

Candour



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of Aotearoa New Zealand

NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

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Our structures and mission



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Contents

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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:

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Deconstructing structure

Amanda Wells

When people ask “what’s distinctive about the Presbyterian Church”, I often fall back on discussions of structure. The way in which the Church is governed and organised is relatively easy to explain, and more comprehensible to most people than arcane theological distinctions. It can be difficult for a lay person to separate any particular Presbyterian church from the Anglican/Methodist/Baptist parish down the road. The idea that there are multiple theological “flavours” doesn’t have a huge amount of resonance for the wedding/funeral-going general population.

The way in which the Presbyterian Church is governed from the bottom up does make it distinctive when compared to the more hierarchical Anglicans, Pope-centric Catholics and congregationalist Baptists. Its democratic nature makes it appealing to and easily understood by those familiar with the Westminster system, with the checks and balances a useful selling point in terms of preventing “Bishop Tamaki”-style personality cults.

This issue of *Candour* gives contributors a chance to write about the problems they see in our governance system or in the way it is being applied. When we discussed this topic during the annual Candour planning teleconference, our thoughts centred around the reforming of presbyteries and stories from that process. In reality, we have a more diverse set of reflections, covering presbyteries but also concepts of leadership at both national and local levels, and the idea of community itself. At the moment, only Kaimai and Southern presbyteries have finalised the mergers mandated by GA08, though other conversations continue. Those playing key roles in those presbytery mergers are perhaps too busy working them through to yet be in a position to write reflections!

Bureaucracy has become almost a dirty word in our society, sloughing its actual meaning of “government by central administration” to become synonymous with inefficiency and over-management. But it’s too easy to say that structure = bureaucracy = inevitable institutional death. Loose, networked groupings rarely sustain the achievements made possible by structure. There’s too much talk about how to do things, rather than actually getting anything done. The “bureaucratic” problem arises only when structure becomes a goal rather than a method of progress. As soon as “because that’s the way we’ve always done things” becomes a rationale for actions or reactions, you’re on a slippery slope.

Why not entertain a few crazy ideas? Organise your roster using Googlegroups, change the prayer phone tree to a Googledoc or set up a Facebook page and encourage your members to “friend” each other (I use Google as an example – Yahoo and others offer very similar, and similarly free, services). Giving people the choice to receive your newsletter electronically is hardly revolutionary, but does say interesting structural things about your ability to adapt to a changing world. On a related note, are shifting service times or moving pews anathema only because of an unbending historical context?

Structure is supposed to give a framework in which ideas can be more readily developed and executed. Or to remove the need to think about some things, so you can focus on others. In the same way that having policies prevents the need to keep making the same decision, structure provides a way of organising those decisions into a coherent whole. But it’s not static. You tend to think of an organisational structure as something that has leaped fully formed from the void, forgetting that it has evolved and twisted many times since its inception.

Last month, one of Andrew Norton’s regular email newsletters contained the observation that “culture eats strategy” for breakfast. I think you could equally substitute “structure” for “strategy”. Culture is a much more powerful force than we give credit, defining what decisions are acceptable and preventing or enabling change. Some of our structures may be reflections of our culture as much as of any strategic process. The culture in which everyone must agree makes the lone dissenter hugely powerful, as Alan Judge observes in this issue of *Candour*. Conversely, strict Westminster-style meetings enable an adversarial culture that reinforces its own unique structures.

The July issue of *Candour* will have the theme “Growth or death” and examine ideas around healthy congregations, how to deal with a smaller, declining congregation, and ask questions about closing churches. The deadline is 30 June and contributions can be emailed to candour@presbyterian.org.nz.

How do our structures serve mission?

Barry Ayers, Pohutukawa Coast Presbyterian, South Auckland

That's a good question to ponder, seeing we are in the midst of possibly the largest "reform of structures" process that our national Church has seen for many years. The reform of presbyteries is happening primarily because we see the need to renew our structures to better fit mission. I note that AES the Rev Martin Baker made the following comment in the October 2009 Bush Telegraph:

This reform is seen as being critical if we are to provide the structures most able to support and resource congregations to grow and develop.

So that begs the question: what "structures" are needed? What could it look like? Can we create the new from what already exists? Is it just another way of rearranging existing challenged systems? How do structures help to *resource* congregations?

I currently have the privilege of working with a fine team of men and women representing the "Northern cluster" in the process of presbytery reform. Our team has met monthly since August 2009 and comprises representatives from the presbyteries of South Auckland, Auckland, North Shore and CTN (Churches Together in Northland). One of the first things I noted about this process was the **complexity** of the task! We are a very *diverse* Church in many ways – culturally, theologically, generationally, geographically, etc. To create a new **structure** that will encourage and support people across that complex array of diverse situations will be a miracle in itself! But then I had to remind myself what this is all about.

We're not looking to build the perfect presbytery. We may not find the *ideal structure* that fits all people's expectations in Presbyterian world. We may not be able to afford all the whistles and bells that people would look for. We may venture further into this process of reform without crossing all our "t"s and dotting all our "i"s. But at the end of the day we do, I believe, need to recapture an energy and passion for being involved in mission. Our *structures need to serve our mission*, and not the other way around. And more than that... we need to find a way of building confidence and morale back into our leaders. There is, in my humble opinion, too much pressure on too many of our leaders – elders and clergy. We need to put in place structures that are *less burdensome* on those who commit their lives to their churches and mission projects. We need the best out of people. We do not want them overwhelmed or unsupported by structures that will not serve and encourage them.

We need to take the well being and support of our leaders much more seriously indeed

I'm currently supporting the concept that *less is more*, and *simple is often best*. We may need to prune back and simplify our church structures without losing the ethos that makes us who we are. Streamlining business usually already happens in most presbyteries. In our new presbyteries we should strive to make that even better. We have very capable people with good administrative skills and abilities in all of our presbyteries. We need to engage these skills and make good use of new technology to move us forward in this transition.

Good structures also need to be *transparent*. One of the things I hear in the reform process is the voiced concern that we are in danger of centralising power into the hands of fewer people. That is always a risk that structures can have, yet I find it almost amusing that most presbyteries already run systems such as comprehensive motions that have already been sifted and shaped by business

committees or executives. Rarely, in my experience, do these comprehensive motions get debated! We *already* trust people to a certain extent.

The huge issue arising from these voiced concerns points us to the heart of the matter with respect to structures. Do we really *trust* one another? Structures at the end of the day are only *means to an end*, not ends in themselves. They exist to help things run more smoothly. They are there to provide the needed checks and balances in an operational sense. They give permission and they provide boundaries – although some might say that they do much of the latter and little of the former! To help serve mission, structures need people who can build confidence and integrity into the life of our Church. Unfortunately that has not always been the case. To make a missional shift in our Church, we need to learn to build stronger relationships with one another and realise that we are all batting for the same team. Rules and structures are not there for people to hit one another or abuse one another. Sometimes we have allowed bad behaviour to exist in our church because we are all tempted to become *terminally nice* for the sake of the Gospel! There needs to be a fair dose of humility and compassion that flows into any new structures that evolve in this major transition. The time for shooting our own troops should be over. Structures will only serve mission if we remind ourselves of the greater goals of our purpose as a Church – to know God and to make him known.

What structures are needed in the new presbyteries? Beyond our expected administrative processes, I must confess I have an open mind! In our Northern reform process the Team is coming up with excellent issues that need to be addressed. We just need some clarity on what that could look like when we create the new presbytery. Key to the process will be putting the *right people* in the right places and putting some serious energy into improving the morale and support of our key leaders. Without more leaders being back in balance and wholeness, we will never have functional structures operating well. As a national Church we need to take the well being and support of our leaders much more seriously indeed.

So, how do our structures serve our mission?

By being our *servant* and not our *master*! The reform process is stretching us beyond our comfort zones. For a church that says that mission is important, we need to be careful that we don't trade one structural system that is creaking and straining for another one that will become a burden as well. We will need to ruthlessly ask questions about everything that we will be tempted to put in place! Do we really need this? Can we do without that? In this day and age of rapid change can we *travel lightly* without losing the edge of why we are here and the ethos of who we are! That, in my mind, will be our greatest challenge... and our most glorious opportunity!



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Making the most of our Presbyterian structures

*Martin Stewart, St Stephen's, Christchurch**

We should be careful with our structures. We set up structures to serve us but they can very easily become our oppressors. We need structures – they are a “necessary evil”. But our structures are to serve us, not we them.

In the Presbyterian Church, we have had a history of establishing structures that share power as much as possible. Among other things, our approach was born out of rebellion against power being vested in individuals.

Put simply, our structure looks something like this:

- A congregation gathers for worship and life together, and witness in the context in which they find themselves
- The congregation calls and elects elders to serve everyone by exercising pastoral oversight among them in the way of Jesus Christ – one of those elders is resourced to be their minister/teacher/preacher
- The congregations are served by the regional presbytery – a gathering of elders – normally two from each congregation (one minister, one other elder) to serve everyone by exercising pastoral oversight among them in the way of Jesus Christ
- Every so often the presbyteries gather in General Assembly to serve everyone by exercising pastoral oversight among them in the way of Jesus Christ

It is not a bad model really – sharing power as much as possible protects us from what happens when too much power is vested in individuals, and it clearly highlights the intent that our structures are primarily set up to serve us.

In describing the model in the way that I have, the emphasis is on protecting people’s freedom – each level of the structure has the mandate to serve people that they may have life in all its freedom in Jesus Christ. It is wise to keep this mandate in mind because it is the nature of structures to try to oppress us and take our freedom away.

A decade or more ago, the Council of Assembly presented us with a model of how our Presbyterian structures are designed to serve us. Do you remember the inverted triangle? It was a genuine attempt to remind the Church of why we do what we do and what our structures exist for. I have tried to represent it in the simple structure outlined above: first and at the top is the congregation; underneath serving them is the session/parish council helping the people do what they do; underneath serving them is the presbytery helping the sessions do what they do; and underneath them is the General Assembly and its resource people helping the presbyteries do what they do. The word “underneath” is important. To avoid our structures oppressing us, we need them to know that they are to serve us by holding us up rather than being over us.

How are we doing?

Our mission “to make Jesus Christ known” through the five faces isn’t too bad a model, except that it is theologically unsound of us to assume that we are the ones who “make Jesus Christ known”. Doesn’t Jesus make himself known? Isn’t our worship and life together a living sign of our being drawn into all that God is doing? Perhaps a safer way to protect ourselves from thinking that the mission of Jesus is all about how *we* organise ourselves is to remember that Jesus is *already* making himself known to us and to the world – the call on us is to catch the wave, or join in the song, rather than think that the mission of Jesus rests on what we “make”.

I sense that there is a lot of panic about the future of our church. Undoubtedly things must change and we need to embrace new configurations and approaches for this new season – but Christ makes his church. It is not for us to behave as if the whole thing is over unless we “do” everything. As always, there is no simple one-fix solution from on high. The call of God has always been a call to community – face-to-face engagement with people in our communities – and not necessarily to larger churches, but to faithful, hopeful, creative, and imaginative local churches.

The power-sharing model inherent in Presbyterianism is being weakened. The partnership of elders and the minister as an “alongside each other” model of leadership is being undermined:

- We have come up with the separatist language of “lay and ordained” as if only the ministers are ordained.
- Our ministers are increasingly being distanced from the people within their care. Not only is the spiritual formation of a people that is at the heart of basic pastoral conversation being neglected, but our ministers are thinking that they can adequately preach the Gospel apart from the people among whom they have been called. The thing that protects the Gospel from becoming reduced to a series of formulations is our life in community – the way that the Spirit opens up the Scriptures into our contexts. The people are the context – knowing the joys and struggles of a people enables the minister to interpret the Word for those people. It is ironic that at the same time that many ministers are taking on the title “pastor” they are operating in a less pastoral manner.
- We have neglected the theological formation of our elders, leading them to think that some of their decisions can be made outside the framework of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.
- We have ministers dominating most if not all of our meetings. It is not all always their fault; many of the elders serving in our church structures seem to be overwhelmed by, or inadequate for, the task. How can we become more dialogical in our processes in order to enable the participation of all of our elders?
- We are also leaning (I believe uncritically) towards a model of the professional CEO-like pastor who sets the vision, who establishes the priorities, and who gathers around him (yes, mostly him!) relatively like-minded people who will endorse his priorities and offer very little critical feedback. There are some large corporate-like churches that may require such a model of pastor, but this should not be seen as the model for the majority of us.

When our ministers take control we are failing to make the most of the creative partnership between elders that is at the heart of the Presbyterian way. I believe that this leaning towards a minister-dominated model undermines one of the essential protections in our structure, namely that no one is dominated. At the heart of our Presbyterian polity is the church as a relational community where power is shared. Our decisions have pastoral implications and these decisions should be made as close to the people we serve as possible.

The partnership of elders and the minister as an “alongside each other” model of leadership is being undermined

Unfortunately one of the inheritances we Presbyterians have had passed onto us is a propensity to be legalistic. Despite Jesus’ clear criticism of the legalism of the Pharisees; we Presbyterians have a great liking for rules and we have a history of being suffocatingly inflexible. While we would want to agree that it is important to try to define what it is we are on about, such as the basics of what we believe and how we can order ourselves, too often we use these as devices for control. I find it increasingly strange that we legislate as a church. I know that we need to have some sort of framework within which to conduct our life together, but in these times where people are encouraged to think for themselves, I wonder about the wisdom of thinking that we can continue to tell people what to think and believe.

What does having Church law mean? While I can be as disturbed as anyone else about some of the things that get said or done in the name of the Presbyterian Church, I don’t feel the need to have the General Assembly or presbytery make a ruling about what people can think and say. The best way to avoid this legalism is to make decisions as close to the people we serve as possible. Instead

of making rulings from “on high”, is it time to explore ways of encouraging quality, theologically informed dialogue among our people, and help them find ways to be effective Presbyterian churches in their communities?

One of what I believe is the worst inheritances in our structure was once our greatest servant. The Westminster form of Government was a defining system of ordering the church among the first Presbyterians. It reflected a deep desire among the reformers for robust decision-making process that enabled participation over decree. It was a process that enabled the voice of the people to be heard in ways not possible in the structures of the Church up until that time. But does it continue to serve us?

I have grown to detest the adversarial way that we Presbyterians conduct our business. The “yes/no”, “for/against” way we handle issues in our life can be incredibly brutal and too easily abused. With our adversarial politics we assume that there can be no “both/and”; we play into the hands of those who are the greatest at elevating and dramatising the issue as the best means of persuasion, while ignoring the wisdom of the quiet and careful and less articulate thinkers; we assume that right and wrong can best be determined by a simple majority; and we allow what we disagree about to be elevated above what we hold in common. We dislike the way that our parliamentary politicians behave towards those who have differing views but we continue to permit the same system within our own structures.

I believe that a complete overhaul of the way we do our business across all of our church structures is well overdue

From time-to-time, different ways of handling things have been adopted. At General Assembly level, we once encouraged relational dialogue groups, but now we hardly make any use of this resource. Our Assembly agreed to move towards a consensus form of decision-making but it has hardly been taken up. At parish level there are still some churches that have very formal Westminster-type formats for meetings, but most churches now operate by consensus and use formal formats only when they have to. Why? Because in our local churches being careful with one another is important to us. We are pastoral communities – we don’t want our differences to turn into unnecessary divisions.

In over 21 years of pastoral ministry, I can think of only a few occasions when there has been an especially tense debate or close vote on an issue. It has not been that there haven’t been issues, but that we have taken care to avoid going to the brink over things because we believe our relationships are more important than our differences. It is also interesting to note that very few of the decisions made from on high in the Church have been burning issues in the lives of these congregations. I believe that a complete overhaul of the way we do our business across all of our church structures is well overdue – included in this overhaul should be a question about what is the appropriate business for our Church to be conducting in each of its different levels.

This brings me all the way back to an earlier point I made with reference to the inverted triangle: that the vital mission of the church is conducted at the place where people meet people with the Gospel – that is, in our congregations, thus:

- when the promised Holy Spirit was given to the church the first “acts of the apostles” were to form worshipping communities for the new believers. The local congregations have always been the centrepiece of the church’s life;
- whatever the structures the church adopts should always be to help enable the missional life of the congregations;
- the primary role of the session/parish council is to serve the missional life of the congregation; the primary role of the presbytery is to help the session/parish councils do what they do; and the primary role of the General Assembly is to help the presbyteries do what they do;

- the presbytery is a gathering of congregations, and the General Assembly is a gathering of presbyteries; maybe it is time to ask the congregations what they want their presbytery to do for them, and for the General Assembly to ask its Presbyteries what they want it to do for them. The structures below the congregations are there to serve them – and things should never be the other way around.

Here are a few obvious (to me) implications:

The agenda of the General Assembly should be determined by the presbyteries; but I have never witnessed an Assembly that is about what the presbyteries want to talk about together to help them in their life. The presbyteries don't even report to the Assembly on their life; why is this?

We have necessarily delegated some functions of the presbyteries to the Assembly office: some aspects of the recruitment and training of ministers, some aspects of overseas mission, some aspects of ecumenical relations, some judicial functions, and some administrative and communication functions, to name a few; there needs to be accountability for this work, and it is important for the presbyteries to send commissioners to participate in that accountability. However, we meet too infrequently to exercise true accountability. I advocate a return to smaller *annual* General Assemblies so that the presbyteries can share their stories and so that the presbyteries can exercise proper oversight of what is carried out nationally in their name.

The place and role of the Council of Assembly in our structure needs to be questioned. Undoubtedly we require a body to oversee the functions of the Assembly Office, but we do we need such a body to give us direction? Isn't the direction of the church best determined by the presbyteries who are in relationship with their congregations? Maybe I am wrong, maybe there is a role for the Council of Assembly, but as what? Surely the only parameters it can function in are as a representation of the presbyteries between Assemblies? It is far from being that at present – firstly, because it is not made up of representatives of most if not all of the presbyteries (it was a decade ago, because it was thought that this was a necessary check and balance), and secondly because it does not report to or relate with the presbyteries: in many instances now, the Council of Assembly and Assembly Office choose to go past the presbyteries and relate directly to the congregations (but only in the form of brief newssheets). The General Assembly and what is carried out in its name is only ever a gathering of presbyteries – it is to the presbyteries that the Council of Assembly should relate – and only to the parishes through the presbyteries. We are not a congregational church!

Isn't the direction of the church best determined by the presbyteries who are in relationship with their congregations?

At its best, the Presbyterian way offers structures that embody a relational approach to being the church: elders together leading a congregation; congregations together being the presbytery as an equal team of elders and ministers; and presbyteries together being the General Assembly also with an equal team of elders and ministers. Although I think that there are some systems and reflexes within those structures that we should consider falling from or radically revising, I cannot think of a better and safer structure for being the Church. Yet in many ways, we have moved away from it – not only are our ministers dominating the Church at its various levels, but we have consistently weakened and bypassed our presbyteries, leaving far too many decisions being made apart from the pastoral context that is the place where the mission of the Gospel is always to be centred.

**Martin is the moderator of Christchurch Presbytery*

Reshaping leadership

Alan Judge, St David's Union, Ashburton*

Church leadership at the beginning of the 21st century is in significant transition and has been for several decades. We are moving away from a type of institutional role, a style of leadership that serves the existing church, preserving its shape and character, to a role that focuses more intentionally on creating a new future among people who have not been well connected to the existing church.

A core ingredient in our identity as Christian leaders is sometimes described as “mission leadership”. As time passes, it seems that the driving force in ministry is towards facilitating mission in our congregations. We are regularly exploring around the fringes of congregational life to discover new initiatives that bring fresh expression to the Good News we exist for. Motivating our people for mission has become a core ingredient of the role of ministers and other key leaders.

When leadership is considered in a presbytery context, again the core issues are about mission – how do we exercise our ministry of oversight in ways that actually help rather than hinder the mission work of our congregations?

The Book of Order points us in the right direction when it describes our presbytery purpose like this:

A presbytery's primary function is to facilitate and resource the life, worship, spiritual nurture and mission of the congregations for which it has responsibility.

Book of Order 8.3

The real challenge for presbyteries is to fulfil our responsibilities to our congregations by assisting them to do these things. The vital priority of the mission of the congregations is at the heart of the life of our presbyteries. The real challenge for presbyteries is to shift our management roles off centre, so that the central position can be taken by our primary function. It is interesting how difficult it is to reorder our priorities to make resourcing congregations the most important thing.

Our leadership challenge fits within the broader discussion of the Church's call to be an outward-focused, mission-engaged and innovative movement. It's a call to be a people who passionately live our faith in ways that connect with our wider communities and the global scene. This is a huge area that needs ongoing, in depth discussion – but for today I'm focusing on issues related to leadership, structures and mission within our context – the Presbyterian and Cooperative Ventures of New Zealand.

Shaping Church structures for a missional Church

One of the key issues with which New Zealand churches are struggling is how to develop structures that assist us to be the mission-focused churches that we are called to be. The reality is that some patterns of leadership, management and governance are more helpful than others. Some processes hinder mission action and some are more helpful.

It is common to think that mission and structures are a distinct area, and that working on the organisation and management of the churches is a distraction from the real work of ministry and mission. But I disagree, because our organisational structures can either serve mission or inhibit mission. In fact, many of our established patterns are more about control of and limiting mission initiatives – but for our churches to thrive in mission, we need to address some of the limiting structures.

1. Decision making – the dangers of waiting for consensus

There are several ways of providing leadership. A common one is sole leadership by an individual who sets the direction for the group; CEO-style pastoral leadership. Quite a few churches operate comfortably with strong sole leadership. The other end of the scale is full consensus, where a group only decides when everyone agrees. Time and energy is focused on resolving divergent views and decisions are delayed until those views are reconciled or eliminated.

Interestingly, the United Kingdom Congregational churches operated by full consensus for 300 years before abandoning it in favour of the majority vote method. The reason for changing was that consensus decision making empowers the status quo over innovation. Since you cannot decide until everyone is convinced, consensus allows those most resistant to change to dominate.

Presbyterian leadership has always been collective in nature, but how a group of leaders reaches a decision can determine the way they are able to embrace being an innovative, mission-focused church. Does your Parish Council or Session wait till everyone is convinced until it moves forward? If so, the most resistant person in the room has been made the most powerful person. The illusion is that consensus gives everyone an equal voice; the reality is that it empowers the negative voice and ensures that the organisation remains heavily weighted towards the status quo.

This impacts on mission, because a core ingredient is experimenting with new things. If the leadership style leans too far towards consensus, the church's capacity to experiment with mission is seriously undermined. Obviously this is also affected by the character and quality of the leaders, not just the process – but the process by which decisions are made is important.

One of the challenges of leadership is to make some tough calls, and sometimes that involves deciding on a new course before everyone has agreed. We would all like everyone to agree, but waiting for that to happen can seriously damage our capacity to be an innovative and mission-focused church.

2. The right people in the room

Recently I listened to a fascinating discussion about church meetings involving United States pastor Bill Hybels. A key point in that discussion was that the right people are involved in the process of discernment and discussion making. It was expressed as “having the right people in the room”. Hybels suggested that one of the key choices is putting the right combination of people together – people who respect each other and have the capacity to explore the big issues. A wrong person in the room can lead to shallow discussion or to being distracted by negative attitudes.

These ideas about having the right people in the room came to mind when I read, in the autobiography of Pakistan President Pervez Musharaff, about how much thought he put into his cabinet selection in 1999 following the military coup. The fact that he brought together the best people (representatives of diverse interests and politics, with some gender balance and good geographic spread) enabled his government to survive some huge challenges. He spent pages and pages describing why he chose those particular people for his cabinet, and how their qualities and the balance among them were so critical to the economic and social recovery of Pakistan.

One of my frustrations in a previous ministry was working with people appointed to parish leadership roles who openly declared they were not leaders. Their presence effectively undercut the capacity of the other parish councillors to provide quality leadership. We were unable to engage in leadership development as key people declared they were not leaders and did not wish to be trained for leadership.

This discussion raises a key question for our selection of leaders for church at local and regional level – how much work do we put into creating the best teams to provide us with high-quality leadership? Maybe our capacity to provide leadership is undermined by the presence of some people who should just not be in the room.

I think the Nominating Committee processes at national level show great insight and those principles of wise selection of leaders should be applied much more widely throughout the Church.

3. Role confusion

My experience with different groups of leaders in the Church is that we often have too many very different roles within one group. For example, at parish council we are attempting to be: decision makers, staff managers, pastoral carers, theologians, advocates for interest groups, ministry leaders, observers, organisers, property managers etc. The range of roles is just too extensive for us to be effective. Our leadership role has become confused by the multiplicity of tasks given to our group.

Contrast this with a situation where a church had a much smaller leadership team, with others allocated to separate groups that had a narrow task focus, but the power to make decisions for themselves. This would generate much more energy and improve the level of focus on the task by those involved in each group. All the groups could have a clearing meeting say twice a year, but do most of their work in much smaller team settings.

Think about the large organisations that are run by reasonably small boards of directors. This works because most of the work is done by others (individuals and teams) who do the work for the directors. The same applies to the operation of the Cabinet. They achieve their leadership goals because their task is clear and their role is limited.

4. Presbytery reform and the mission of the Church

I'm a member of the smallest presbytery in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand – eight parishes. Yet I see myself as an advocate for a much better way of expressing the ministry of oversight for congregations. I am a supporter of significant presbytery reform even though the process of getting there may take some time for Canterbury, West Coast and Nelson/Marlborough.

At the heart of the presbytery reform process is a thorough re-evaluation of the way our regional bodies have functioned. In my part of the country, there has been extensive discussion and a major and detailed proposal developed, but the presbyteries decided not to proceed, and will pick up the reform process again in September next year.

Often it is the parish over the hill or across the city that is more supportive than the parish down the road

Local parish leadership perceive smaller presbyteries to be more understanding and sympathetic to their circumstances. Deep fears have been expressed relating to distant presbytery management committees making decisions without local perspectives and long hours of travel for presbytery business. But the reality is that neighbouring parishes do not often express support for each other. Often it is the parish over the hill or across the city that is more supportive than the parish down the road. Distance can provide the perspective needed to facilitate change. The smaller presbytery may offer the comfort of a family, but seldom assists parishes to embrace the realities of becoming mission-focused congregations.

To assist parishes in the journey towards engaging more fully in their mission to their communities, we need presbyteries that have the resources (in terms of finance, people and spirituality) to offer what congregations need.

Throughout the process of presbytery reform in the northern South Island, people kept telling me that this was a distraction and suggested that reorganising the Church was a distraction from the real mission of the churches. I partly agree and in the short term that has been true; yet my energy for the reform process has come from a desire to see presbytery lift its game and do a better job of resourcing parishes for mission.

The structure of the Church and the mission of the Church are inextricably intertwined. We need a better way of functioning so that our congregations are supported for the mission of God in their communities.

Institutions and movements

Built into the Parish Review Training Manual (produced by the Rev Dr Susan Jones this year) is some helpful comments on understanding congregations. I found particularly helpful the section about "institutions" and "movements" and how they affect each other. In this way of understanding

organisations, institution refers to the way we structure and order our life, while movements push against the institution and advance fresh ways of functioning.

Movements express passion and innovation and often emerge from the margins of the life of congregations. They do things differently and advocate for radical alternatives.

Institution refers to an aspect of our life as churches that seeks order and stability and accountability. So there is a natural tension between these two elements within congregations and presbyteries. It is healthy to have both.

If there is too much institution and not enough movements, our Church dies in an avalanche of control. If there is too much of the movements and not enough of the institution, the cohesion of the organisation vanishes and we splinter. There can often be misunderstandings between people who are advocating a new direction and those trying to preserve the organisational structure.

I wonder if the call to ministry roles includes being a key advocate for a new future in congregations and the wider Church, and to some extent protecting movement people from the hostility of the institution. Are we really doing what we are called to if we stand too close to those whose prime focus is defending the institution?

Mission and structure

Thanks for the opportunity to express some views around enabling mission in our Church and beyond. Let's journey together towards a new future.

Mission is at the heart of who we are called to be; it is our life blood. Without a passion for the mission of God pulsating through our veins as churches, we lose sight of the reason for our existence. Most people enter ministry because of this desire to be part of what God is doing in the world and in the Church, and we stay in ministry for the same reason.

But for the mission of God to really impact our world, we need the structure of the Church to work with mission and not against it. We need the structures of church life to be continually reformed, so that our congregations can thrive in mission to our communities.

**Alan Judge is in joint ministry with his wife Rachel at St David's Community Church in Ashburton. Alan and Rachel are former editors of Candour.*

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Structuring session for mission

Phil King, St Margaret's Bishopdale, Christchurch

Much has been written in recent times about the structure of the Presbyterian Church and how the traditional model of a session and board of managers does not always fit with our needs today. Many of my colleagues are further ahead than me in terms of the issues I will discuss here, but this article reflects some of my own experience working with our structures and engaging in mission, through 20 years in parish ministry.

I can't remember all the details, but I first recognised a problem with our structures early on in my ministry – it went something like this. Not long after my arrival in my first parish, session recognised there was a need for secretarial assistance and agreed to appoint a parish secretary. A week or so later, I was chairing the board of managers meeting, which responded to this decision with a “no,” saying the parish couldn't afford it. I'm quite sure they could have; it was more a case of how they chose to spend their money. It felt wrong at the time but being young and inexperienced, the board's decision ruled. I hasten to add that they were very decent people in that parish and had I been more experienced I am sure we would have worked something out. But it did highlight some issues within the system.

When I moved to Christchurch, I was influenced by various conferences and some books that I read on structures and mission. There was talk about creating a “permission-giving culture,” built around a church's mission, vision and values. Put simply, this suggested that we need to free our members up to use their gifts for mission, making the church's resources available to them, while holding them accountable to its vision and values. I found this line of thought helpful, and as I shared it with our members we made a number of adjustments to help streamline our ministry and develop new mission initiatives.

One of these was to establish a charitable trust, which helps us access community funding that is not available to the church, or at least, not without huge effort and major issues. The trust was developed to provide community outreach, and the small group of trustees has been effective at making quick decisions that enable ministry to occur. One of the keys to this is that all the strategic and financial decisions are made in the same meeting, with everyone owning the vision and having access to the same information. The trust has been established for nine years and continues to provide effective community ministries. We have been careful to ensure that it remains integrally connected with the vision of the church. Session has a representative elder and I have chaired the trust since its inception, and manage the staff. This adds considerably to my workload and is something I would like to hand over, but despite a long-term search I haven't been able to find the right replacement yet.

We adopted a model where a group of five elders meets with me to address our current needs and concerns

For the duration of my ministry at St Margaret's, we have always retained a session and board of managers but have played around with these. Several years ago, we re-structured session to help us adjust to our changing scene. We recognised that pastoral, regional and national matters were leaving us with little time to spend on vision casting and problem solving. So we adopted a model where a smaller group of five elders meets with me to address our current needs and concerns. I set the agenda for these monthly meetings, which we named “strategy team”. Here we are able to think critically and set the direction in terms of our mission, while still leaving final decision-making in the hands of the full session, which meets bi-monthly. Members of the strategy team have enjoyed these meetings because they have been free of some of the frustrations that have been attached to larger meetings, and everyone is more focused on what needs to be done.

We are currently just moving into the second stage of these changes. After thinking this over for a long time, and following a conversation with a colleague whose church has also re-structured, I felt that we needed to tweak things again. So at our recent session retreat, we agreed to take this a step further, by strengthening the strategy team with some extra elders, and giving them full responsibility for session decisions. The strategy team will remain a small, dynamic group, gathering information, addressing issues and having the ability to make decisions efficiently. The current session meetings will now intentionally focus only on pastoral care, adding to their number with extra members who contribute in this area.

Up until now we have always retained the traditional model of every elder having a pastoral district, but this is now changing as well. The elders on strategy team may choose to retain their pastoral district, but some have opted to have a break and concentrate on strategy. This is a model I am encouraging, because we need to add new, younger elders to serve on strategy team, for whom the idea of having a traditional pastoral district will be a stumbling block. We have already begun to develop a pastoral care team who will help contribute pastorally, and we also have a growing number of housegroups who offer effective pastoral care to their members. I know there are bound to be holes in the system but it feels better to me than trying to patch up an outdated model that has been creaking at the seams for some time.

It is a challenge to strike the balance between a permission-giving culture, and uncontrolled expenditure

We have tried hard in recent years to give a clear message that session is here to encourage, facilitate and serve the mission of the church. We deliberately set time aside in our session meetings for both paid and volunteer leaders to come and share how their ministry is going, answer questions, and be prayed for. We thank them for what they are doing and they invariably feel affirmed and encouraged. This has helped to clarify what a leading function of eldership is – “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up”. It has become an important part of what we do as a session, and gives a deeper understanding to the role and responsibility of eldership. By doing this, the body *is* built up and loyalty to one another increases, “as each part does its work.”

Another area we are still working on is the board of managers. We have tried re-organising this with separate finance, property and technology teams but it has not really worked for us. One of the problems with this is leadership. You might have a good leader who can keep a board of managers working well as a single entity, but once you divide it up, not everyone has the skills to drive their particular function and things can tend to drift. Employment of staff has also added complications to church life, and there needs to be clarity about where the responsibility for human resources lies as well. So recently we went back to a fairly standard model with the board of managers, although it meets less regularly and I neither chair it nor attend. This presents some problems in terms of communication, and so I may need to turn up occasionally to help with that, but eventually I think we need to restructure here as well.

Our evolving model still has the potential for a disconnect between the vision that is cast at strategy, and financial decisions being made at board level. After many years talking about a permission-giving culture, we still have the potential for miscommunication and niggles over expenditure and process. Treasurers understandably get fractious when someone presents them with a receipt for unbudgeted expenditure, expecting to be reimbursed. It is a challenge to strike the balance between a permission-giving culture, and uncontrolled expenditure. My preference will be to have a key member of the finance team on strategy team so there is clear understanding about, and ownership of, why and how we are spending our money. Mission needs to drive the financial decision-making, rather than being held captive to it.

Of course, not everyone gets the picture. I have just returned from a pastoral visit with one of our long-standing elders, a former session clerk. We were discussing the re-structuring of our session, and he said to me, "session should be dealing with the pastoral. They keep talking about dollars and cents and it's got nothing to do with them. That's for the board of managers." He believes in a strict application of the division between the temporal and pastoral responsibilities of our respective courts. He freely admits that he's old school, and fortunately he is benign - we have a good relationship. He is 78, has a hankering for communion cards, and sees no reason to step down from active eldership. It is important that we deal respectfully with this generation of elders who have served the church faithfully throughout their lifetime, but we do need to move on.

No matter how good our structures are, if we have a people problem, changing the structure will not solve it

Christchurch Presbytery has also been through a process of restructuring to help facilitate mission. A few years ago, we changed from the routine of monthly business meetings to one where we held a mission meeting every second month. A visioning committee was responsible for arranging input for these meetings, which were open to whoever wanted to come. We had a range of different speakers and programmes, and generally received good feedback. This helped to change the culture and send a clear message that Presbytery existed to serve the church and was working with congregations to support them and help to provide resources for mission. The General Assembly's decision on the reform of Presbyteries meant that we put this on hold, but we have just begun to work our way back towards it. Some of the challenges in this model lie in how we deal with urgent business, and maintaining a high standard of input at each meeting.

Despite all the years of experience I am still learning about what works. I have been around long enough to know that good communication is the key. And I have also been in the game long enough, with a few scars to prove it, to know that no matter how good our structures are, if we have a people problem, changing the structure will not solve it. People are our business and that is where we have to do our best work, communicating well, casting a vision, healing hurts, building bridges, equipping people for service – and sometimes helping them retire gracefully. We help ourselves by creating structures that serve mission as best we can, and helping each other grow into the calling that God has on our lives.



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Passing on the baton

Paul Prestidge, Wellington

First, let me be clear that I'm somewhat sceptical as to whether organisational structural reform is as crucial to success as the MBA textbook industry might have us believe. Church cultures, like those of any organisation, run on a complex mixture of internal myths (explicit or tacit) and external circumstances. Manufacturing change in churches is, I suspect, more of an art than science. Mostly we evolve and adapt in rather unpredictable ways – probably because that's what the world does too.

None of this, of course, stopped me from trying various types of structure reform in the parish I've just left after 13 years of ministry. My "party story" happened only after 10 years of ministry. I wondered for a while whether this meant I was very slow on the uptake but, I suspect, as with cheese making, good things take time. I say "good", but time will tell.

The idea of a total generational shift in the leadership of St James [in New Plymouth] first occurred to me as I was conducting a quinquennial visitation in a rural parish. I found myself speaking with some feeling to the session of this parish about the opportunity, as I saw it, for them to step aside and make room in the church's leadership for a small group of women in their 20s. Because they were a relatively small parish with scant existing leadership resources, the unlikely option of a handful of young women who weren't at all steeped in the church's ways appeared more obvious to me as an outsider. Leadership choices were few, so the apparently risky choice didn't appear so relatively risky to me.

Very soon after my bold advice to this other church, it hit me that precisely the same issue was true of St James. After 10 years of ministry at St James, I was still the youngest person on session. I had instituted an executive session to make the leadership group a more workable size, but even the youngest of the new elders brought onto session up until this point was in her late 40s.

Why did this matter? Because the church I'd come into 10 years earlier was greying. Slowly younger families had joined and we were beginning to look a more demographically balanced congregation (death and rest homes doing their bit to redress the balance as well!). But the generational shift in our congregation was still not assured, and, like most churches I know, ours was very concerned to remain viable and effective into the future. To secure this hope for future, I occurred to me that we needed to give responsibility for leading the church to this younger generation – younger, that is, than me.

There are undoubtedly many good objections to this rather simplistic line of reasoning. But in our circumstances these objections didn't outweigh, in my reflections, the opportunity afforded.

So what I did was prayerfully write a paper to my session, putting forward a quite detailed proposal which I unimaginatively entitled "passing on the baton". I presented the paper to them in October 2007, and then left for five weeks overseas! In brief, the paper asked the session (of 16 elders) to corporately step aside in favour of a new session comprising about seven or eight 30-somethings. Existing session members could then chose to retire or become part of a new pastoral eldership, which would continue its pastoral visitation responsibilities – something St James had never relieved session members of. The new session wouldn't be required to undertake pastoral visitation and they would be appointed for a maximum term of three years, rotating off for at least one year and being replaced by other elders (perhaps older elders again) elected by the full eldership. In the first instance, however, the proposal was clear: give leadership of the church entirely over to a new and younger eldership, unencumbered by any existing session members, except the two full-time pastors.

Coming back from overseas I was delighted, and surprised, to find the session quite open to this proposal. A few had their doubts – wanting some older heads to remain on any new session, but other influential session members were insistent that giving this new (as yet unpopulated) session unencumbered room to make decisions was important.

Very consciously, to protect the integrity of the process, I had informed session from the start that I had not talked to any prospective younger session members about any of this. I told the session that this was certainly their decision and it wouldn't work if some felt pushed and those feelings became a source of anxiety in the congregation more generally. Because, at some point, even if session agreed to pass the baton on, the congregation would need to give their consent. Such

consent would be unlikely if some felt their friends on session were being treated poorly. Session needed to speak with one voice on this matter, or not at all.

In the New Year, session were on board. They were pressing me to speed up the timetable, being concerned to begin speaking to some potential new session members. Would these young ones be at all interested in becoming Presbyterian elders? They were so busy anyway. Some of them were busy having babies, for goodness sake! Right from the start I'd anticipated that this would probably be session's greatest concern. They were now anxious to see if any young ones were really interested. Remember, I'd not talked to anybody outside session about this yet.

The green light was given and now I needed to talk to prospective new session members. I covered off with session the sorts of people I thought we should approach, and then went and asked. A few said "yes" quite quickly – which surprised me. One, whom I was most keen to get on board, waited until the very last minute. It was the last day I'd given him to reply and he called me on his cell phone about to board a plane for overseas. Dolefully he confessed to being a very reluctant convert to the idea of becoming a Presbyterian elder! Institutionally shy postmoderns generally don't see much mana associated with church eldership!

It took several months for enough young ones to agree. Along the way, to my complete surprise, the longest-attending young person I asked reacted by quitting the church altogether. Of the others, all but three were not even formal members of St James. One, with a Salvation Army background, needed to be baptised.

Institutionally shy postmoderns generally don't see much mana associated with church eldership

After baptism and membership had been attended to, the next step was ordination into eldership.

Now was the time to have a congregational meeting and explain the whole plan. We could have hardly asked them to ordain these Johnny-come-latelies without being entirely open at this point.

Everyone felt a little awkward about this. The prospective new elders most of all, who were well aware of breaching normal institutional propriety. All I can say was that we were confident in the Christian maturity of the people we'd asked and so hoped that the congregation (who, of course, knew them all) would overlook any sense of unseemliness about the process.

They did put aside any misgivings and at a subsequent worship service all 16 session members stood up and passed the baton onto a new, much younger session. A formal generational shift in the leadership of St James was thus accomplished.

How's it all working out? Well, to begin with I'm not there any longer. I'd been aware from the start that I might end up moving on as part of giving the new leadership "space" in which to work. I've done so with mixed feelings as there are some wonderful things going on in St James, and I loved being part of a church increasingly full of energy and willing to take on new challenges. And perhaps I could have stayed on and worked through my role with the new leadership group – although that was certainly looming as a major challenge. My colleague, who has pastored with me for 10 years, is left with that challenge in the meantime.

St James has made a decisive generational shift. It's part of a foundation God has lain, so I believe, for making that congregation "fit for purpose" into the future. Of course its life is always contingent and much can go wrong in a very short period of time. But the faith-risk was taken and at least St James won't die wondering. In fact, many are finding life through this community of disciples.

The 'misseo dei' and life in the valley

Richard Dawson, Leith Valley Presbyterian, Dunedin*

In 1911, Oswald Chambers left a successful Bible College that he had founded in Clapham, London, to serve the war effort as a YMCA chaplain in Zeitoun, Egypt, where he ended up ministering to mainly Australian and New Zealand troops. Chambers died in Egypt in 1917 at the age of 43 of a ruptured appendix, which went septic because he refused to use a hospital bed that was needed for the wounded from the war. But his teaching went on in the form of many published books, compiled largely by his wife after his death from the writings he left behind. Among these is the hugely successful book of devotional readings *My Utmost for His Highest*, in which is outlined his highly practical approach to Christianity. Chambers was a great believer in the "step of faith"; the idea that human initiative was involved, indeed required, in the day-to-day working out of our relationship with God. Chambers writes, "When it comes to taking the initiative against drudgery, we have to take the first step as though there were no God. There is no point in waiting for God to help us — he will not. But once we arise, immediately we find he is there."

This, for me, represents a fascinating mix of both pragmatism and mysticism, of the immanent and the transcendent. Chambers is sure there is an immanent God and that knowing and experiencing this immanence is vital to the Christian walk today. But he is also sure that such immanence waits for human initiative – for the cry of the human heart and the willing turning towards God. This bears stark contrast to some approaches today to church growth and to church health, which tend to look upon a variety of things as "magic fixes" for declining numbers at worship and for worsening statistics across the board in relation to denominational health. It also bears a contrast with those who would look simply to hang on and not be concerned at all about our inability to reach the emerging generations with any great effectiveness. In contrast to magic, what I've found in 20 years of ministry is that most good innovations require about 10 percent innovation and 90 percent work.

I believe that many congregations are so far from being communities that they actually have become anti-community

And this is not to belittle good, hard research in things like generational preference, systems theory, people management and sound systems. All these are good in and of themselves and can add considerably to the efficiency of a congregation's mission. But none of them replace good, faithful, consistent and careful work. And especially nothing replaces the sharing of that work within and throughout a congregation. I have a theory that places at least some of the blame for the ease with which congregations have slipped into decline squarely at the foot of how we've trained the ordained clergy. How many good women and men of faith have led congregations to become communities that cannot show any initiative or even ownership of the vision of the church because they've led in a way that says to most, "this is all about me!" A bit harsh, you say? Perhaps, but when services have largely been planned led and preached by one person for decades, what is a good pew sitter supposed to think? And this is to say nothing of whether anyone has any idea of what we're about as a community of faith – of what we're aiming for and hoping for.

Which brings me to the second theme of this little number – community. We've tended not to exegete well this word as it pertains to congregations. We perhaps understand the word "congregation" better because it refers mostly to the gathering of a group of people not connected by anything

much else but the fact that they gather in one place for a shortish period of time on a Sunday morning or night to worship God. But congregations are, for many people, and particularly for those dipping their toes into the church for a first feel, important places of community. They are places where people look to belong and to be valued and to find friendship and shelter and all the things a good community should foster. I believe, however, that many congregations haven't been taught how to be communities. I believe that they are so far from being communities that they actually have become anti-community. In other words they tend to recoil from doing things together and they view those they meet in that brief hour or two on a Sunday as people they'd rather not be in community with. And so there is a barely concealed sigh of relief when they head out the door of the church building each Sunday.

We live in a pretty harsh world where weaker, different and unsupported people so often are left to themselves

So inured are we to our lounges and TV sets, to our private existence and our ability to "do what we like" that community becomes an unwelcome interruption to life as we know it; church even more so because it so often represents the antithesis to the sort of community that we might choose to spend more time with. Different ages, interests, socio-economic levels, academic achievements all combine to reinforce these impressions. This is to say nothing of the special kind of vicious politics that can be found in churches that works to make some churches not just anti-community but black holes of basic human society. I once had a "welcomer" at the door of a parish greet a new Christian who had not been to church for a couple of months with the words, "Oh, so you decided to come back, did you. Where have you been for the last six weeks?" Church communities are, in fact, generally lacking in resilience and flexibility. They struggle to deal with anyone out of the ordinary – with anyone who expresses emotion or who is "different" in any way. They guard the boundaries of their community with great energy and are usually highly critical of anyone who crosses those boundaries unbidden. This acts simply to make most congregations unsafe for newcomers.

This is where I believe we need to work as a church. We live in a pretty harsh world where weaker, different and unsupported people so often are left to themselves; left to fall by the wayside. The one thing that would make a huge difference to most churches both internally and in regard to these people is if we upped our game in regard to how we do community. Fostering real relationship from the eldership down would begin to change this and make churches places of kind and welcoming community in which newcomers might feel less alone in the world. By "real relationship," I mean the development of the ability to share our hearts with each other, to share our hurts and our highs, to confess our weaknesses and needs with each other and to generally love each other. This is the work of the Gospel.

In a remarkable exposition of what it meant to lay down one's life for Christ, Chambers writes this. I think it particularly applies today to our Church.

We are not made for the bright-shining moments of life, but we have to walk in the light of them in our everyday ways. There was only one bright-shining moment in the life of Jesus, and that was on the Mount of Transfiguration. It was there that he emptied himself of his glory for the second time, and then came down into the demon-possessed valley (see Mark 9:1–29). For 33 years Jesus laid down his life to do the will of his Father. "By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16). Yet it is contrary to our human nature to do so.

**Richard is the moderator of Southern Presbytery*

There is indeed ambiguity in the page! A response to John Howell

Rev Dr Murray Rae, Dunedin

In the May issue of *Candour*, John Howell, in his article, “There is ambiguity in the page”, offers a response to my article in the October 2009 edition about the biblical hermeneutics of John Calvin. John has a number of criticisms to make of an understanding of Scripture that he attributes collectively to Calvin, to me, to Karl Barth and to Richard Hays. Although I am honoured by the association, I was careful in my article to point out that there are aspects of Calvin’s hermeneutics that “few Biblical scholars are likely to repeat today”. I proceed to point out some “astonishing claims” by Calvin that we will not be inclined to share, and conclude my article by saying, “We may not find in modern commentaries, nor be inclined to offer ourselves, a repetition of Calvin’s exegetical formulations... We may need to say something very different from Calvin in our own hermeneutical work, but there are, nevertheless, things we may learn through engagement with him”. That is a rather different position, I suggest, than the one John accuses me of, namely, the straightforward and unqualified “advocacy” of Calvin’s views.

Significant differences notwithstanding, there *is* common ground between Calvin, Barth, Hays and me. In particular, we share the view that Scripture is authoritative, that it is inspired by God, and that we have need of the Spirit’s guidance in order to read and understand it aright. More broadly, I share with these others the conviction that God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ, that is, revelation, is both the starting point and the final criterion of truth for all Christian theology, and thus for the Christian reading of Scripture. I am prepared to defend these propositions, although the particular way in which I defend them will not be the same in every particular as the defenses variously offered by Calvin, Barth and Hays. There is a roominess in this orthodoxy for differing accounts.

The fundamental premise of Barth’s whole theology is that God *does* have a home in the world, specifically in Jesus Christ

What are John’s criticisms of this set of theological claims? He begins by quoting approvingly Ruth Page’s complaints about Barth. Page is unhappy; first, with Barth’s insistence that “nothing but the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Scriptures gives God’s partnership with [hu]mankind”, and second, with neo-orthodoxy’s negative conception of the world. “The only function of the world in their [neo-orthodox] theologies was the negative one of demonstrating sin and the impossibility of finding God outside his own revelation”, Page writes. She is eager to find space for the disclosure of God in the world at large. She further contends that “the neo-orthodox God has no home in the world at all”. These are surprising allegations to have launched against Barth and neo-orthodoxy. The fundamental premise of Barth’s whole theology is that God *does* have a home in the world, specifically in Jesus Christ. The Word has indeed become flesh; the Word of God can be found among us under the very worldly conditions of created existence.

I would go further, in my neo-orthodox way, to suggest that the incarnation establishes very clearly that the things of the earth, flesh and blood, bread and wine, are crafted by the Spirit into the instruments of God’s self-communication. This is not a world-denying theology but an affirmation of the goodness of creation and of the world’s suitability for the working out of God’s purposes.

Barth says as much when he declares that “it is a slander on creation to charge it with a share in chaos because it includes a Yes and a No...” Barth celebrated again and again creation’s “harmonious praise of God”.¹ It is a misrepresentation of Barth to suggest that he had no ear for creation’s voice of praise. The determined Christocentrism of Barth’s theology does not entail that nothing in the world may speak of God, only that Christ is the first and the last Word by which all other words are to be judged.

The gathering of God’s people for worship is evidence of a unity in faith that is upheld in and through our diversity

John’s second complaint refers more specifically to Calvin’s proposal that our reading of Scripture should be guided by the Spirit and may be tested both privately and publicly. He quotes me thus: “The public test is against the common consent and polity of the Church. God will make us of one mind, and unites us together in the unity of faith.” John objects strongly to this proposal and observes that the process of coming to one mind is fraught with difficulty. “Which Biblical commentator should I consult?, which theologian should I read?”, he asks. It is abundantly clear that the Church accommodates a wide diversity of interpretations and seldom comes to “one mind”.

There is a difficulty here to be sure. But the principal difficulty is John’s omission of my explanation and qualification of the point. Let me quote myself:

‘It is a marvellous work of God’, Calvin says, ‘that, overcoming all our perversity, he makes us of one mind, and unites us together in the pure unity of faith.’ This claim too might evoke some incredulity. Are those in the Church of one mind, and held together in the pure unity of faith? Our answer may depend on whether or not we think that the Gospel has been preserved in the Church. Does there exist across the vast diversity of Christian communities a Gospel, testified to in Word and Sacrament, that obliges us to recognise one another as a sister in Christ, a brother in Christ, whatever shape our individual perversities may take? Are we agreed, in spite of all else, that in Jesus Christ, God is reconciling the world to Godself? Wherever that Gospel is preached and heard and received, there is a unity of faith, sustained by the miracle of God’s grace, sustained in spite of all the Church’s disagreements and disputes. Calvin was very far from being naïve about the fragmentation and disunity of the church, but he could trust nevertheless that despite the perversity of individual Christians, God sees to it that the Gospel is not lost; the Gospel is preserved and the Church survives wherever the Word is truly preached and heard and the sacraments are rightly administered. Wherever that takes place, the sinful remnant of God’s people are gathered together in the pure unity of faith.

This is not a position, as John suggests, that suppresses diversity and overrides a legitimate hermeneutical plurality in our reading of Scripture.² It is an affirmation, rather, that in virtue of the providential care of God, the Gospel has been preserved in the Church, and so also a unity. This divine preservation of the Gospel enables us joyfully to set aside our differences with those who gather Sunday by Sunday for worship, and to affirm with them the glad news of God’s call to us, of God’s intercession for us, of God’s forgiveness of us, and of God’s commissioning of us to be disciples of Jesus. The “one mind” represented here does not at all mean that we must agree on every particular of Biblical interpretation. But the gathering of God’s people for worship is evidence of a unity in faith that is upheld in and through our diversity.

John’s third objection is a moral one, and concerns Calvin’s christocentric reading of the Old Testament. John writes:

It is one thing to say:

¹ These two instances of celebration are taken from Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960) 299 and 298.

² If anyone is interested, I have defended hermeneutical pluralism at some length in my article, ‘Texts and Context: Scripture and the Divine Economy’ in *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1.1 (2007) 23-45.

Read Deutero Isaiah in the light of the Gospels in which Jesus Christ is known, and you will see that the figure of the servant can be understood in the light of Christ,

and another and different proposition

That the writer of Deutero Isaiah really intended the person of Christ in the figure of the servant.

The more concerning issue is that (2) gives no weight to the writings of Deutero Isaiah in their own right as an authentic revelation from God at that time.

John goes on to warn against the dangers of anti-semitism that attend such a reading of Isaiah. I agree. The unqualified identification of the servant with Jesus Christ is one of Calvin's hermeneutical moves that I do not wish to endorse. It should be noted, however, as I did in my original article, that Calvin takes pains to uphold the authority of Israel's Scripture and, apropos the danger of anti-semitism, the faithfulness of Israel's testimony. The Jews are, with us, he says, "partakers in the promises of Christ". Calvin's careful qualifications notwithstanding, he does, in my view, veer too close to the claim that Deutero-Isaiah himself meant to speak of Jesus, the one whom Christians confess to be the Christ. I took some care to show in my discussion of this matter that our reluctance to accept Calvin's interpretation should not be allowed to obscure something that Calvin had right, namely his affirmation that the Word of God sounded in the Scriptures of the Old Testament is the very same Word who is also testified to in the New Testament. The point is simply the anti-Marcionite point that we have to do with the same God throughout the Scriptures of the Old Testament and the New. Calvin's orthodoxy in this matter is to be respected, even though we are likely to choose to defend the point in ways rather different from those adopted by Calvin himself.

Our reluctance to accept Calvin's interpretation should not be allowed to obscure something that Calvin had right

In the concluding two paragraphs of his article, John arrives at the theme signalled in his title. He wants there to be some allowance—more than he perceives in Calvin or me—for ambiguity; for the possibility that the text of Scripture may support more than one meaning. Again, I agree. One of the implications deriving from the confession that we understand the text only as the Spirit guides us is that the meaning of Scripture, like the Spirit, cannot be pinned down once and for all. We must attend again and again to what the Spirit is saying to the Church, in grateful acknowledgment that the God of the Bible is the living God who has new things to say in fulfilment of the divine purpose. That is the point of returning again and again to the text of Scripture rather than supposing that its authority has now been replaced by the creeds. John wants us to recognise that the creeds are secondary. That is true, but their secondariness does not render them untrue or somehow invalid. The creeds bear witness to the constancy of God who is the same yesterday, today and forever, and who can therefore be relied upon, but they do not at all preclude our attending anew every morning to the breath of the Spirit who enlivens the word and has more yet to disclose of the depths and the riches of God.

I wonder, therefore, whether John is reading into Calvin's and also into my defense of the authority of Scripture an ossified dogmatism that has no place for the richness, the mystery, and the dynamism of God's address to us in Scripture. If that is his charge, I must ask him to be more explicit about where he finds me guilty.

The urban divide

Martin Baker

I have great memories of the years I spent living on a north Waikato dairy farm. A succession of Friesian calves, with names like Emma Peel and Lady Penelope reflecting the world broadcast in a vivid greyscale from our unreliable 18-inch television. One memory is of Fergus, a massive creature, who in mating season leapt the fence of the bull paddock beside our house to express his very amorous intentions towards my father's company car – a curvaceous Volkswagen. Neither were the same again. A few days later Fergus took some kind of dislike to local farmer Bruce, effortlessly pushing him through a five-wire fence. Bruce survived, but alas, Fergus did not – ending his days as ground meat exported to satiate the American hamburger market.

The local church was located on a main road opposite the freezing works. Its members were Maori and Pakeha from a spectrum of denominational histories. We were not frequent attendees, but I have vivid memories of often quite eccentric people, who must have been travelling evangelists, showing up on Sundays. They would regale us with wonderfully vivid stories of heaven and hell and the qualities associated with their respective accessibilities. People appreciated the effort, enjoyed the company and looked forward to the tea and baking afterwards.

Despite the years of holiday jobs of hay bailing and milking that followed even after I moved to town, I recall these memories as an urban dweller. I think about these experiences in relation to a number of conversations I have had over the past few months in which people talked about the difference in rural and urban church life. As someone said to me last week, "city people like you with your plans to support growth in places like Auckland just do not understand or appreciate what it's like in the country".

I think those comments and the concerns behind them are very real. I also think they express a key challenge we face as a national denomination. While travelling around, I do find a significant commonality in the worship content of our congregations, but the context, medium and situation of that worship is becoming more and more diverse. If we are, (and I am) committed to supporting a national Church, what is the nature of our cohesiveness? What will hold us together in a situation of burgeoning diversity of size, cultural context and experience?

It is true that an increasing number of people in our Church are quite distant from rural life, let alone engagement with a rural worshipping community. But what is it like being a Korean Presbyterian, who has lived in the country just a couple of years and joining with 800 others in Sunday worship within one of our largest congregations? Or a third-generation Samoan living in Otara and joining in a Sunday service in a church that your grandparents help to found?

There is richness in sharing the stories that we all have to tell. Even stories that include a peculiar fondness for the Avengers (Emma) and the Thunderbirds (Penelope – a puppet actually). While we all have different backgrounds, there is always a risk that we will somehow privilege one history over another. We need to address the questions of justice that are reflected in our bicultural journey, but we are still inclined to see our own situation as one deserving special acknowledgement and protection.

To affirm our Christian hope in the spending priorities we choose as a national Church is fraught with difficulties. A culturally sophisticated, mission focused and theologically literate leadership is high on my own list. I also think that by placing a priority on our commitment to support children and young people we affirm a hope not just for a future, but that their particular situation allows for an overcoming of the damaging parochialism that seems to beset our Church and its congregations.

One of the most rewarding experiences of my own ministry was early on and involved leading the worship in a congregation of a dozen people in a community hall adjacent to a state-housing area. It was an extraordinarily eclectic group comprised of recent immigrants, people who were dealing with various psychiatric disorders as well as one or two faithful, middle-class Presbyterians whose offerings kept the whole thing going. I heard some years ago that the church sold the building for some reason, and that community drifted away. What is important for the Gospel proclamation and us? Is it possible that some little community worshipping in some church somewhere would have been willing to hold their services at the RSA and release the money they had in their church to keep that community service and ministry going? For the sake of our Church's integrity and the Gospel, I hope we still have ways of finding the unity that allows those decisions to be made.