to that might be. However *EXPLORE* also seeks to redeem the emphasis often put on our sinful humanity, which sees us as having one of two options: heaven or hell. Beginning with a look at who Jesus is, it moves to the love of God, joy in the creation of humanity, what it means to be made in the image of God and how we operate as body, soul and spirit. It then works through how sin affects us and the power of the Christ event to redeem this. The last sections focus on transformation, tools for growing a relationship with God and baptism. You can add as much fun and food to this as you like.

If you are interested in using this manual and giving some feedback so it can be further developed, I'd be keen to talk. It comes with a colourful and interactive students' manual and a leaders' manual.

DEEPER is a 10-week course with a focus on the Holy Spirit and what it means to be filled with and walking in the Spirit. Its emphasis ranges from gaining an understanding of the Trinity, to the work of the Spirit in Old and New Testaments, spiritual baptism, the fruit of the

Spirit, the gifts of the Spirit, discernment, prophecy and the role of the Spirit and the gifts in church. It is designed to allow participants to gain both knowledge and experience in things of the Spirit. Written by my colleague Emma McPhail (who came from the UK and spent the past two and half years working in studentsoul), I highly recommend this resource as a wonderful platform to move our churches into a greater spiritual awareness without putting them off. It comes with a participants' manual and a leaders' manual.

These four manuals are available from studentsoul Dunedin. They are the kinds of resources that would be best utilised with some training. If you are interested in discussing some of the options please contact:

Rev Helen Harray
hmharray@paradise.net.nz
027 473 0042

Post Graduate Scholarship 2010

The Knox Centre for Ministry & Leadership invites applications from suitable candidates for the 2010 Begg-Dickie Post Graduate Scholarship. The scholarship aims to promote and develop the theological and teaching resources of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

In order to qualify for 2010, you must have graduated from the Knox Centre for Ministry & Leadership (previously the School of Ministry) between 2005 and 2009. The scholarship will contribute to the cost of fees, travel and living expenses for one year, incurred as part of post-graduate study in New Zealand or abroad, as approved by the Senatus of the Knox Centre for Ministry & Leadership. If working towards a two-year MTheol or three-year PhD, the recipient may apply for a further one or two years funding, subject to approval by Senatus. On completion, it is expected that the recipient proceed to service within the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

For further details, see www.presbyterian.org.nz. The submission deadline is 31st March 2010.



The purpose of preaching

Susan Jones, Timaru Presbyterian Parish, South Canterbury

I have been told I am a good preacher. Usually the people who tell me that are on the liberal end of the scale, often academic in their leanings, though occasionally an evangelical has been known to appreciate what I have said. Personally, I can never tell which sermons will “take”. If there is a pattern of any sort, the ones I despaired of most seemed to strike the right note more often than any I was at all pleased with on Saturday night. So I can’t tell you how to write a good sermon or even a bad one!

In the last couple of years I have encountered a different opinion of my skill at the preaching art. In the course of pastoral care, I met a woman with a typical Generation X background of pain and abuse. I found her to be extremely perceptive spirituality and an ardent, perhaps more accurately desperate, seeker. She had followed Asian spirituality for a while. Some of you may feel that these credentials disqualify her as a credible critic of preaching.

I certainly found myself thinking that when she made her first critical comment. We had already reached a reasonable rapport. She knew I was trying to be helpful, so I knew this wasn’t a lashing out at a hated enemy of the Church, which she had experienced as actively hostile to her and her “kind”. Her comments were intended to be helpful and to tell me what she needed from my sermonising. Still, at first, I thought she was typical of dilettante seekers who wanted to hear what *they* wanted to hear, and who, in my experience, fled Christianity when the going got tough. When I really listened, however, that wasn’t where she was coming from.

The particular sermon she chose to critique was the Samaritan woman at the well. I had found Google Earth pictures of the valley where Jacob’s well was to be found and tried to place the conversation in a geographical and theological location. When you looked at the picture, you could see the holy hill the woman was pointing to when she talked with Jesus. I thought that was helpful. I wished previous preachers had done that for me.

Geographical and theological orientation was not what she was seeking. She was interested in discovering the key moment of this encounter. She wanted to know what was *really* happening here, not geographically, not theologically, but *spiritually*. This kind of heart-to-heart encounter that happened between Jesus and the Samaritan woman was the kind of encounter she was seeking for

herself. The story was for her a kind of role model or case study of how you *encountered* God. She was frustrated that I wasn’t unpacking the story to reveal exactly that.

I felt strange inside as she spoke. Kind of squirmy. As if I had my back against a wall with no place to go. I had no excuses or reasons why I had not been able to expose the moment she was needing to help her so I listened, but said increasingly little.

I don’t think I knew then how much I *had* blanketed the crucial pivot of that story- the crucial spirituality of that encounter - with cognitive information. I remember thinking that I still thought the visual stuff was worthwhile. I could dimly see what she was getting at, but I harboured in my mind an out for me that this newcomer to Christianity didn’t really know how Christian sermons worked - as opposed to other religions’ teachings, for example.

I know her better now. I know myself better now. I wrapped that story up so the spirituality in it suffocated because I was out of touch myself with the spiritual walk at that time. I could do pictures and maps, I could unpack theological arguments, I could support the woman’s role in feminist fashion. Starved of spiritual encounters with the Holy One myself, however, I was unable to recognise the true point of encounter at the well. Still less could I speak of it. Nor was I able to recognise the need of that woman and, I believe, the rest of my congregation who *didn’t* critique the sermon that day.

I don’t think this is a learning only for a left-of-centre female minister. If the unashamed evangelicals amongst you will admit it, you too have had moments like this when your prayer-starved words muffle The Word. You have had moments when your head preaches rather than your heart. You too have hidden your soul from your people because you know it is not in a good state.

I am writing this almost at the end of a study leave where every book on my list has battered me with the same message; a message I believe from a somewhat exasperated God. “Pray. Pray. Pray. Pray so you can die to your academic/liberal/evangelical/preacherly self. Let go your assumptions of correctness and cognitive knowledge and doctrine and pray so that I can work through you. I’ll still get you to use some of those tools you learned in ministry training, but most of all I want you to let me show,

Response

through you, my heart to the people in front of you this Sunday, and the next and the next. Pray so you can keep yourself ready, but out of my way”

The purpose of preaching is essentially spiritual. That what's she was telling me. I don't think I would have been ready to hear that message on study leave had she not already told me what she was missing when I was

preaching. I wish I had listened with less arrogance and a more open heart.

I don't know if there is a moral in this story. Listen to unlikely critics? Take study leave more often? I know there is an imperative. Pray, so God will be able to preach through you.

Ministry Exchange/Overseas Ministry Opportunities

I have received expressions of interest from overseas ministers wanting to either exchange charges with Presbyterian Ministers or serve in Presbyterian parishes. I have provided a brief outline of the opportunities available. Please contact me for further information at juliette@presbyterian.org.nz.

New opportunities:

Uniting Church in Canada

A Uniting minister from a mid-sized parish in rural Ontario seeks a three-month exchange between the months of May to October in either 2010 or 2011. The parish has 250 members, with 65-80 attending Sunday worship, and has active programmes in music, children and adults. The parish considers itself to be 'middle of the road to liberal theologically' and has a solid lay leadership which has a strong focus on community outreach. The parish is situated near the Great Lakes and is well served by several small cities within easy driving distance (25-45km). The minister is open to ministry contexts and locations here.

Presbyterian Church in Canada

A Presbyterian minister from a multicultural parish near Vancouver seeks an exchange. The parish has about 130 members (about 90 on any Sunday) and represents British Canadian, Filipino and African heritage. The church worship is a mix of traditional and contemporary style. This is a sole position with support from several active elders and a part-time administrator. The current minister has been with the church for a little over five years has focused on the Gospel of Luke for the last three years. Parishioners hold a high view of Scripture and would like to be more mission-minded.

Opportunities in Canada:

United Church of Canada – Nova Scotia

A minister of a historic church in Halifax seeks a six month exchange from September 2010.

Opportunities in the United States of America:

Presbyterian Church (USA) – Washington

A minister from a rural parish seeks a three month exchange in 2009-10.

Presbyterian Church (USA) – North Carolina

A minister in team ministry in Charlotte is seeking an exchange with a New Zealand minister.

Every year I am helped by people who have real ability to analyse statistics to gain some insights into the changes happening in the life of our Church.

On the whole we are becoming an urban, culturally diverse church with the most significant numerical growth emerging from larger, multi-staffed congregations.

While there is a great deal more that could be written about these various trends, one of the things I am concerned about is the relationship between what the data is telling us and our function and identity as a distinctly Presbyterian church.

Representation. When our membership and participation in worship becomes increasingly concentrated in a small number of larger congregations, and when this is coupled with our growing number of congregations with less than 30 or 40 people, how do we weigh up the values of representation versus an affirmation that each voting minister and elder brings with him or her some distinctive point of view that needs to be heard and valued? While affirming the value of our smaller congregations, does that affirmation extend to recognising that our systems of representation mean that their elected elders and ministers have a disproportionate power to influence regional and national decisions?

Institutional memory. In a Church which, in places, is going through rapid change, what values do we place on institutional memory? I have just read two interesting papers written for the Presbyterian Church (USA). One identified a critical issue being that we have undermined the authority and value of the institution through years of focus on the needs and concerns of particular interest groups. The author argues that this has meant that we have failed to invest in maintaining the values and function of time-honoured processes and organisational culture and the Reformed ethos. On the other hand, another writer affirms the value of prioritising investment and support of young people – they are ones who do not carry the baggage of previous generations, and their arguments, and they bring a freshness and creativity that will help transform and grow the Church.

Wealth concentration. The accumulated financial reserves controlled by congregations (not including the value of church real estate) have grown dramatically over the last decade. This wealth, however, is concentrated and not spread. Some of our larger, growing churches have the least money (or are in debt). Wealth tends to be concentrated in our older European or Pakeha congregations, which have had the benefit of receiving bequest in-

come and/or have had excess land and buildings that they have sold off over the years. How do we discuss what this means for us as a Church?

Baptism. In one recent year, the majority of all the baptisms in our Church occurred among just four of our newest Korean congregations. Overall, the amount of people of any age being baptised in our Church has declined by a third in the past 10 years. What priority are we placing on the provision of this sacrament?

Membership. At a decline of over 30 percent in the last 10 years, membership is reducing at a much higher rate than attendance (which is down 20 percent). What will this mean for us in another 10 years? If membership is a prerequisite for leadership as an elder or representation at regional or national events, the data indicates that the pool is getting smaller, fast.

Age. In most parts of the country, and especially in provincial New Zealand, the average age of our congregations is over 65. While there is some very interesting research supporting a correlation between church attendance and longevity, many of our congregations face a very high level of loss through mortality. However, it may not be quite as bad as the data suggests, with some churches attracting a good number of older people back to regular involvement. What will be the expectations of those baby boomers who may return to the Church in their 60s? Perhaps they will want it to be “how they remember it” from when they left in such huge numbers when they were young? What is also important is that age profiles and ethnicity are closely related. Our European or Pakeha congregations tend to be much older than our Asian and Pacific congregations.

Perhaps for you, but certainly for me, the most hopeful thing for our future is not found in any statistics, but in the reality of people’s lives and experiences as they involve themselves in the life and activities of their local congregations and their journeys in discovering the call God makes on their, and our, lives. However, in affirming the primacy of our local congregations, it is also critical, not only for our effective witness but also for our growth and mission, that we do seek ways of expressing a shared and common identity that affirms a mutual care and responsibility.

