



Address to GA23 by Moderator Designate Rev Peter Dunn

Friday 29 September 2023

Greetings to all of you attending GA23. Moderator Rose, greetings and further congratulations on your installation as Moderator. Moderator Tamihana, tena koe me Te Aka Puoho.

I am humbled to stand here following the outcome of the election process for Moderator Designate. I never thought I would stand addressing the General Assembly for this reason. Opportunity, timing, proportional voting, the leading of the Holy Spirit, I have no idea how that logarithm works. But I thank you for this opportunity to be the next Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, and for the confirmation given today.

I love being part of the Presbyterian Church. Being Presbyterian is in my DNA, with my family being part of the Presbyterian movement for generations. One of my forebearers, for example, was on the Kirk Session of the Parish of Auchterarder in Perthshire, Scotland, when in 1834, they unanimously rejected the appointment of a new minister by the local Laird under the patronage system. That set in train a series of events that led to the Disruption of 1843 when about 40% of ministers and parishes left the Church of Scotland and formed the Free Church of Scotland. Those who left did so as an act of "principled opposition" to the State claiming civil law jurisdiction over the Church of Scotland, including the appointment of ministers to Parishes by the Lairds - the landed gentry.

As you get to know me, you will find that "principled opposition" is part of my makeup regarding the Scriptures and our confessions of faith that are in constant dialogue with what societal ideologies demand of us. When you read chapter 1, section 1, of the Book of Order, think of me and my approach to being part of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

I love being part of the Presbyterian Church. Presbyterian DNA is interesting and tells a bit of a story, but it does not hold me in this denomination. I am here because this Church has nurtured and encouraged my faith and my calling. I have found in most instances that I can stand in any Presbyterian gathering and say the words "We believe". We believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We believe that Jesus Christ was God incarnate, was crucified and rose again on the third day, and then ascended to heaven, where he sits at the right hand of the Father, awaiting his return to judge the living and the dead. We believe.

This Church has nurtured me from my birth. I acknowledge the faith and prayers of my parents and other family members. I still remember some Sunday School teachers, Bible Class and Youth leaders, Professors and lecturers at Knox Theological Hall when I trained for ministry. A couple of good supervisors, many ministers, elders and members of congregations I have been part of. I remember their devotion to Christ, their love, care, and interest in my spiritual, and overall well-being. That is the Church at its best, and I have experienced that. Who I am as a Christian is mostly the result of the spiritual nurture of this Church. *Ehara taku toa, he takitahi, he toa takitini. (My success should not be bestowed onto me alone, as it was not individual success but the success of a collective).*

This is my 34th year in ministry. It took me many years to understand that as a minister and a leader in the Church, I was not only called but also chosen. Over that time, I have experienced the Church

at its best and, too often, the Church at its worst at local, presbytery and Assembly levels. Once, I just about walked away from it all, most probably out of the Church altogether, to be truthful, to take up my alternative calling of driving trucks in Australia. My supervisor picked up the vibes of that dark time and told me to run and find a safe place. With study leave available, I travelled the length of the country to be safe. I discovered the open secret of the "thin place" from my "Celtic" roots. Forty days and nights deep in the bush of Fiordland, solo, by myself, with the challenges and dangers of the environment, with the Creator of heaven and earth. If you haven't heard of thin places, they are where heaven and earth meet - literally. Someone meets you there. I met someone who healed me, chose me and re-confirmed my calling. As you get to know me as an ageing Pakeha boomer, which I certainly am, I hope you will also meet a spiritual person who finds spiritual sustenance on the contemplative path, who is still on an exciting spiritual journey of discovery with the context of engaging with the complex societal questions being asked of the Church in regards to the Christian faith that "We believe".

Some have asked if I have any ideas for a theme for my Moderatorial term in two years' time. Please, let me get over this day first. But here is a teaser: the opening sentences of Kupu Whakapono

Mai tēnei whenua o Aotearoa Niu Tirenī
E whakaatu ana mātou
Ki te Atua kotahi, te Atua ora
Te Matua, Tama, Wairua Tapu
Te aroha i mua i te aroha

From this land of Aotearoa New Zealand, we confess that we believe in & belong to the one true and living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Love before all love.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, "We believe".