

# Candour



Presbyterian Church  
of Aotearoa New Zealand

NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

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## Being of One Heart and Mind: Discernment and Decision-making in Assembly



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Candour 2013

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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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# Being of One Heart and Mind

*Pamela Tankersley, Wellington Presbytery*

**A**s a good Presbyterian minister, I have subscribed to the Formula and acknowledged that “the Presbyterian government of this Church is agreeable to the Word of God” and have promised to submit to it.

But I, like many, wondered if the manner in which we made our decisions at GA12 would meet God’s favour: Was it really discerning God’s direction for us?

The opening at Te Maungarongo Marae, Ohope, was marvellous, we had great worship and inspiring input from a guest speaker and there were some excellent highlights. Yet so many commissioners left GA12 feeling hurt, bewildered, angry and generally dissatisfied with their Assembly experience – mostly because of the fraught way we engaged in decision-making.

We could do an in-depth analysis of why this was so, but I want to reflect on one decision at GA12 that for me encapsulated the topic for this issue of Candour: “Being of One Heart and Mind; Discernment and Decision-making in Assembly” (what it means to be a body gathered around Jesus Christ when we meet?).

In making the decision, “that the Pacific Islands Synod be granted the status of a Presbytery”, I believe we caught a glimpse of General Assembly at its best.

Why was this? Because...

1. The recommendation was the product of a well-researched and consultative process (at presbytery and parish level), culminating in an excellent report.
2. The recommendation (and the report and ensuing discussion) was grounded clearly in a theology and praxis of mission.
3. The commissioners came to this discussion, on the whole, informed by the report and local presbytery discussion, but many came undecided about how they would vote. Rather than being defensive of a predetermined position, they came open to discern and be changed by what the Spirit was saying to the Church.
4. A vision of a new era was presented and encouragement was given in Assembly for some great oratory. It was a moving occasion to see the hopes and dreams of a precious minority part of the Church fulfilled.
5. Though the necessary Book of Order changes were presented, this did not dominate; regulations were seen as tools for the journey.
6. This decision empowered the Pacific Islands Synod to act more responsively in mission within its own cultural context and traditions, and this celebrated the richness of our cultural diversity. It encouraged the Church to stand in solidarity with some of the “least” in Aotearoa, our diaspora communities.
7. By allowing the moderator of Te Aka Puaho to make the first speech, the process took the Treaty of Waitangi seriously while at the same time recognising that this is a global issue being acted out locally.
8. The Assembly gave credence to Pasifika cultural preferences, allowing the time and space needed. To accommodate visitors, it was flexible with its standing orders.
9. With all this, reaching a decision by consensus was simple – and the vote was unanimous. The Assembly was not divided into winners and losers. Perhaps there were doubts remaining in some minds and hearts, and much recognition that the outcomes of the decision would require continuing, careful engagement, but we may presume all saw that this decision was agreeable to the Word of God.

So if the elements of this decision were applied to more of the Assembly’s discussion and decision-making, what might be changed to give us a mind-set of “being of one heart and mind”?



“ In making the decision, “that the Pacific Islands Synod be granted the status of a Presbytery”, I believe we caught a glimpse of General Assembly at its best.

- We might understand better that Assembly is about putting ourselves on God’s side and not the other way around.
- The majority of discussions might be on mission and on our engagement with the context of the world rather than on order and structure.
- We might decide to empower bodies other than the General Assembly to decide structural issues, putting people and the issues first, not the regulations.
- Commissioners might come open to discerning and listening to what the Spirit is saying to the Church.
- Vision for justice and compassion for the least might take highest priority on our agendas.
- Recommendations would be supported by good research, consultation and theology.
- We would use consensus decision-making instead of Westminster debate (no winners and losers and no lobby groups).
- Those from our ethnic groups, youth, and lay people, might find they are supported and encouraged to have their voices heard.
- We would recognise that the Presbyterian Church is a part of the whole of God’s realm and not an end in itself.
- Respect for difference, the dignity of all, and passion for justice would once more be valued in the oratory of commissioners.

I was always intrigued that in our theological training Church and Spirit were seen to be of the same ilk: the outpouring of the Spirit of God is what forms and empowers the Church. We are the Body of Christ in this place and in this time, and no more so than as we gather for Assembly to discern what God the Spirit is saying to us.

May the Spirit show us how we can recover that deep truth.

*Editor’s note: The Very Rev Pamela Tankersley is now retired. In her ministry she filled many leadership roles in the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church - Moderator, convener of the Assembly Business Workgroup, co-coordinator and chaplain. At this last Assembly she was administrator for all the papers and registration, and one of two deputy clerks (with responsibility to ensure that the counting of votes was in order).*

# A “nice knock-down argument” – interpreting the Assembly

*Stuart Vogel, Northern Presbytery*

“**G**ood, better, best. Never let it rest, until your good is better and your better is best”.

*(St Jerome, Patron Saint of Interpreters)*

## Introduction

**F**rom the call to worship at the opening of General Assembly to the benediction at its closing worship, hundreds of thousands of words spill out onto the floor of Assembly, in committees, over lunch tables, coffee breaks and late into the night. Over four days or so, we rely on words to establish our arguments; to convince; to define our statements, decisions and recommendations; and to bring our minds, hearts and spirits together.

Interpreters translating at the General Assembly for an overseas guest or in places like a court of law or at the United Nations, experience such events in a unique way. They have no time to think about or analyse what is being said. Words in one language must be repeated in the other – immediately, fully and accurately. The interpreter is constantly under threat of ambush – by words, terms or expressions which suddenly appear and which he or she doesn’t understand.

Words are indispensable tools which define, express and promote our worship, mission and ministry. Jesus himself was “the Word” or, as J B Phillips translated John 1:1, “In the beginning, God expressed himself”. However, it is vital to master words by “nailing down” what they do and do not mean. If we do not do so, our speech will divide and confuse us. We will, as St Jerome says, just “chatter about our views”.

In letters to the New Zealand Herald recently, some words which were being made to carry a diverse, ambiguous, conflicting and contradictory range of meanings were “marriage”, “living wage” “equality before the law” and even “drought”. (“Four weeks without rain is not a drought. In every other country in the world it is called summer.”) How words and terms are defined and expressed, and how well the Assembly’s processes allow all commissioners to express themselves clearly, will determine the success of the gathering.

## Interpreting faith through words

In Mark 15:34 we hear, for the one and only time in the Bible, the actual words of Jesus: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” Mark knows that none of his readers understand Aramaic, so he translates into Greek: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Mark included Jesus’ original words because they are actually untranslatable.

Those Aramaic words alone cry out the central heart, act, and message of the Gospel. God has “abandoned” Jesus Christ for our sakes - and yet Jesus’ words open up the possibility of true relationships and real forgiveness. Verse 39 is packed to the rafters with drama and irony; a Roman army officer, of all people, grasps – or is grasped – and is profoundly shaken by the significance of what he sees and hears: he utters a statement of faith, “This man really was the son of God”. Presumably the officer had no interpreter on hand just then - but he did not need one.

## Interpreting GA12

At the General Assembly last year, the Asian Council recommended that section 1.5 of the Book of Order, “A multicultural Church with a bicultural commitment”, be rewritten.

The Council report argued that the statement was an inadequate expression of the nature of the contemporary New Zealand Church. The statement rightly notes the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural partnership between Te Aka Puaho and other Church courts.

However, no definition of “multiculturalism” is offered, except to note that people from the Pacific and other places have come to New Zealand. Our Asian communities are not mentioned, although they are now a significant part of the Presbyterian Church. Nor, surprisingly, is Jesus Christ mentioned. He alone can bind us together into one Church as its Lord and glue.

The Asian Council recommended: “that the General Assembly asks the Council of Assembly to initiate a process of discussion about the implications of declaring the Presbyterian Church to be a cross-cultural Church within the context of a bicultural church, with a view to adopting a short statement on the nature and priorities of the Church as an ethnically diverse community in and for its mission and ministry”.

At the General Assembly last year, the Asian Council recommended that section 1.5 of the Book of Order, “A multicultural Church with a bicultural commitment”, be rewritten.

This recommendation slipped through GA12 virtually unnoticed and without discussion, under the pressure of time taken by other important matters. Understandable as that was, GA lost the opportunity to grasp the meaning and significance of the recommendation. Especially in a theologically and ethnically diverse Church, precision in the choice, use, and agreed understanding of words is crucial.

This recommendation shifts the focus from the “multicultural” to “cross-cultural” Church. This is very far from just playing with words. The shift expresses the essence of the emerging and future church. It is vital that the whole Church grasps this shift.

Multicultural means: “the preservation of different cultures or cultural identities within a unified society, as a state or nation”. Its emphasis is primarily on preservation of cultural identities and only secondly on engagement in ministry and mission together.

In contrast, cross-culturalism means “involving or bridging the differences between two or more cultures”. It implies, indeed demands, mutual interaction and engagement and prayerful reflection together – and that is a very different kind of Church. While celebrating the variety of experiences and lifestyle that we all bring to God’s table, the Asian Council has proposed three further definitions to refine our understanding of the term cross-cultural:

- i. *Cross-fertilisation* of ideas, insights and concepts is a necessary outcome of meaningful interaction between cultures. To give a very simple example: a Taiwanese minister came to worship at a “Kiwi” church. Traditionally, there is no children’s talk during Sunday worship in Taiwan. He saw that the children’s talk gave the minister an opportunity every week to get to know, and indeed love, the children under his or her pastoral care. He introduced children’s talks to his church in Taiwan, because of the new opportunities it opened up for his ministry to care for the children in his church. He planted a Kiwi idea in Taiwanese soil.

- ii. **Cross-pollination** occurs when two or more groups work and learn together and in doing so, both groups change. Recently, there have been exchanges of young people between our Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. The key principle or theme behind these exchanges is “more than fun”. As young people from different cultural and church backgrounds share their experiences, ideas and dreams and work together on joint projects, they learn from and with each other and deepen their understanding of “glocal” (global and local) mission. If this is done well, a new interdependent Christian culture will be formed among the emerging leaders of the Taiwanese and New Zealand (and increasingly other Asian and Pacific) Churches.
- iii. **Cross-referencing** occurs when we are humble enough to let another group of people (such as the Asian Christian community) say to us (as we may to them): “You are doing this well, but we think you could do that better”. Anyone can dish out advice and guidance. That is easy. It is far harder to take to heart advice and guidance that exposes and addresses our weaknesses. But with accepting this challenge, there comes real growth and renewal.

## Conclusion

It is vital that commissioners at the Assembly in 2014 understand the difference between the words “multicultural” and “cross-cultural”, because there is a fundamental shift in ministry and mission expressed here. The new statement in the Book of Order will not just be words. It will be a challenge to move to a new place with new people and become a different Church. There is a famous passage in Lewis Carroll’s novel, *Alice in Wonderland*. Carroll was confronting the kinds of struggle for mastery of meaning that appears at Assemblies:

*“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’”, Alice said.*

*Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”*

*“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument’,” Alice objected.*

*“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less’.*

*“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things”.*

*“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master - that’s all”.*

If the aim of going to the General Assembly is to “knock-down someone else’s argument nicely” (or perhaps, if necessary, not nicely) and win the vote “our way”, then there is really no point going.

Assembly gains significance when we take time to master the words we use and agree on what they mean and express; when the processes in which we use them in discussing issues allow all to speak freely; and when there is an in-depth and informed understanding of the subjects at hand. Only then can and does Assembly drive Gospel mission and ministry forward. When that happens, Assembly can be magnificent – but only when that happens.

## Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership – Theology Study Grants for 2013

The Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership is once again delighted to be able to offer a limited number of scholarships in 2013, to Presbyterians doing part-time or full-time theological studies through Otago University, Auckland University, Laidlaw College, Carey Baptist College and the Ecumenical Institute of Distance Theological Studies.

If you know of anyone who might benefit from such a grant, please encourage them to apply. They should send a letter of application detailing their course (and costs) of study, and what church they’re involved in. They should also include a brief letter of support from someone in their church (preferably their minister so we can discuss their church’s involvement and the course of study).

The deadline for applications is  
**31 MARCH 2013**

Letters should be sent to the Principal, Very Rev Dr Graham Redding, at Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, Knox College, Arden Street, Opoho, Dunedin 9010 or emailed to [principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz](mailto:principal@knoxcentre.ac.nz)

# Discernment in Assembly

*Kerry Enright, Wellington Presbytery*

**Finished as Assembly Executive Secretary six-and-a-half years ago so what I write, where it comments on the Presbyterian Church, will be dated and reflect a particular period in the Church's life. Since then I have been National Director of UnitingWorld, the Uniting Church in Australia's Assembly Agency for international partnerships, of which there are 35. That more recent experience has broadened my sense of how discernment happens across a Church and it's something of that perspective I wish to add. It comes in the context of a number of Churches globally reviewing their practices of discernment.<sup>1</sup>**

The manual for meetings of the Uniting Church in Australia begins, "When a council of the church makes decisions, it is aiming to discern the guidance of the Spirit in response to the word of God ... discernment is not something for which we can set down the rules. But the processes we use to create community and communicate in our meetings can themselves assist in the discernment process".

In both the Uniting and Presbyterian Churches, the Assembly meeting is only one facet of a process of national discernment that is complex and continual. UnitingWorld has a three-year strategic plan that is adopted by our governance body after input by staff, focus groups with communities across Australia, online comment, face-to-face consultation with minority communities, feedback from partners and robust discussion in our committees.

We are building ownership of our direction and culture not least because most of our income comes from individual and congregational donors. The plan is reviewed annually and turned into annual plans, the achievement of which is monitored and reported on quarterly. As an Assembly Agency this process of discernment has the largest impact on what we do each day.

The input into the overarching plan is the result of a continuous dynamic of discernment. People are recruited to our governance bodies because of their skills. We have people with experience in diplomacy, foreign affairs, business, communications, university management, development, missiology, corporate governance, finance, government relations, congregational leadership and networking among young people.

Their experience in those sectors is valuable in expanding our capacity to interpret what is happening in our world. This leads to discussions eliciting viewpoints on fundamental issues such as the nature of mission; the balance between delivering a service and overturning the systems that cause poverty; what is good trade; the place and mode of evangelism; how best to work with governments and business; how we engage with people of other faiths; and how development intersects with trade and economic development.

In these discussions we are seeking to discern to what the Spirit is calling us. The process is driven by our desire to participate in the mission of God with a keen awareness of our capacity to harm. We know, as a mission Agency and given the history of colonialism in which we participated, that we are flawed discerners.

Discernment also comes by interacting with areas in which we believe the Spirit is active beyond our existing experience. Our new Asia Manager, Ji Zhang, grew up in Shanghai, became a Christian, undertook theological study and is a minister in the UCA. His recently published book is about Plato and Daoism and he has led our partnership with the China Christian Council.

One in five people in our world live in China and there are between 25 and 90 million Christians there. Spiritually, economically and geo-politically, we need to engage China and Chinese Christianity. As we do so – and this is true of all our partnerships – we are awakened to very different perspectives on Christianity. I believe it is critical to the health of congregations and to a national church that they continually step outside their existing frameworks and ways, in order to see how things look from another perspective.

<sup>1</sup> Discerning the Work of the Holy Spirit, Doctrine Committee Uniting Church in Australia November 2011, UCA website; Scripture and Moral Discernment, Report on the consultation among representatives of Formula of Agreement churches (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ) ELCA website



I have just returned from visiting the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka which values evangelism and upholds pluralism, where a love for people of other faiths has cost much and also where people have turned towards Jesus from other faiths. Discernment relies on the capacity, as Miroslav Volf<sup>2</sup> puts it, to see things from there and not just from here. The Western inclination to play opposites, “either/or”, needs to encounter parts of the world better at synthesis, “both/and”.

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Christianity in most of the world is burgeoning. However, something has happened to Western Christianity that has eviscerated its experience of God and its perspective on faith. In my view we who live within the heritage of the Enlightenment need to exercise humility about our perspectives on what we think Christianity really is and what God really wants.

At the same time, the particularity of our perspective needs to be named. Our view of the world is through the lens of Jesus Christ. Our particular faith perspective with its deep commitment to justice embodied in Jesus needs to be front and centre of how we discern.

As an example, through the Uniting Church’s involvement with the Pacific Conference of Churches, we came to see how the approach to trade taken by the governments of Australia and New Zealand was doing considerable damage to Pacific spirituality, economy and culture. UnitingWorld commissioned a study on trade justice in the Pacific. In naming our point of entry to the subject, it was essential that the paper be theological, even as it sought to include the best that the discipline of economics offered.

This continual opening out through partnering diverse communities nationally and world-wide is then the context in which we come to pray and read the Bible, which are key disciplines in the process of discernment. Increasingly, praying and Bible-reading, in which we listen personally and corporately for God’s Word, need to occur with cross-cultural acumen in order to lessen the constraints of our Western context. It is interesting to see how people of the Abrahamic faiths are reading the Bible together more frequently.

Ongoing formation of the Church by Jesus Christ is essential for discernment. In the Uniting Church the doctrine committee has an important role in producing accessible resources in forming people for seeking and expressing the mind of Christ.

The Assembly meeting then is one vehicle of national discernment by individuals and communities in all kinds of contexts and needs to reflect the richness of that continual process. People who gather need to be able to offer insights from the rich diversity of missional contexts in which they and others seek to be disciples of Jesus.

The question is whether the processes of the Assembly meeting itself are eliciting the richness of this national discernment and whether they are taking account of the developments that have occurred in Christianity world-wide over recent decades.

In the present structure of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, the major facilitator eliciting that richness is the Council of Assembly. The Council has the role of engaging the

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, Abingdon 1996 Nashville USA

whole Church in developing policy, presenting it for consideration by the Assembly and then implementing what the Assembly decides. The Council exercises leadership by involving the whole Church in dialogue about what is most important to the Church's participation in the mission of God. Engagement with the Church requires communication to listen for the Spirit alive in the world. Listening is not just a matter of breadth, engaging presbyteries and sessions and other communities, but also depth, listening to those whose experience offers special insight. The Council looks for words that state key directional, theological, ethical and missional convictions to take forward the Church's national discernment about what God is doing in the world. These are offered to the wider-Church gathered in Assembly.

The Council's mandate is as broad as the mission of God, just as it is for the councils of the Church. Councils of Assembly know very well how controversial some issues are. The controversial issues invite the most thoughtful facilitation. In those situations, Councils do not serve the Church by avoiding conflict or by crashing through, but by drawing out perspectives and facilitating engagement of differences.

Councils also need courage because first attempts at words rarely engender shared conviction and it's tempting to give up in the face of initial criticism. Courage is needed because the most important challenges are frequently the most intractable and difficult to name, often requiring perseverance over many years. The temptation in organisations is to gloss over divergences, focus on what is manageable, tinker with rules and regulations or restate more loudly well-rehearsed positions. Sometimes the best that can be achieved is to foment discussion or posit hunches even when that is confusing. Sometimes the worst outcome is a smooth decision where people agree or disagree too quickly.

Sometimes the worst outcome is a smooth decision where people agree or disagree too quickly.

Practically the quality of discernment when people gather in Assembly depends considerably on the calibre of preparation, the ability of reports to reflect and further elicit national discernment, the quality of the presenting and the processes of consideration. Assembly discernment is enhanced by careful attention to the content of a report, the wording of a proposal, the length and tone of the presentation and the processes of consideration.

Those processes in the Uniting Church differ from those in the Presbyterian Church. The Uniting Church was formed in 1977 from the Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist Churches. It exists, among other things, to be "a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself ...". The nature of relationship expressed in the Trinity and re-expressed in the Body of Christ provides a model for its community. Its unity is regularly strained but its ethos is about building community and seeking unified action.

Its decision-making processes summarised as "consensus" reflect that ethos. The manual for meetings states: "Consensus is a process by which a common mind of the meeting is sought about the wisest way forward on a particular issue at the time". Critical to that process is an attempt to listen to diverse voices and to find ways of including them in ongoing discernment.

In the three yearly Assembly meeting, the President is charged with naming what is emerging from the Assembly as a whole and looking for words that reflect the Assembly's mind. A proposal is a starting point. As people make contributions they offer words that try to include more of the diversity of those gathered. Not all views can be included because sometimes the differences are stark. However, even then there is a process for positively acknowledging the differences. The

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process is more complex than I can describe in a few words and is well set out in the manual for meetings on the UCA Assembly website. The Presbyterian Church incorporated some of these practices in the 1990s but generally they were enlisted to enhance the Westminster model rather than change it.

In my view Council of Assembly and Assembly processes need to take account of the dramatic changes in Christianity worldwide. Globally, churches are looking for ways to facilitate healthy processes of discernment that reflect a diversity of culture, context and experience. They are looking for processes where people, formed by Jesus Christ, offer their insights arising from their participation in the mission of God in their particular contexts. Such perspectives are likely to be elicited and encouraged when the processes themselves have space for such diversity and where the conflicts arising from such diversity are facilitated so the different perspectives, influenced by the ongoing conversations, are able to be offered in the ongoing process of national discernment.

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# Good decision-making

*John Howell, Kaimai Presbytery*

**I had the task of being a facilitator for the Business Committee at the last Assembly (GA12). This involved setting up a negotiation or discussion between the proposers of a remit and those who wished to amend or oppose it.**

Effective negotiations are difficult when people take positions, because the first thing you have to do is to get people to move from their position. This is done by asking them what they want to do or achieve, and see if alternative options might find common ground or might be just as effective in achieving what they want. But the way in which remits are presented is simply to state a position, without any supporting evidence or thinking as to why this approach has merit or should be adopted. It leads to adversarial negotiations as contrasted with enquiring conversations.

In submitting a proposal for how the Church should do its work, I would be expecting a process of decision-making that has some or all of the following:

1. Why would this proposal be endorsed? What are some reasons or advantages in its favour? Can you show me your thinking so that I can see where you are coming from, or what might persuade me to agree with you?
2. Is it trying to solve a problem, and if so, what is this problem, and how will any proposed changes solve that problem? Will any proposed changes create some other problems with unintended consequences? If you change this part of the system will it create difficulties for other parts of the Church?
3. How would this proposal compare with other options including the option of doing nothing? Perhaps these could be compared showing some reasons or benefits for, and some reasons or costs against.
4. On the basis that structure and function are integrated, does the proposal ignore this connection? Will an improvement in functioning within the current structure solve the problem, or if a restructuring is proposed, what changes in function are required to make it work?
5. Agreeing on a proposal at General Assembly is only the first step of getting the proposal adopted into the life and work of the Church as a whole. Does the proposal find common ground or ownership with those whose energy and commitment will be required to make it work? And who are those who will implement into action these decisions?

The current method of putting before Assembly remits only, without some evidence or some work showing such a process as the above, in my view, does not give confidence that the Assembly is making wise or informed decisions.

Further, the current method is positional, that is, it simply places before the Assembly a conclusion. The temptation then is to conduct the debate around positions, rather than seek what is good or sound or well-informed.

The Council of Assembly might well reflect on how its proposal on mission and representation sent to Dialogue Group 1 was lost. The proposers were unwilling to engage in facilitation with the group that wanted to send the matter to presbyteries to see if there could be common ground. The proposal was lost. I suggest that if the Council of Assembly report had included the background thinking of the five matters as listed above, and they were less positional so that common ground could be found, they might have achieved a more satisfactory outcome for the Assembly. The matter, as I understand it, is to go back to the Council of Assembly for re-drafting prior to going to presbyteries. If the re-draft is not about a position, but an invitation to a meaningful conversation, then a different kind of report needs to be written.



# Diversity Within Unity

*Ray Coster, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand*

**U**nity has always been a high value of the Christian faith ever since Jesus offered that wonderful prayer recorded in John 17. If it is a high value in the heart of God, it must be for us too. Paul picked up this value time and again in his letters to the churches as he exhorted the people who followed Jesus to be one.

That powerful Ephesians 4 passage leaps to mind where he speaks of “one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all”. Or the passage in Philippians 2: 1-4, which encourages us to imitate Christ’s humility.

Encouraging words and eloquent exhortation do not necessarily make a value into behaviour. I remember a woman once told me that she refuses to sing the hymn, “Thy Hand O God has Guided” because of the words of the refrain, *One Church, one faith, one Lord*. “This has never been the case,” she told me, “and never will be”. “The Church has always been divided, so I refuse to sing it!” Is she right? I don’t think so. There is one faith, one Church, one Lord, even though there are also divisions within the fragmented Body of Christ. It is healthy to have diversity within unity.

Unity is not being the same. Unity does not mean there are no differences. People do not give up certain aspects of their identity when they become one. A married couple can be one and still retain the identity of being male and female. When Jesus prayed the prayer of John 17 the Father, Son and Holy Spirit did not deny or remove their specific identity, their personality, or way of functioning. True unity is much more than a surface feature.

When Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, he was talking about a deeper unity than physical reality. Of course a Jew remains a Jew and a gentile a gentile. And praise God that men remain men and women remain women!

We can have unity at an Assembly without having to leave aspects of our identity or our preferences or perspectives at the door. Someone once said, “When two people always agree on everything – at least one person’s mind is not working!” Unity happens when each of us brings our gift, thought or belief – whatever that might be – BUT we also bring the attitude of being “humble, gentle and patient” with each other (Eph 4: 2)

**T**here is one faith, one Church, one Lord, even though there are also divisions within the fragmented Body of Christ.

Indeed the passage is even more forceful and realistic of our human behaviour when it says that we should “bear (anekomai) with one another in love”. That literally means “put up with or endure each other”. We only need to bring that attitude when we disagree or think differently than the person beside us. In other words, unity takes effort. But it is worth it.

One of my goals as Moderator is to work for a “culture of honour” in our Church. If someone is a follower of Jesus then it is my duty and obligation, but even more my joy and delight, to honour that person. I know that where people honour others – especially those that they disagree with and think differently from – the Holy Spirit will be present.<sup>1</sup> The New Testament writers are very clear that part of living with a resurrection mind-set is to honour and respect other believers. Where there is this culture of honour and respect, I believe that discernment will be much easier.

<sup>1</sup> See ‘Culture of Honour’ by Danny Silk.

In my experience discernment is not always easy. However, overall I have great confidence in our system of discernment and respect for the eldership model. None of us is perfect, but time and again I have reflected in amazement at how God has led a session, a presbytery and even an Assembly in discernment.

Personally, I do not think that GA12 was a good example of a process of discernment. While I as Moderator attempted to create a “culture of honour” other factors worked against our discernment processes.

It is my understanding that this was the shortest Assembly on record. In effect, the business committee only had two full days to arrange our discussion. We lived with pressure and constraint. That is not conducive to discernment. Hopefully the new model of an Assembly week will help us improve, giving more time for seeking the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

As I reflect I wonder how we can discern God’s will when we only give people two minutes to speak and ten seconds of that time is taken telling the Moderator their name and where they come from. And then, when the pressure and constraints of time pushed in even more, the Moderator had to restrict all people’s speaking to one minute. That, to me, does not provide an environment or culture for good discernment.

### **My desire would be as follows:**

1. Let us all come to a session meeting, presbytery and Assembly with an attitude of respect and honour for fellow believers and followers of Jesus as outlined by Paul in Ephesians 4: 1-3: “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”
2. Let us take time to be with each other in a context outside of a debate, so that we gain an understanding of each other’s heart and mind. In this way, when we come to debate and discern a matter we hear more than the words that are said.
3. Let us structure our Assembly so that we can give people time to share what they believe the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. This may not always be on the floor of an Assembly – but in discussion or dialogue groups, too. Let’s take time to listen to each other and hear what Holy Spirit may be saying through them.
4. Let us set aside more time for collective prayer and worship as an Assembly – without the thought of business pressure hanging over us.
5. Let’s give the chaplains a higher priority and see more use made of the chapel by all Commissioners where we can wait in silence and call on the name of God for our Church and it’s Assembly.

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# No easy task: committing to the ways of discernment in an adversarial system

*Graham Redding, Principal Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership*

**In the *Leadership Handbook*, recently produced by the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, a section is devoted to the art of discernment which, we suggest, is a key aspect of leadership.**

In a Christian context, discernment is linked primarily to ascertaining the will of the Triune God, understood in terms of “seeking the mind of Christ” and “listening for what the Spirit is saying to the church”. Discernment is both a personal and collective act. It involves the interpretation of both Scripture and context. It utilises both reason and intuition. It is prayerful and consultative. It respects the collective wisdom of the majority, even as it listens for God’s voice in the words and pleas of those on the margins. It strives for consensus decision-making that avoids dividing a committee or church court into winners and losers in regards to particular issues.

The incorporation of communal spiritual practices (e.g. worship, singing, silence, prayer and Bible study) into business meetings can go a long way towards facilitating discernment and building consensus. So too can the cultivation of listening skills and the sensitive and skilled use of meeting procedures. What we are really talking about here is Church courts and committees seeing themselves first and foremost as forums for doing business in the context of discerning God’s will, not merely doing business for its own sake.

**H**ow can a coherent and sustained theological argument on a complex issue be delivered in just two minutes?

One of the frustrations that many people seem to share in relation to the General Assembly is that the process of discernment, as described above, is so rarely evident. Why is this? I would note the following reasons:

1. The process of discernment works more readily in smaller gatherings where participants know and (hopefully) trust one another. What we are talking about here is a relational way of being together and conducting business. The sheer size and infrequency of General Assemblies makes this difficult. First-time commissioners (especially non-clergy), unfamiliar with Church processes and procedures, often find the whole experience overwhelming.
2. The process of discernment works best when things don’t have to be rushed, and where participants can “wait on God”. In this regard, local church councils often have the luxury of deferring difficult decisions until subsequent meetings, and in the meantime commit themselves to further prayer, study and consultation. Whilst the process for sending General Assembly decisions down to congregations for voting under the terms of the Barrier Act is a useful mechanism for testing the will of the Church on significant matters, it does have its limitations – for example, congregations can only vote yes or no to particular proposals; they cannot propose amendments or express nuanced views. This limitation is especially evident

when decisions sent down under the Barrier Act have been clumsily worded (often as a result of compromise and hastily worded amendments on the floor of the Assembly) and have ramifications not previously foreseen. It's a "like it or lump it" process.

3. The General Assembly is not a good forum for rigorous and informed theological discussion. Expediency and pragmatism tend to be the orders of the day. Whilst the advent of dialogue groups has allowed everybody to have a voice, and in that sense made the General Assembly a more participatory event than in the past, often the ensuing discussions are reactionary and ill-informed. This is compounded by restrictive speaking time limits; how can a coherent and sustained theological argument on a complex issue be delivered in just two minutes?

One of the good things about the pre-dialogue-group era was that Assemblies often featured memorable debates that displayed impressive levels of biblical and theological engagement. Yes, those debates were often dominated by just a few voices, but more often than not those voices were worth hearing (including the ones with which one disagreed!). They provided real food for thought, and could be persuasive. Good oratory could be both informative and inspirational.

**T**he current decision-making process at the Assembly is adversarial rather than consensus-building. It creates winners and losers.

Nowadays, debates on the floor of the Assembly have largely been reduced to a series of sound bites, usually voicing pre-determined positions, and are seldom persuasive. Whilst good theological arguments might be raised in dialogue groups, few of those arguments will make it back to the floor of the Assembly via the dialogue group reporting process, because what is reported are patterns of feedback, not individual points. Indeed, the reporting system lacks the element of discernment – it simply summarises what has been said in the dialogue groups – and if the groups are in general agreement than it is unlikely that any additional debating time will be scheduled for the plenary session. Instead, the motion under discussion is simply put straight to the vote.

4. The current decision-making process at the Assembly is adversarial rather than consensus-building. It creates winners and losers. It also reduces the will of God to a winning majority and virtually eliminates the possibility of hearing the voice of God through minority voices. It's a winner-takes-all system. It also encourages unsavoury tactics on the part of those who seek to win or preserve a majority vote on a contentious issue. When a debate is framed in terms of a battle to be won, rather than a process for discernment, a combative and divisive mood almost inevitably descends upon the Assembly, and any attempt to raise or revisit a controversial issue quickly gets shut down by an ill-tempered, power-wielding majority.

Ministry Interns from the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership attend each General Assembly. Part of their role is to assist the Assembly's business committee, the most visible aspects of which are running the microphones and counting votes in the plenary sessions. But their primary role is simply to observe and to learn. At the end of each day they reflect on what they have seen and heard.

Interestingly, their comments from one Assembly to the next are relatively constant, especially in relation to the debates on controversial issues. They note the adversarial tone of the debates. They also comment on the dominance of two or three leading personalities (who seem to be present at every General Assembly), the absence of trust and grace, and the tactics that appear to be deployed



both on the floor of the Assembly and behind the scenes. Almost invariably our students ask if the Presbyterian Church is well served by the General Assembly's current model of discernment and decision making.

What can be done? Moves in recent years to shift the focus of the General Assembly away from simply doing business to inspiring and resourcing the Church reflect a broad-based conviction that something has to change. And there are some additional things that can be considered, such as adopting a consensus model of decision-making, like that which appears to be used effectively by the Uniting Church of Australia.

I would like to see our Church find a way to affirm together what needs to be affirmed whilst also working out how we respect difference and learn to live together in shalom and reconciliation.

But none of these things in and of themselves will do the job, and there is no quick fix, because the real and underlying problem is of a theological, not organisational, nature. It has to do with our ecclesiology, or how we view our life together as a Church. Sadly, the history of the Reformed movement, of which the Presbyterian Church is part, is one that is noted for a disturbingly high degree of fragmentation and division. As a general rule, we do not have a strong sense of being part of a larger body in which each part is regarded as indispensable to the whole (cf. 1 Corinthians 12).

Our generally non-sacramental approach to worship has fostered an individualistic approach to faith and weakened our sense of being-in-community. Lacking a strong sense of shared identity in baptism and table fellowship, the words by which we seek to bear witness to the Word quickly become accusatory and confrontational. Fellowship is readily broken over doctrinal disagreements. We hear this expressed in the oft-used statement, "If such-and-such doesn't agree with the decision, let them join another Church".

For me, this sort of statement, and the sentiment that lies behind it, constitutes a failed witness to the Gospel of reconciliation. It is incumbent upon us as followers of Jesus to find a better way. To that end, I would like to see our Church find a way to affirm together what needs to be affirmed, whilst also working out how we respect difference and learn to live together in shalom and reconciliation.

Indeed, there are many core beliefs and doctrines that we are able to affirm together, including those contained in our creedal and confessional heritage (Catholic and Reformed), but from time to time there have been, and will continue to be, differences of opinion on issues of the day. It is then that we are challenged to create space for those who hold a minority viewpoint. We can only do so by respecting each other's personal integrity, and, in a spirit of humility, seek to build up the body of Christ, knowing that few things compromise the integrity of Christian witness more than a divided and conflicted Church.

Is there a way to do this? If there is, it won't be easy, because it will require a significant shift in the way that we think about, and conduct, Church business. But every time I join others around the Lord's Table, including those with whom I disagree, and I am reminded to view them not as strangers and adversaries but rather as brothers and sisters in Christ; then I am reminded that with God anything is possible and that the vision of shalom and reconciliation that the Gospel holds before us is worth striving for.

# How's the water?

*Martin Baker, Assembly Executive Secretary*

**I knew very little of the writings of the late David Foster Wallace until a friend raved to me about his work and sent me a link to a graduation speech he gave to students at Kenyon College, Ohio. Wallace was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and has been heralded as one of the most insightful writers in contemporary literature.**

In his speech to the young students, he pointed out that the exact same experience can mean two totally different things to two different people, given those people's two different belief templates, and two different ways of constructing meaning from experience.

To illustrate - I am terrible at backing trailers. I will do almost anything to avoid being placed in a situation where I have to back a trailer. My trailer has a small aluminium boat on it, (named *Laura Palmer*). So, I am at the Blind Bay, Great Barrier Island, boat ramp and I have misread the tide chart. I cannot just drive down onto the beach, back the trailer a few meters and drop *Laura Palmer* into the water. I have to back down a ramp, a long narrow concrete ramp, with big drop offs on either side. Of course, things do not go well.

Whenever I get into this situation, of an inadequacy (which may even raise questions about my masculinity), whenever I am in such a situation, an audience appears as if from nowhere. They fold their arms and pretend not to watch, but I know they are looking. After three or four minutes of back-and-forth I noticed further-up the boat ramp a Massey Ferguson towing a much larger boat, waiting to back down. Then horror, two long-wheelbase Land Rovers, also waiting with their much bigger boats. I closed my eyes and said, "God what am I going to do?" Into my short prayer intruded the voice of my fantastic neighbour, Kevin, the most gifted trailer-backer this side of the black stump. "Need a hand?" said Kevin. Seconds later *Laura Palmer* slid off my trailer into the warm waters of the Colville Channel.

Was Kevin an answer to prayer? Yes? No?

Wallace, in his address to the graduating students says:

"We educated people do not want to claim that one interpretation is true and the other is false or bad. Which is fine, except we also never end up talking about just where these individual beliefs come from. We end up thinking as if a person's most basic orientation toward the world, and the meaning of his or her experience were somehow just hard-wired, like height or shoe-size; or automatically absorbed from the culture, like language. As if how we construct meaning were not actually a matter of personal, intentional choice. Plus, there's the whole matter of arrogance. The nonreligious person is so totally certain in his or her dismissal of the possibility that X [in my adaption of the story, Kevin] had anything to do with my prayer for help. True, there are plenty of religious people who seem arrogant and certain of their own interpretations, too. They're probably even more repulsive than atheists, at least to most of us. But religious dogmatists' problem is exactly the same as the story's unbeliever: blind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he or she is locked up."

"How's the water today?" says the old fish to the young fish. The young fish replies, "What is water?"

I take from what Wallace says a message that maybe as congregations, and in our ministries, we do not have to concede everything to the secular narrative. Perhaps we can be people who support the kind of communities that encourage what our Presbyterian forebears called *the advancement of sound learning*. It is to do with what teaching about how to think is really supposed to mean. To encourage theological discernment. To be as Wallace says, just a little less arrogant. To have just a little critical awareness about ourselves and our certainties.

When I reflect on our own debates, at Assembly, and at other times in the life of our Church, I have often heard friends and colleagues argue from strongly held positions of biblical truth, justice, and integrity. While it is clear in these debates that people have different certainties, we do not seem to be able to find a place where we can both affirm our integrity as a community, and allow some way of holding these views in tension. Even bringing contentious matters to the vote can seem to almost

**W**hen I reflect on our own debates, at Assembly, and at other times in the life of our Church, I have often heard friends and colleagues argue from strongly held positions of biblical truth, justice, and integrity.

undermine the graciousness which is a gift from God central to our Gospel. I am not even sure that the way we make decisions is the answer. I think the way forward is more a question of culture and missiology. How is God calling us to be the Church, within the complexities and diversity of the context in which we bear witness to God's love for the world?

*(I have adapted this column from a sermon I preached, in February 2013, at the induction of the Rev Dr Selwyn Yeoman as the 7th Master of Knox College, Dunedin.)*

## Rotorua District Presbyterian Church

THE NEW ROTORUA DISTRICT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IS EXCITED TO BE ASKING FOR EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST IN TWO NEW ASSOCIATE ORDAINED MINISTRY POSITIONS!



**The structure of RDPC is such that each minister is responsible for the primary worship pastoral and leadership requirements of one of the three larger congregations within RDPC as well as one or more of the smaller congregations.**

These positions are part of a team of three ordained ministers and a wider team of full time and part time paid staff and volunteers. Rev Lance Thomas is the current Senior Minister.

- We are looking for one ordained minister whose passion and giftedness is in leading and pastoring a congregation who are exploring new forms of worship (Post-modern). We are looking for someone who is comfortable with the exploration of contemporary worship possibilities and interested in working with and building on an existing community.
- We are looking for a minister whose passion and giftedness is in pastoring a suburban congregation with a mixed but predominantly older age group familiar with a traditional style of worship. Opportunities also exist for the development of new work in East Rotorua. Experience and passion towards Connection with the community through service and outreach opportunities would be an advantage.

Both these positions require people who are team players and have an understanding and commitment to using their gifts as part of a wider ministry team.

These positions offer an opportunity to be part of a new beginning not just in the life of the Rotorua Presbyterian Churches but also a new model of being Church that may be a way forward for others in the future.

Please contact The Convenor RDPC Ministry Settlement Board (both positions) for an application package. (We'll send you and profile and tell you how to take it a step further.) Please make contact through Kiri at [rotorua.presy@gmail.com](mailto:rotorua.presy@gmail.com) who is handling this process.

# Letter to the Editor:

*Alan Goss, Gisborne – Hawke's Bay Presbytery*

**G**raham Redding has many good things to say in his *Candour* article of November 2012, but he doesn't go far enough. No mention is made of the life and teaching of Jesus on which the Christian faith is based. The Church's central doctrine of the Incarnation – God become man – is overlooked. The triune God is quoted as "the agent of mission and transformation, not the Church".

Creedal doctrines like the Trinity are primarily concerned with establishing Jesus' status and rank within the God-head. He is God incarnate, begotten of the Father, born of a Virgin and a person of the Holy Trinity. He is regarded as the founder of a new religion. Jesus would have been surprised to receive such accolades. The breaker-down of idols had now become an icon.

Jesus was a theist and not a Trinitarian, he believed in a personal supernatural God who intervenes in human affairs. He was a Jew, not a Christian (Christianity emerged sometime later). And especially, Jesus was an ordinary human being who had a vision of a new reality which he called the "Kingdom of God". It was a world vastly different from the one he had been born into. In concrete everyday language his parables showed that God dwells in the ordinary activities of our daily lives.

The Creeds do contain some remarkable insights. They represent stages in the early development of Christian thinking about how Jesus could be both human and divine. However, their thought forms are now foreign to modern people; they speak of a God-man in a code language which would have mystified even Jesus himself. The Creeds are now out-of-date; they are now history.

The focus in many churches today is more about faith and belief than about the subversive message of Jesus. Jesus then becomes the soft, safe "teddy bear" Jesus, who is favoured by the evangelical churches. The Presbyterian Church is playing for time and is postponing dealing with those hard and embarrassing questions which lurk in people's minds. Its counsel is, "Don't rock the boat", don't disturb the faith of simple believers. It discourages ordinary people to think for themselves. It smothers their intellectual integrity. The emptying of the pews is a telling sign.

So has the Church got a future? The call to "let the Church die" is not a cry of despair; rather it is a herald of hope. Orthodox Christianity has run its course. Belief in a supernatural world has virtually collapsed. Over its long history the Church has achieved much and its good works continue. But now it should be allowed to die. It will take time as change comes slowly. New ways of being church are already emerging; now is the time to move on and to welcome in a new day.

**Sun,  
Sand,  
Surf,  
Salvation**

**Like the idea of being near the beach in the Sunny North, or maybe the challenge of helping to grow a church to witness in a diverse and changing community?**

We are looking for a full-time Minister to come to Waipu and work with a generous and enthusiastic group of people to help us carry out our mission in this area. The Parish stretches the length of Bream Bay from One Tree Point down to Langs Beach, with a Church Centre at Ruakaka and Waipu. Historically significant to Waipu, the church still holds a central place in the community.

If you would like to know a little more about this position, or to see a copy of the Profile, please contact the MSB Convenor, Verna Healy (Phone 09 4207088 [verna.h@clear.net.nz](mailto:verna.h@clear.net.nz))