

**GA25 Opening Service Address
PCANZ Moderator Right Rev Peter Dunn**

20 October 2025

Readings

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Colossians 1:15-20

Opening Remarks

Acknowledgments and thanks

Message

I am a Christian. I am a Christian. I am a Christian.

I openly declare that Jesus is Lord and I believe in my heart that God raised him from the dead. (Romans 10:9 NLT). I will say that to anyone.

From the Deuteronomy 6 reading, what this must mean is that I love the LORD my God with all my heart, all my soul, and all my strength. And I must commit myself wholeheartedly to God's commands and the teaching of Jesus, the Prophet's and the Apostles. It is a lifelong struggle to keep one's relationship with God focused, as experience shows. And you will be the judges of my living like that over the next two years.

My testimony on how I became a Christian follows the script of Deuteronomy 6:7, "Repeat them again and again to your children". That's what my parents did in the context of our 1960s and 70's home life, a time of significant societal change. Their teaching and witness were foundational to my becoming a Christian. As life continued, others taught me with their actions and words, and I have discovered more and more the delight of the Holy Spirit's presence in the thin place where heaven and earth meet.

My theme for this Assembly and my term as Moderator is "We believe". The catalyst for the theme is engagement with people in the Church I minister in. We have a pool of people associated with our ministries who come from non-Christian backgrounds, with a complete lack of experience of what it means to belong to a Christian Community. Please note I said "Christian Community," not a lack of Christian knowledge. I have this understanding that people must be given space and time to belong before they believe. What most of them want is a safe place, so they will watch with suspicion, for a start, how we, as a Christian Community, interact. If they discern we are like the world on the street, it is over between us. We have seen people come to our Church and belong for two or three years before they come to faith in Jesus Christ, and we baptise them and nurture them as new disciples.

Behind this is the fact that we are just beginning to rediscover the power of the Gospel, the relevance of the Good News, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in lost and broken lives. As a Christian Community, we believe. Not that I believe, you believe, or that person over

there believes. We believe together. We do not believe as individuals. As Christians, can I say, as Presbyterians in Aotearoa New Zealand, our Christian faith is communal; it is the faith we confess together.

The "we believe" logo can move in the imagination as you like. In a moment, I will be introducing the analogy of a braided river to consider who we are as the Presbyterian Church. The Cross is the anchor feature. Being in the stream of Reformed Theology, the Cross is empty because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The wavy lines represent a braided river. Even if you are colour blind, I do hope you can play with that image. But one night I was lying there thinking about things, as old men do, without worrying about anything, when it came to me that the wavy lines might also represent a howling norwester you get in these parts. And a howling norwester drifted my mind to thinking about the wind of the Holy Spirit reviving the good old PCANZ, and anyone else who wants to join in. Old men dream dreams.

Braided River

This is a braided river. There are a number of these in the South Island. This one is the Waitaki River. It is the border between Otago and Canterbury. Alpine Presbytery has as part of its mission statement the line "Resourcing the Braided River". That's cool.

A braided river is known for its many channels that flow within its banks from the mountains to the sea. The channels shift and change over time, but the river is still the river. When I was a boy on a family holiday we camped by the Waitaki River. One night, there was no wind, but there was a constant rumbling noise. The Waitaki dam upstream had spilled water, and what we heard was thousands of tonnes of gravel heading downstream. An image of its power. The Presbyterian Church is a braided river—an analogy.

What flows in the channels within the banks? Evangelicals and progressives. Conservatives and Liberals. Cooperating Parishes. Urban and rural parishes. Parishes with ministers, parishes without, parishes that have recently realised they cannot afford a minister any more. Parishes that are thriving and growing, parishes on palliative care, working out who will finally turn the lights off. There are people from the Rainbow Community. There are Contemplatives. Charismatics, the occasional mystic. Nicene Creed adherents, those who are not. Those in the channel of Reformed Theology. There could even be dispensationalists and Anabaptists in our river. How many languages and cultures flow in our channels? Forty? Fifty? We have channels that are recognisable as ethnic channels, bringing their richness to the river. Youth leaders and their challenging groups of young people. We have a large channel of boomers. Ordained Ministers, Ordained Elders, Deacons and Board of Managers, Parish Counsellors. Members and associate members. And people who just come to our Churches.

I have run out of labels. That is the nature of our braided river. There is another saying, often quoted, that flows from the analogy. "Unity in Diversity". The Presbyterian Church has identified itself in this expression, making the best it can of its diversity. No one can argue that we are not a diverse Church. You will experience it, mostly in a positive manner, over the next few days and celebrate it.

But also be aware that unity in diversity can also be a hiding place and stronghold for those who will not submit to the fundamental doctrines of this Church. I want to say to you that in such strongholds, ideologies and self-interest from other rivers mix with ours and can occur in any one of our theological streams. What unites us in our diversity can't be the diversity, it must be our faith in Jesus Christ, and that must not be forgotten as our agreed faith and doctrine is applied in every conversation.

A story from about the time when unity and diversity became the catch phrase. It was 1988. At Knox Theological Hall, a class I was in was taught by a really lovely man, someone I think everyone remained on good terms with after we completed training. This particular year he based his lectures on a book called "Into the Whirlwind- The Future of the Church" by John Selby Spong. If the teaching had been comparative between views, that would have been a great course. But we were told at the beginning that he would teach the new path for Christianity, to free us from centuries of misinterpreting the life of Jesus. So week after week we were told why we should put aside belief in the virgin birth, miracles, the divinity of Christ, the resurrection and just about everything else, including the biblical canon. The dark side of unity in diversity protected that lovely man and false teaching in the context of his delivery. But as you know, challenging false teachers when the Church protects them comes at a significant cost and harm to the Church, so nothing is said.

Now, don't despair too much; there were other lecturers at Knox at the time who were life-changing for most of us through their lectures. Two of my friends at Knox became Christians—you know, Jesus is Lord, and God raised him from the dead, Christians. I have no idea how they got selected for training in the first place, but I am glad they were.

Here are some questions and observations for Ministers and Elders of the Presbyterian Church. There are some "we believe" things you have agreed to at your ordination. In the Statements of our Fundamental Doctrines, we find that one of the earliest expressions of Christian fundamental doctrines is in the Apostles Creed, which we, as a Church, to quote, "with joy affirms". We did in 1971 at least. The Fundamental Doctrines cover the Trinity. They talk about the Word of God being contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the supreme rule of life, faith, and duty, being the Supreme Standard of this Church. The Fundamental doctrines discuss God and nature, and state that God is the God of Creation. They talk about the person of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of Christ, judgment and the Christian hope of redemption.

The question is, are these historic notes from a past age, or the "we believe" affirmations of a living and breathing community of faith in Christ in 2025? I have no idea where most of you float in our river. I hope that you are in the flow. Or maybe you are on the bank throwing stones, or no longer interested, wandering in the paddock next door?

Soon we will recite together the Nicene Creed, which, like the Apostle's Creed, is one of the earliest expressions of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian Church. I read an article this year about the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed, which is this year. The article proposed that the Church to which the writer belongs should stop using the Creed because it referred to

an old and now obsolete understanding of God. Follow that logic through: it means that our Supreme Standard of the Word of God, contained in the Old and New Testaments, must be treated in the same way. That is the death of the Church.

Where are you, my colleagues in ministry —Ministers and Elders, leaders in the Presbyterian Church — with "we believe" affirmations of the Christian faith? This is not an academic or tick-box question. It is a question of the heart, the soul, the mind and the integrity of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Can I dare to say, in the gathering of the General Assembly 2025, speaking on your behalf as the Moderator, "We are Christians. We believe with our heart and intellect, with our emotions, that God raised Jesus from the dead"?