

PWANZ Closure Devotion 2023

Tena koutou katoa, Talofa, Talofa lava, Kia orana, Malo e lelei, Taloha Ni, Bula vinaka
Greetings to you all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I grew up with APW very much a part of the landscape of my life. My mother belonged to it for years and was President of the Milton group at least twice. The story is told that when I was quite young, I wasn't feeling well one night, and Mum was away to the Evening APW group. Nothing Dad could do would console me - I wanted my Mum. So in the end he phoned the Minister who went across to the meeting in the hall and Mum ran several blocks home! As soon as I saw her, I felt better and went to sleep!! Just when she thought she could have a break from the children and enjoy being with her church friends! Lots of juggling went on as women cared for their families and served the church.

Growing up I remember Mum being involved with meetings, fundraising, preparing devotions, helping people in various ways through the APW group. The women enjoyed the friendships formed and the mission and the values of the group gave them a sense of purpose and fulfilment. They were an enormous help to the running of the church through the various rosters they organised - for flowers, cleaning, morning teas, catering for funerals, and through pastoral work, organising the annual fairs and so on. They were the backbone of the church!

And then in the various churches I have belonged to, the APW groups were well attended and enjoyed by the participants. They were often the 'mission-focussed' part of the church and did an enormous amount to help the communities in which they were based, as well as supporting overseas missions. The fellowship shared was also highly valued.

When I was training for ministry in Dunedin, many APW groups supported students through regular prayer, correspondence, food, furniture, firewood and so on. This was greatly appreciated by the students and helped strengthen the connection with the national church.

As well as these roles already mentioned, APW also produced some wonderful resources and I have a couple of devotional books on my bookshelf that I use from time to time. Faith-filled wisdom and thoughtful contributions that have been used throughout the country. What talented, wise women.

Presbyterian women have also been involved at the international level through the Special Consultative Status as a Non-governmental organisation with the United Nations, drawing attention to the needs, injustices, aspirations and achievements of women around the world. This has been a platform that has been able to effect change and has encouraged those involved with it.

Recently the Fellowship group (previously APW) at our church talked of what the organisation had meant to them. One woman said she knew that she was now considered an adult when she was asked to join the local PWMU! They spoke of how for those who lived on farms in rural areas, it was a wonderful organisation which connected them and saved them from feelings of isolation. They enjoyed meeting up with women from other places through Presbyterian and the annual national conferences. Studies, resources, praying, listening to speakers, supporting missionaries, using their talents, the provision of food and hospitality, learning opportunities were all highly valued.

Each group around the country will have their own memories and I encourage you all to share those at your meetings, in your own contexts, giving value to what has happened in that past and how it has shaped, encouraged and nurtured the women of our church, people in our communities, and our national church as well. As this movement comes to a close, we feel the loss of it, acknowledge our feelings and also know the hope of God who leads us in new directions.

Dear God
Take us now and put our feet on the road
That leads to the horizons of your unfolding future
The future to which the Spirit draws us,
And from which the crucified and risen one
Comes to meet us.
Amen.

Rose Luxford

Suggested hymns

Groups will also have their favourites

‘God gives us a future’

‘Tama ngakau marie’

‘Nothing is lost on the breath of God’

‘Faafetai I Le Atua’

Reading: Luke 24: 13-35

I have always loved this reading and the imagery it evokes. On the wall of the Andersons Bay Church, Dunedin where I used to attend, there was a painting of Jesus with these followers on the road to Emmaus. It conveyed such a sense of connection and companionship, and it lifted my heart when I looked at it.

The story tells us that the followers are downcast and sad about what has happened to their friend Jesus; the man they had considered a prophet and powerful in all that he did. And now he has been killed by crucifixion and there is great grief. They have also heard the curious tale of the women who had found that Jesus’ body was no longer in the tomb, and that they had been told he was alive. And we can note that it was the women who were first to connect with the Risen Christ. For these followers on the road to Emmaus, none of it seemed to make much sense. And Jesus speaks into this situation of sadness, uncertainty and fear, using the scriptures to teach them of the ways of God. What a surprise it must have been for them to encounter a person of sensitivity and learning on the road.

And then later when they share bread together, they recognise this stranger for who he is. When they recall that happening, they talk of ‘how their hearts burned within them’ when they were with him on the road.

It is such an inspiring story. The journey from grief to celebration. The appreciation of the richness of the time they had spent together on the road - listening and learning. And that stayed with them, nurtured them and inspired them, even after the resurrected Jesus had left them.

When we lose something or someone who is dear to us, we naturally feel sorrow and a sense of loss. That is because it or they have meant something special to us. We miss it keenly and there is an emptiness. And this will be the case with the end of the Presbyterian women movement. It has been such an influential and important part of many people's lives and will be sorely missed.

'How our hearts burned within us' can apply to the various Presbyterian women movements over the years. The times spent together. The learning. The work. The laughter. The sorrows. It has been a time in our lives that has been incredibly valuable and helped shape us. None of that can be taken away. Through this movement, Christ has been at the centre of it all, and through him there has been life and growth. Although the movement is finishing, Christ continues to be at the heart of who we are and will continue to lead us. For that we are so grateful.

A litany of thanks

Give thanks for all those women who have gone before us

Worshipping and working, caring and visioning

Give thanks for their faith and their care

Their exploring and learning, their questions, their growth

Give thanks for their juggling of tasks and responsibilities

Their ability to multi-task and to make connections

Give thanks for the different cultures and the different outlooks

The insights and insights, the warmth of friendship

Give thanks for those who have spoken out and challenged

Brought attention to inequality and injustice

Give thanks for those who have also acted to bring change

And in so doing given hope to those who have been suffering

Give thanks for the times our hearts have burned within us

As we have encountered the Christ in our midst

Give thanks that all of this has shaped and blessed us

And woven a people of faith and of hope

Give thanks to our God

Creator, Redeemer, Life-giving Spirit

Prayer

Holy and loving God - as we gather in your presence this day, we give our heartfelt thanks for all the women who have gone before us in this movement of Presbyterian women. For 118 collective years of service to you, the community, the church, society. Women who have juggled their responsibilities of home, children, work, community and church to be part of an organisation that has so enriched and supported your work in our world. We remember them with gratitude and love, with admiration and respect for all they have done, and for all that they were.

These women and groups have formed the backbone of many of your churches. Supporting ministries, enhancing worship, teaching children, learning and growing, raising money, providing hospitality and care. All of these acts of care and commitment have infused the church with a richness and blessing that we can hardly comprehend.

They have also spoken out on issues of injustice and inequality, and those voices have been heard. We give thanks for their courage and conviction, and also for the ongoing work that will be done in this space by people committed to the teachings of Jesus and the passion for social justice.

We too have been part of this movement and enjoyed our times of working together to serve your church and our community. We have valued the strong friendships that have been forged, the work that has helped people, the support we have given to mission and to the church. This has been a huge part of our lives and so we acknowledge our feelings of sadness and loss as this season draws to a close.

We also know that you are a God of hope, and of surprises. You lead us down pathways we have not anticipated and present us with opportunities that are life-giving. And so in this time that is impacting us, we know that we can trust in you as we go into the future. Walk with us we pray, open our hearts to the whisper or the shout of the Holy Spirit, so that we can continue to serve you and your church in this place and this time, and into the future.

We pray in the name of Jesus - the one who honoured women in his ministry and his calling. Amen.

