

# CANDOUR

News and Views for Ministers

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## Theology and doctrine

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## Noticeboard

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# GA06

# Grappling with theology

Amanda Wells

Starting (but not finishing) a Carey College “introduction to theology” paper means I feel particularly unqualified to write this editorial. I vaguely remember that other people, when I mentioned this paper, would respond with something like “how interesting to learn about the history of world religions”. Theology as a Christian construct appears to have fallen below the radar.

Put “theology” into Google and the first result is a sponsored link with the tagline “theology is meaningless to the truly born-again Christians”. Odd grammar aside, this line of thought is hardly encouraging. But it shouldn’t just be dismissed out of hand. For some people, reacting against denominational strictures has meant a rejection of their intellectual underpinnings. A perceived dualism exists between old-school, wordy preaching and a kind of historical ignorance founded on literal Biblical interpretation. Before I create widespread offence with that statement, let me say that I’m not a fan of binary oppositions. We all know refugees from charismatic, feeling-focused churches, in the same way that people firmly embedded in Christianity’s intellectual tradition often start to search for emotional engagement.

What’s this got to do with theology? Perhaps it’s time to reclaim theology as relevant. To take its concepts out of academic discourse and into the language of today. And, of course, this is slowly happening, even in New Zealand. It just hasn’t reached a critical mass yet.

I’ve read some of the research that’s been done in the past about what *Candour* readers want. You want theology, it says. More specifically, scholarly thinking with a Biblical foundation, or at least that’s the inference I draw. We have some of that in this issue. If you’re interested in writing more, I’m very interested in hearing from you. But I’m also interested that some of the strongest feedback we receive on *Candour* is not about its academic side but about your stories of practice, success and failure out in the community. Perhaps theology is like broccoli; nutritious, disease-preventing and great in small doses.

In this issue, Martin Macauley offers a thoughtful examination of what it means to shift our theological tool into the postmodern era. Mark Chapman looks at our Calvinist heritage and the impact it can have on mission. As he observes, “our theology will profoundly affect the face we turn to the community” - like it or not. Kevin Ward

considers the flip side of his research on the contemporary context; that the churches that thrive are those with a commitment to orthodoxy. Other theological dimensions are explored by Andrew Dunn and Russell Thew, while Selwyn Yeoman looks at the theological implications of mission. This issue concludes with an extract from Chris Bedford’s research on rural ministry tenure; not strictly theology, perhaps, but an attempt to get at the drivers behind some disturbing trends.

Our September issue has the theme “The missing generation: 25-45”. Contributions are welcome.

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# Theology in a postmodern context

Martin Macauley, St Paul's, Katikati

*The World has changed  
I feel it in the water  
I feel it in the earth  
I smell it in the air*

So begins Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. In the Church, we are realising that the world has changed around us. In fact, in reading the proliferation of books on postmodernism, one could be forgiven for thinking that everything is different. What has changed and what remains the same? "Post" modernism does not mean "anti" modernism. Some things are the same. But it is a time of transition, like puberty where it is the same person who is changing and developing. What does the transition to postmodernism (or whatever is to come) mean for our theology and doctrine?

Some things still remain the same. I believe God is still the God of the Exodus who rescued God's people from slavery in Egypt and, despite their rebellion, eventually brought them into the Promised Land. Jesus is still the one who touched and healed the leper; who told the waves and the wind "Quiet! Be Still!" and they were; and of whom Thomas confessed on meeting the risen Jesus, "My Lord and my God". The Holy Spirit is still the one who enabled humble fishermen to stand up at nine in the morning and tell people about Jesus. Yet despite these continuities, I believe a number of transition points can be identified.

## Transition Point One: From Propositions to Stories

In a postmodern setting, our doctrine of God is proclaimed from the Biblical stories, rather than from the propositions of a systematic theology or the statements of a confession. I'm sure good preachers have always done this. It is more faithful to the nature of the Bible. As much as modernist minds might want it to be, the Bible is not a textbook of belief. Nor is it (as many enthusiastic preachers have claimed) the owner's or operating manual for human beings. God has chosen to reveal God's nature to us as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Newbigin points out:

*[Jesus] did not write a book which would have served forever as the unquestionable and irrefutable statement of the truth about God. He formed a community of friends and shared his life with them. He left it to them to be his witnesses, and - as we know - their witness has come to us in varied forms; we know about*

*very few of the words and deeds of Jesus with the kind of certainty Descartes identified with reliable knowledge. To wish it were otherwise is to depart from the manner in which God has chosen to make himself known.<sup>1</sup>*

So, while I'm not against stating propositions, let's celebrate the Biblical stories as a starting point and a check on the propositional claims we make.

## Transition Point Two: From Theology (and knowledge) as 'Building' to 'Web'

The task of the modern era from Descartes on was to construct a system of knowledge that was like a building, built on solid foundations, block by block. This was true for what became the evangelical/fundamentalist tradition through the philosopher Thomas Reid and the Princeton scholars Charles Hodge and BB Warfield, where the foundation was inerrant scripture. It was also true for the liberal tradition that developed through Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Friedrich Schleiermacher, this time with religious experience as the foundation. The postmodern challenge is this: what if knowledge is not foundational, but more like a network or a spider's web, where each doctrinal claim must be supported by a cluster of arguments? Nancey Murphy, building on the thought of Alisdair McIntyre, gives examples, such as the way Christology is linked with doctrine of the atonement; the doctrine of the Spirit linked with the doctrine of the church as the church's source of efficacy or identity. "These examples suggest that while theology may be systematic in the sense of being interconnected, it is not systematic in the sense that we can make the connections by means of a single linear argument."<sup>2</sup>

So, when we admit that our theological foundations are not as self-supporting as the modern era might have us believe, we are more willing to be in conversation with others who differ from us. Such conversations develop our understanding of different parts of the theological "web". Brian McLaren's book *Generous Orthodoxy* has received its share of criticism, but its strength is that it looks beyond a confrontational clash of theological buildings (an "us/them" approach) to a conversational mutual informing of a theological web (a "we" approach).<sup>3</sup>

Let me give two specific examples of theological transitions.

### Transition Point Three: From Atonement Theories to the Kingdom of God

The Gospel is more than the “four spiritual laws”. As important as the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement is, and as central as the cross is to Christianity, becoming a Christian is more than just having our sins forgiven. I think the New Zealand church is doing a little better than our North American counterparts in recognising this. I remember reading Gordon Miller’s World Vision Christian Leadership Letter with his helpful illustration of various gates through which people enter the kingdom of God. This reminded us to appreciate a range of theories of the atonement. And, of course, for years now people have been reminding us of the holistic kingdom of God perspective on God’s work in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

This has implications for our evangelism, and our worship. In addition to talking about sins being forgiven, let’s not forget: deliverance from evil, social justice and caring for the poor, caring for creation, new meaning and purpose, adoption into God’s family...the whole Gospel of the kingdom of God. Rob Harley’s Journeys course, for example, considers a range of aspects of kingdom living, not just forgiveness of sins. In addition, it does so through stories, and not just propositions. Brian McLaren offers the image of evangelism as “dance”, where the Christian moves and interacts along with their inquiring friend. This contrasts with the modern approach, which is more like a conquest than a dance. Think of the words we use to describe our evangelism: “a crusade”, “winning people for Christ”, “taking our city”...<sup>5</sup>

### Transition Point Four: Ecclesiology – From Attractional to Incarnational

We have inherited an understanding of church as the gathered people of God. There are many practical advantages of this – not least that the gathered people can hear a sermon, listen to the notices, and give in the offering. But many writers are highlighting the need for Christians to be a sent people who carry out incarnational mission in their postmodern communities. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch give an example of reaching out to a local model car club that meets on a Sunday morning nearby. A traditional attractional church might hold special services for model-car enthusiasts, perhaps with a recently converted model car racer giving her testimony, and excellent flyers promoting the service and the fact that Jesus loves model car enthusiasts. But would the enthusiasts abandon their car club to go to church on Sunday? In the incarnational church, however, a few of their members who were moved with compassion for the people in the model car club would get their own model cars out of the attic (or buy one if they didn’t have one) and go along to enter

the model car community and earn the relational right to speak about their love for Jesus. This kind of church would not scold those members for missing church on Sunday, but commission them as missionaries to the car club.<sup>6</sup>

How do I feel when I think of these and other transitions to postmodernism? Sometimes I feel scared because we are navigating off the map. I also feel excited because I think we are getting glimpses of what church (and theology and doctrine) could be like as we follow Christ in an increasingly postmodern century. I need some excitement here to counter the growing disquiet that the tools of the modern era are not effective at helping postmodern people meet and follow Jesus. And I feel reassured, that our God is the one who travels with us into this uncharted territory, and that God knows the end from the beginning.

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 89.
- <sup>2</sup> Nancey Murphy, *Reasoning & Rhetoric in Religion* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 199. See also Murphy’s book *Beyond Liberalism & Fundamentalism* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1996) and Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001)
- <sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (El Cajon CA: Emergent/YS, 2004)
- <sup>4</sup> I remember lectures and conversations in my Bible College of NZ days with Chris Marshall and Brian Hathaway. See Marshall *Kingdom Come* (Auckland: Bible College of NZ, 1990); Brian Hathaway *Beyond Renewal: The Kingdom of God* (Milton Keynes: Word, 1990).
- <sup>5</sup> Brian McLaren *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002)
- <sup>6</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003)



# 'Our father who art in Geneva'

Mark Chapman, Clevedon Presbyterian, Papakura

I've often wondered if much of our difficulty with local mission is due to in some major part to our Calvinist heritage. This heritage we at least pay homage to in the Westminster Confession of Faith at our ordination. A more Calvinistic doctrine it would be hard to find.

Apart from the basic five principles of Calvinism:

- Total Depravity — human sin has affected every aspect of the human character
- Unconditional Election — God chooses some to be saved and some to be damned
- Limited Atonement — Christ died for the sins of some (those predestined to heaven), but not for others (those predestined to hell).
- Irresistible Grace — when God has bestowed his grace upon a person because they have been predestined for heaven, it is impossible for a person to "resist" this grace and not end up in heaven
- Perseverance of the saints — the saints (that is, those whom God has saved) will always remain under God's protection until they are brought to heaven.

Calvin taught that the function of the Church was to ensure that the Word was preached and the sacraments administered. The above theology and practice is the model for a lot of what we do and believe.

In Calvin's Geneva, there weren't vast numbers of unchurched people. Every one would have been baptised and had their name on a parish role. Either Catholic or Reformed. Or they were Jewish. That means Calvin was not faced with the question of reaching the unchurched. His main concern was the gathering and perfecting of the saints.

With this model there is no need for mission into the community. The elect will end up on your doorstep regardless. Those elected for damnation won't! If they do, they may be better for it, but it won't do them any eternal good.

Is it any wonder then that the Presbyterian Church in which I was a teenager in the 60s had only programmes for church members and their families. There was the cradle roll for baptised children of believers; Sunday School and Bible Class for children of believers; Sunday worship and a mid-week Bible Study all aimed at the gathering and perfecting of the saints. I sensed more

than a hint of Calvinism in a comment made to me when I first came into ordained ministry in 1976: "they (the unchurched), know we are here and what we do, they will come if they feel called to come". This was said to me as I pondered how our congregation of 20-30, most of whom were hereditary members, could grow. That's pure unadulterated Calvinism, although I suspect from a subliminal Calvinist. I had a Baptist friend – a minister who was more than subliminal. His church had a programme where they worked through the phone book looking for people who were interested in attending their church. The elect would respond!

Now, if we are subliminal Calvinists, it may be time for a check-up from the neck-up. And it begins here: what is your theology? What do you believe about God's salvation in Jesus Christ?

If not a Calvinist, then maybe an Arminian as was John Wesley: "those who believe will be saved", believing being an act of the will. As a confirmed Barthian, I reject both in favour of God's freedom to be God and to be gracious to whom He will. For me, it's the understanding of this freedom that makes it such a joy to be a minister of the Gospel and makes the Gospel into truly good news!

If you are a true Calvinist, just do what you are doing and the elect will come.

If, however, you don't believe in an elect who are going to come to your church and stay regardless of what you do, then you require a paradigm shift from parish to mission station. From inward looking to outward looking.

If you see yourself as a mission station, you may then consider the possibility that you have a market. Let's say that your market is the unchurched population in a given area. It may be 1000 or 10,000 people. Your product, what you are offering to this market, is the God we know in Jesus Christ! That's not blasphemy. Think for a while. It's been said that when a person comes to your church they decide within five minutes whether they will come back. That's before the message or most of the music or anything else. If that is true, then they will come back if they "buy" what is there. Assuming it is God's Spirit at work bringing them there in the first place, if they don't buy you, hopefully they will buy another congregation.

People church-hop for a variety of reasons, one of which is they have never been sold on your congregation. You have to ask why.

Clevedon Presbyterian “sells”. Five days a week, we sell ourselves through programmes that meet the needs of families in the community. They come to our church lounge and they are met with kind, loving, Spirit-filled Christians who care about them, no strings attached, whose Gospel is what they do and how they present themselves. Those who come have to buy those who run the programmes. Then they buy the programme. Then they may buy in on a deeper level and listen when they invite one of these caring, Christ-centred people who has won their trust to speak into some deeper need.

We sell ourselves when the community has a death or a wedding and we don’t charge for use of the church.

On any given Sunday when a person drives into our church grounds, a car park attendant is selling the Gospel to them with a smile and a welcome and practical help. I stand at the door and personally greet everyone who enters – children, teenagers and adults with a high five, a hug, a handshake. I am selling. The ushers are selling good news through interest and attention. As a team we are attempting to remove the stumbling blocks of indifference, coldness, shyness, fear, aloofness etc that often greets the first-time visitor to a Sunday morning service.

What we believe — our theology — will profoundly affect the face we turn to the community. If we really believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news and not moderately good news with a back hander if we don’t believe (God loves you brother but mess with Him and you go straight to hell. Don’t pass go and don’t collect \$200!); if it is really good news, then we will go into the community with outrageous joy and overcoming love. We will be free to be a servant people. We will take seriously their pain, and their joy. We will weep with them and laugh with them. We will forget self and all our need for political dominance in our Church courts. Who’s doing it to whom and how and why, will fade into insignificance. (Remember the stupid debates over church union and the real biggie – in the act of re-ordination whose hands were going to be laid on in which order!)

Let me close with two observations. I was on holiday this month and went to a friend’s church. When I got home my wife rang and said a young man (who had been through hell and back), had arrived and wanted to see me. He arrived at the manse smelling of good October brewing! When I saw his pain I simply took him in my arms and

held him for a good couple of minutes. Afterwards he told me that that was all he had come for. He was gone within 10 minutes. That’s all it takes to proclaim the good news. That’s the theology of the lost son. I have Rembrandt’s painting on my wall to remind me.

Secondly, my theology comes to its fullest joy when I am taking the funeral service of someone who would profess to be a non-believer. I am able to say with the greatest confidence: “(the deceased) as far as I know didn’t believe in God. The good news is the God I know in Jesus Christ believed in him. I don’t understand exactly what that means but this I believe. This sickness, this death can never be the last word. Another word has yet to be spoken; is even now spoken. It is the word of the one of whom it was said, ‘even if I go into the world of the dead, Lord, you would be there to guide me.’ And because it is God’s word it will ultimately be good.”

A theology that sees in every person an image bearer of God will always allow the theologian to treat every person with the greatest respect. “Believer” or “non-believer”.

## Glendowie Presbyterian Church Auckland

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Expressions of interest are sought by Monday 9 October

# Towards a unifying centre?

Kevin Ward, School of Ministry, Dunedin

My doctoral research looked at trends that had an impact on churches in New Zealand during the last four decades of the 20th century. My hunch was that as New Zealand society changed and diversified, most churches failed to adapt to that new culture, and this failure was at the heart of the malaise it faced.

I found an excellent study of churches over the same period in the United States very helpful in providing a theoretical framework. Donald Miller in *Reinventing American Protestantism* stated the sociological premise that “if Christianity is going to survive it must continually reinvent itself, adapting its message to the members of each generation, along with their culture and the geographical setting... Churches... that do not constantly ‘resymbolise’ their message eventually die; in contrast groups that have the foresight to encapsulate their message in contemporary symbols and forms have not only the potential to survive but sometimes grow at remarkable rates.” Here was my argument. However, as I studied his work again, I found there was something else going on in the research. The churches that thrived were also “successfully mediating the sacred, bringing God to people and conveying the self-transcending and life-changing core of all true religion... they offer people hope and meaning that is grounded in an experience of the sacred”. He argued that the churches he was researching, such as Vineyard and Calvary Chapel, were doing this while those like his own Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church were not.

This led me into a significant and ongoing stream of research in sociology; that churches that create “strong” meaning systems are more likely to thrive than those that are “weak” and allow almost anything to go. This led me to develop two basic parameters for my study of churches: a commitment to orthodoxy and willingness to adapt culturally. My thesis, supported by the research was that churches that thrived are likely to have combined a strong adherence to the basic tenets of orthodox Christian belief with an ability to adapt their life and message to the rapidly changing social and cultural context.

So far most of my writing has been on the latter half of this equation. However, it is easy for us to focus on that to the extent that we forget at the heart there needs to be commitment to the tradition in which we stand; to the historic beliefs at the core of our faith. This is part of our challenge as a Church. We need not only to adapt to our new pluralistic cultural context and develop a diversity of forms; we also need to seek to define a theological core around which we can form ourselves. Alister McGrath puts it well: “The future belongs to those who can relate the heritage of the past to the realities of the present.”

So what is this heritage? The term I have found increasingly helpful is orthodoxy. GK Chesterton defined it as “the Apostles’ Creed, as understood by everybody calling himself Christian until a very short time ago and the general historic conduct of those who hold such a creed”.

Reading the literature from a variety of perspectives it seems there are four key dimensions to consider in defining a set of orthodox Christian beliefs.

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**The Bible has an authority in providing answers to the ultimate questions of life that no other source of information has**

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## 1. About Jesus Christ

The Christian theological task began with reflection on the Christ event. The human Jesus was clearly more than human, especially in the light of his death and resurrection. Early in its development, the Christian community began to see him as divine, although exactly what that meant was debated for a few more centuries. But nevertheless, it was this belief that led to their eventual separation from the synagogue on the one hand and to their persecution by the Empire on the other, since it meant that if Jesus was Lord then the uniqueness of this meant they could not call Caesar Lord. The core of this was worked out early in the piece by Paul. Joseph Plevink helpfully defines the centre of Paul’s theology as “the identity of Christ as God’s Son and the saving action of God in Christ to bring salvation to all”.

Dean Hoge led a team researching the faith journeys of baby boomers brought up as Presbyterians, published in book *Vanishing Boundaries*. They found the strongest indicator of whether these people remained involved in church was what they called the “Christ Only Index”; the



belief that he is God's only Son and that salvation is available only through him. They found Presbyterian churches had many people they called "Lay liberals". While they have a high regard for Jesus, they affirm neither of these truths. These two beliefs about Jesus, that he is as God's son a unique person and that the salvation he achieved for others on the cross is unique, have long been central to orthodox Christianity. The Nicene Creed, for instance, says that:

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...*

*For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary...*

*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate...*

While there may be a variety of ways in which the divinity of Jesus can be explained and a number of interpretations of how salvation is gained through him, these are not optional beliefs for orthodoxy.

## 2. About God

A number of sociologists talk about the quest for "transcendence", or the "numinous", as being central to what people are looking for from religion. Reginald Bibby, surveying the Canadian scene, observes that the "desire for the numinous is widespread" but claims that many of the mainline churches in their quest to adapt to contemporary secular understandings have "lost a sense of the numinous, the supernatural dimension of religion. They underemphasise God in the course of trying to speak to life". In contrast to this, Miller claims that the growth of new paradigm churches in the US "can be attributed to their ability to communicate the sacred in profound and life-changing ways".

It seems then that how we view God is critical. Is God understood in orthodox terms, as a personal being other than oneself, who can be personally encountered in some way, or is God defined more in terms of a force or something you encounter by your own inward journey of self-discovery; a more immanent understanding. If it is the latter then there seems much less chance that a person will experience a sense of transcendence or personal encounter with God. It is believing that God has been and still is active in the world. In the creeds, this can be seen as defined in three ways: first as the God who created, second as the God and Father of Jesus and third as the Holy Spirit. The Nicene Creed, for example, says:

*We believe in one God... maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, eternally*

*begotten of the Father... through him all things were made.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son*

Many today, in trying to delineate orthodoxy, talk about a Trinitarian faith, following the lead of Karl Barth. Tom Torrance notes that the doctrine of the Trinity has been called "the innermost heart of the Christian Faith, the central dogma of classical theology, the fundamental grammar of our knowledge of God". G G Collins writes that "to be a Christian is to believe in, experience and worship God in a trinitarian way". And that "any doctrine of God which has ceased to be trinitarian has thereby ceased to be Christian". Again there might be a variety of metaphors and even language for this, and with the growing realisation that God is non-gendered to speak of God as Creator, Redeemer and Spirit may be more helpful in some contexts than Father, Son and Spirit – but it is Trinitarian none the less.

## 3. About Scripture

Sociologists see the purpose of religion in many ways as being to give meaning and purpose to life; to answer the ultimate questions. Research indicates that these questions are still being asked, that there still is a quest for meaning. So Miller claims that people are drawn to churches because they deal with this need. "People... want to anchor their understanding in an authoritative framework of meaning and the Bible provides a centre for doing this." Obviously for Scripture to do this, there needs to be a view of it that holds it in some way to be uniquely authoritative in providing answers on these ultimate questions. It also seems to be related to the first point in providing some objective truth claims about the nature of Jesus and of salvation. The Bible has an authority in providing answers to the ultimate questions of life that no other source of information has. Orthodoxy has always maintained the uniqueness of Scripture in this regard, over and against other approaches to Christian belief that have placed other sources as being equally authoritative.

As orthodox Christian belief was defined in the early centuries, it was often this very issue, the teaching of what was coming to be regarded as Scripture, that defined it against what came to be treated as heresy, or heterodox belief. While it is important to recognise that there are a variety of ways in which Scripture might be read and interpreted, we need to be reminded that it has a unique place as a source of meaning and guidance for the Christian community.

#### 4. About mission

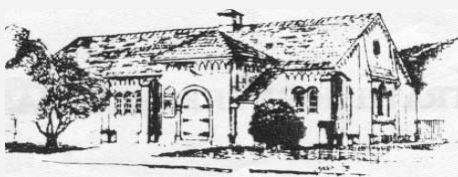
Again many of the researchers on what is happening in contemporary religion identify that what many people are looking for from religion is something that will change their life — for the better. This in many ways is what the therapeutic quest — the self-fulfilment focus — from the 1960s onwards is about. Thus a belief system that maintains that being a Christian is about life transformation, about giving up some old ways of behaving and embracing some new and different ways of behaving, rather than just “blessing” whatever your current lifestyle is, seems important. Again orthodoxy, with its emphasis on repentance and discipleship, has embraced this dimension. It is expressed in the creeds in terms of belief in “one baptism and the forgiveness of sins”.

Those at the more liberal end of the theological spectrum have tended to believe that a corrupt society corrupts people rather than the other way around, and so the Church needs to focus on changing the social order rather than changing individuals. The latter has of course been at the heart of the evangelical understanding of Christianity. Both of these are equally important as the mission of the church is about personal and societal transformation. For this kind of change to occur, it seems important to believe that Scripture contains some ethical absolutes in terms of behaviour. In contrast to this, David Tracy describes liberalism as having an “explicit commitment to the basic... ethical values of the modern secular period” and Jurgen Moltmann says that “Modernist theology merely produces a mirror image of the modern world, and repeats what modern women and men know in any case”. It would also

appear important to have belief in a God who can be experienced in such a way that change is possible.

So what I am arguing for here is that, while in an increasingly pluralistic society the Church needs to embrace diversity in its cultural expressions of the Gospel, we need to have a unity that is provided in the first instance by a commitment to what have been historically accepted as the core central components of our faith, from Paul down through the creeds and even through the reformation period when our individual creeds or confessions of faith developed. At this time when diversity is rightly celebrated by many, both inside and outside the church, we need also to refocus on what are the unifying central beliefs of historic Christianity. While Christianity has allowed for considerable diversity of expression and belief from its inception (it is what most of the battles that fill the pages of the New Testament are about), it has never been a faith that allows for unlimited expressions. There are boundaries to freedom (the whole argument of 1 Corinthians 8-11). It is these boundaries that provide the core that makes us distinctive as the people of God, the community of Jesus, in a world Christ came as God incarnate to redeem.

[this reflection is very much the beginning of a work in progress I hope to refine and develop further in the future – so helpful feedback is welcome - but I do believe is as critical for the future of our journeying together as is understanding and adapting to our context].



### ST. CHRISTOPHER'S SEATOUN-STRATHMORE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH Wellington

St Christopher's Seatoun/Strathmore Presbyterian Church is a parish in the Eastern Suburbs of Wellington City.

The congregation is vital and has a strong sense of community. We are innovative and have a commitment to exploring and enjoying the opportunities of Christian mission. We manage our affairs well.

We are looking for a Minister who will

- motivate and lead us into new opportunities.
- who will give spiritual leadership,
- who will be excited by the challenge for growth in the Parish
- who will help develop and implement a shared vision and mission plan.
- be an ordained Minister in the Presbyterian Church, and willing to become a leader in our community.

We want someone with great ideas and an enthusiasm, which will get a ready response from us.

The Parish terms of call will be the standard for the Church, but the Parish is flexible on how housing is provided and will work with the Minister to meet their requirements. We are also flexible about the type of ministry, whether full or part time, and we are open to discuss options with you. If you are enthusiastic about this opportunity then, in the first instance, please make your enquiry to :

Tom Law, Nominator  
134 Hanson St  
Newtown  
Wellington

Email [lawt@e3.net.nz](mailto:lawt@e3.net.nz)  
Phone 04 389-8202  
Mobile 021 791-337

# Theology, doctrine and spirituality

Andrew Dunn, minister emeritus, North Shore\*

“**O** Lord, you have seduced me and I have been seduced”. This intriguing verse from Jeremiah 20:7 (J.B.) is used as a connecting refrain between segments of the profound film *Into Great Silence*, a 2 hour 40 minute documentary filmed recently in a Carthusian monastery in Germany. With no commentary and little conversation it invites us into the life and devotion of 15 monks filmed over four seasons of the year. The words appear on the screen in German, French and English from time to time, interspersed with other Scripture verses of the call to discipleship.

Is it theology? Is it doctrine? Or is it spirituality? The theatre was silent – hardly a sound, and certainly no munching of popcorn or scrunching of wrappings. Now and then a little laughter as the monks played one day on the snowy slopes and then back to deep respectful silence. If what was going on in me was anything to go by I would say that a theological dialogue was taking place, especially around the radical call to follow Jesus. Who could make that demand of us, and why? There was some solid doctrinal thinking as well – who would dare to seduce us so completely? Who is it that is worthy to be named “Lord” and expects to be receptively heard? And yet the whole experience was very invitational of obedience, stretching of our lifetime’s “yes”, very satisfying to feel called again and our devotion received – and that’s prayer and spirituality.

The monks weren’t showmen or putting on a performance as a money raiser or promotion. The film producer had approached them with his request to film their lifestyle and they had responded that perhaps in 10 to 12 years they might be ready for such a thing. Sixteen years later they contacted him and said they were ready! It took 12 months just to get the film “in the can” and now it’s being screened in film festivals around the world. It has all the appeal of *The March of The Penguins* but it’s attraction is more than that – it explores a way of doing the faith in such radical fashion that one is taken back to the time when one first believed, first set out on the journey of faith with such simplicity, faith and devotion. That was a time of discovering words about God, of doing theology, finding God in every part of life and thought, of believing the simple verities, finding they stood up to the challenges of education and church life, of journeying spiritually beyond anything yet experienced. Yet they couldn’t be separated out into different disciplines, as it were; they

were part of the whole experience of going with God, of believing and resting in God’s love and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the presence of the Holy Spirit, praying, communing and seeing answers everywhere.

The academic disciplines of theology, doctrine and spirituality can be worked on separately, and fruitfully. Each has its own divisions and subdisciplines that know no end!<sup>1</sup> And rightly so. However, they may be merely academic disciplines, empty of depth and encounter but rich in material to squabble and divide over. More fruitful personally are experiences of God, what Paul Hawker calls secret affairs of the soul<sup>2</sup>, which encourage us onwards in our exploration of God’s stooping to us in love. No wonder that one of the most fruitful questions in spiritual direction is about the signs of grace in life a person can see!

I have two favourite ikons at the moment. Christ Pantokrator, from St Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai, is a coloured painting of Jesus as Lord of all things holding a book of the Scriptures while he gazes penetratingly into my soul. I can’t escape those eyes! The other is a copy of Andrew Rublev’s Trinity icon of 1425AD. It uses the encounter in Genesis 18 between the three visitors and Sarah and Abraham to draw the viewer into the encircling love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There’s a filled chalice on the table round which they sit with an open way to the table that invites the pray-er to join them.<sup>3</sup>

The ikon “writers” bring their deep grasp of things spiritual to light with theological statements, as in Christ Pantokrator: Christ the living Word is lord of all (Cf. Coloss. 1:15ff). As disciples of Christ, learners in his school of faith, we are invited to engage with this astonishing idea, that he is to be met in all the circumstances and experiences of life. It’s from the rich theology of this Colossian passage (among others) that we come to understand that Christ is in all things, holding everything in creation together.

Andrew Rublev uses more doctrinal and mystical statements laid out clearly (and beautifully) with paint and ink on wood. God has three ways of being God’s self, Trinity, yet is to be met in mystery and a sense of surprise and delight; Eucharist is central to our nourishment and celebration; the love of God invites us, draws us into union with Them; lively faith leads us into the circle of

God's love in Christ; Christian discipleship is not only following Christ (which can be at a distance) but joining the circle of grace, taking our place at the table! It sounds like a credal statement, doesn't it, and of course it's all true and depicts simply and clearly the engagements of faith. The reality for the viewer is about personal things of faith and trust on life's journey, not simply doctrinal belief or the dogmas of the Christian way, rich and necessary though they are!

So the three go hand-in-hand. Spirituality needs the vigorous discussions of theology to keep it engaged in real things in the here and now and the impact of them on faith, and indeed faith on them. It is the lively searching for and experience of the truths behind the statements we make about our faith. No wonder some writers speak about "spiritual theology". Spirituality keeps doctrine alert to new truths breaking forth from God's Word and in turn needs those truths to save it, to save us from individualism and flights of fancy that take us down paths that lead to nowhere in particular, or indeed that lead to dangerous places. Theology (words about God) needs

doctrine (literally "the teaching") to give it an anchor point in the distilled wisdom of our faith, a marker in the realm of discussion and debate that goes on in our thinking about our faith, and has done over two millennia and more. Both are enlivened by the rich meaning of all this and the ways they feed and nourish devotion, growth on the pilgrimage from our beginnings to our ending, from here to Eternity.

*\*Andrew Dunn works with his wife Margaret at Oasis Retreat and Study Centre, Albany, on the edge of North Shore and Rodney County*

### References

<sup>1</sup> A quick reference to this wide range is in the Wikipedia articles Theology, Doctrine, Spirituality. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)

<sup>2</sup> Paul Hawker. *Secret Affairs of the Soul – Ordinary people's extraordinary experiences of the sacred*. Northstone. 2000

<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen. *Behold The Beauty Of the Lord. Praying with Icons*. Ave Maria Press. 1987.



## Director, Centre for Christian Leadership Dunedin

The Presbyterian Church is entering a period of significant change in the way present and future leaders are trained and equipped to fulfil their ministry.

Interested persons are invited to apply now to enable the successful applicant to start as early as possible, should the General Assembly, the Church's governing body, decide to establish this new position at its meeting to be held in September 2006.

Based in Dunedin at Knox College, we seek a person with proven leadership skills who has had significant experience in ministry and in teaching at a tertiary level. The Director will be responsible for providing theological leadership and leading the development of programmes for providing teaching, ministry formation and continuing professional development and support for ministers, elders and other leaders in the church.

The Director will work closely with an Establishment Board during the Centre's establishment. The appointee will manage the transition from the existing structure, build a strong foundation, and lead the Centre through its crucial initial years, helping to meet new opportunities for Christian leadership development in the Presbyterian Church and wider.

Key to this role will be an active Christian faith that reflects an integration of theological scholarship, judgement and discernment. The ability to lead and facilitate teamwork, with an aptitude for working in change management and with developing and managing many, varied, relationships, is essential. Experience in contemporary management principles and practises along with strategic vision, will be vital.

Full details are available in the position description. You may obtain a copy by visiting [www.presbyterian.org.nz](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz) or contacting Marilla Hood, Human Resource Manager, on ph 64-4 381-8296 or by emailing [marilla@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:marilla@presbyterian.org.nz)

Applications should be submitted by email to Marilla Hood at [marilla@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:marilla@presbyterian.org.nz) or in writing to Marilla Hood, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, PO Box 9049, Wellington, New Zealand.

Applications close Monday 4 September 2006.



# Doing theology at Cambridge

*Russell Thew, Columba Presbyterian Church, Oamaru*

Spending the Michaelmas term, the beginning of the academic year from late September to early December 2004, at Westminster College Cambridge was a most wonderfully refreshing experience for my wife Helen and me. We had the use of the small annexe flat made available to visitors and full participation in the life of the college. We shared midday meals in college and self-catered for the rest.

A typical day began with chapel at 8.30am. Apart from some days when we were out of town, we never missed this vital part of college life. Surrounded by the stimulating beauty of the modern stained glass windows by Douglas Strachan, we shared in morning prayers led by staff and students. We also took a turn. It was always worshipful, prepared and thoughtful. Life was celebrated, sadness acknowledged, truth and mystery engaged with. During that time laughter and tears were expressed.

Most mornings Helen did an hour or two of voluntary work in the library and took time to read and to write. I found on my arrival that there was more opportunity to attend classes and seminars than I had thought possible, so I made the most of it. I shall not forget the privilege of sitting in with a small group of first year students as we began classes in pastoral theology — “Introduction to Church’s Ministry”. It was formative as they left familiar places to begin a new voyage of discovery.

Each week the homiletics tutorial group looked at the lectionary readings that one student would work on to prepare to preach at chapel. Later in the week at one of the staff residences, we would meet and sensitively reflect on how the student had exercised their leadership role.

I took the opportunity to attend classes at the University Faculty of Divinity. (It is led by Graham Stanton, Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity: a Dunedin man, a graduate of Otago and of the Theological Hall.) Like a starved man I attended classes in Jewish-Christian relations; Jesus Christ in theology since 1918; Augustine and Aquinas; Psychology and Religion; and Introduction to Islam. Often I would use the adjacent history library to read particularly in the history of the family as a social unit. Within the College I attended classes on the introduction to the theology of mission and historical theology. I was pleased that I didn’t have to prepare for the Tripos.

Returning to the college for the midday meal, it was heartening to share good food, take a place on the long benches and join the spirited seriousness and hilarity of students, staff and visitors, some of whom were only in for the day. One could almost hear echoes of Rupert Brooke: “they love the Good; they worship Truth: they laugh uproariously in youth”.

On weekends when we were in Cambridge we invariably attended the United Reformed Emmanuel Church in Central Cambridge, a congregation that has strong links with Westminster College. While we were there one of the college staff preached for a Call to Emmanuel. Westminster College is part of the Cambridge Theological Federation that unites the various theological colleges and affiliated institutes. In addition to shared classes and forums, the Federation meets every fortnight for common worship. It was enriching but not without its tensions. As we trotted back to college along the cobblestones, theological and liturgical reflection heated the cold night air.

The Presbyterian Church has rightly emphasised the need for an educated clergy and for public worship that engages both the mind and the heart. And knows the difference between worship that uses only personal pronouns and the wide sweep of the Psalmist who urges us to “Sing to the Lord all the World”. It is in community that one comes to see Trinitarian theology as being dynamic and interactive rather than static; and it is in community that one is formed, rather like the way Jesus gathered his disciples together.

Both Helen and I have in recent years completed post graduate degrees, from Deakin University and the Melbourne College of Divinity. They were challenging and time-consuming. Much of the work was done from home through distance learning and attending residential schools. It was all good. But being part of college life was better. I was impressed by the quality of the URC’s students in training for ministry. Like their counterparts here in New Zealand, they face a daunting future.

Year by year in parish ministry, as one tries faithfully to lead Christian communities in public worship and service, one of the sustaining ingredients is the collegial support and friendship of colleagues, both older and younger.

# Tibet: Witnessing without words

Selwyn Yeoman, St Clair, Dunedin

In May 2005, my wife Natalie and I concluded our 20-year ministry in Mosgiel North Taieri and set off for a completely new phase of life on the Tibetan Plateau in Qinghai Province, Western China. Home was to be Zhidu, a village of 2000 people, capital of the poorest and one of the most remote counties in China. At 4200m above sea level, it was a good bit higher than Mt Cook and just as devoid of trees and oxygen, but the grasslands go on forever. It's a land of vast basins separated by mountain ranges and wild rivers. The region is the heart of the huge Sanjiangyuan Nature reserve, and headwaters of the Yellow, Yang Tse and Mekong rivers, in whose valleys live about one quarter of the human race.

We were to work with Plateau Perspectives, a small Canadian based NGO whose goal is "to promote biodiversity conservation and sustainable community development in the Tibetan Plateau region of western China as a sign of Christian love for the world". We did not go as "missionaries". In fact, "the two worst things you can do in China," we were told, "is to be a missionary or a spy". There really wasn't much risk of either since we only had about two phrases of Tibetan and enough "market Mandarin" to greet people, buy food and be reasonably confident that we'd got the correct change. So were we turning our backs on the call to ministry in order to go adventuring? Nobody has ever hinted as much to us but a few, both inside and outside the Church, have wondered what environmental protection has to do with the Christian faith.

## On The Gospel of The Kingdom

Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God has received more attention in the last 50 years than perhaps it had for a long time previously. In the formative days of the NZ National Council of Churches, Harold Turner and others suggested that it would be helpful for post-war New Zealand churches to have the Gospel proclamation of the Kingdom shape our mission and identity, rather more than the traditional creedal statements. Conservative evangelicals in New Zealand later picked up a similar theme in their warm response to Brian Hathaway's book *Beyond Renewal*, and the aging Harold Turner became a very enthusiastic reviewer.

The vision of the Kingdom of God integrates many strands of theological emphasis that are often set in opposition to each other. It reminds different traditions and

streams of spiritual life that they are each only part of a much larger river.

Hans Kung once suggested that "the Kingdom of God is creation healed". I love that! It encapsulates the Pauline hope of "all things in heaven and on Earth restored to God through Christ", or John's apocalyptic vision of "all things made new".

Most of us know that, no matter how astute our preaching or sensitive our pastoral care, not everybody with whom we engage appears to come to faith or have their lives converted. But we keep at it anyway because we are bearing witness to another reality, the Kingdom of God; present but only in part and often only dimly seen. And if indeed the Kingdom is about the healing of creation, then we must bear witness to that also. Ministries of environmental protection and wildlife conservation are part of that witness; a reminder that God's purpose for the human race cannot be fulfilled apart from all those other creatures with which we are inextricably bound up in life here. And when one cannot speak of the Good News of Christ, we look for other authentic ways of bearing witness to that Good News. Environmental protection then is not just a useful cover for some other evangelistic agenda. It does in truth, in itself bear witness to the Good News. It gives expression to God's purpose for creation. Like everything else we do, it will be but a sign, a pointer, and we would be both arrogant and foolish to pretend that our sign was the whole thing.

The Gospel of the Kingdom is the undergirding, integrating vision. There are other associated elements: as those who exercise some kind of dominion in the Earth we are called to participate in the servant-Lordship of Christ. This is a particular form of caring for, in fact serving the wellbeing of creation. Also it is a sacramental, priestly ministry as we both receive from God and offer creation back to God; and, looking as it is to a hopeful future, it is an eschatological ministry. We live by a vision, with purpose, "looking to that which is to come".

## On being vulnerable receivers

The lectionary readings at the time we travelled included Matthew's account of Jesus' sending of the disciples on their own missionary journeys. What struck me in a new way was how much in these stories they are made completely dependent upon those among whom they will go.

We too went vulnerable and dependent. Pit toilets, well water, cooking and keeping warm by yak dung fires (even at -25° Celsius), the hospitality of nomads with tsampa, yak yoghurt, Tibetan tea and bowls of mutton bones all raise questions, unanswered yet, about what we take with us and what we are to receive as we go. But how often in our mission planning and proclamation do we take the time to make ourselves as vulnerable as those disciples were? And what would it mean for us to do so?

### **On being church -‘two or three gathered...’**

What does it mean to be church? We were warned off using that word for our gatherings since a church requires registration. Sometimes the gathering was just Nat and myself, the only English speakers and perhaps the only Christian believers that we knew of for 1000kms. Then, surprisingly, a degree of liturgical formality helps rather than hinders the sense of having gathered for a special purpose. Visual aids add to what each of the participants may bring. And more than ever before one values the sense of participating in the communion of saints, that fellowship through time and space, meeting through this day in so many vastly different ways and circumstances, who save us from being alone here despite our isolation. With almost nothing of the things we put huge energy into in New Zealand, we were the church. That’s got me re-thinking quite a bit about our corporate life back here.

### **On wondering about failure:**

I don’t know if I’ll get to answer those questions in the Tibetan Chinese context. Project plan changes and the deeper than anticipated impacts of isolation have seen us home much sooner than expected. So did we fail in what we set out to do? I imagine I’m not the only reader who sometimes reflects like that. I’ve come to believe more strongly that God opens doors of opportunity rather than compulsion. Go through them and even in the most demanding situations life may be enriched, vision enlarged, service learned, relationships deepened and grace discovered in new ways. And some of these graces will go unknown unless there is, in some sense, failure. In fact, so long as others have not been hurt or compromised, does failure matter? The wonderful experiences remain and I would not have missed them for the world. Because we are looking to the as yet unclear future, some degree of failure is part of the journey. What if we’d not tried? There probably would be a lifetime of regrets about what might have been.

I’m now enjoying the vulnerability and interdependence of ministry in the team at Coastal Unity parish, and a Masters project on all of this at Otago University. Bruce Hamill has on his study door a quote from Winston Churchill; “Success is being able to go from failure to failure without losing heart”. It lifts me every time I see it.

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## **Rural ministers: Outstanding in their field**

*Chris Bedford, transition minister, Ellesmere Cooperating Parish, Canterbury*

**I**n January 2006, I commenced a period of Transition Ministry in Ellesmere Cooperating Parish, Canterbury. I quickly discovered that in the 28-year life of this parish as a Cooperating Venture, no minister has stayed beyond five years. Why is this? Is this the normal experience in cooperating and union parishes, in rural parishes, and particularly in rural cooperating ventures? I set out to gather information to see if there is a pattern, and what issues are perceived as being important factors affecting whether or not a person will take up a position in a rural CV.

### **Key Conclusions**

Long-term ministries make for the greatest possibility that a church will grow. Challenges that are worked through, rather than avoided, denied or skirted around increase the likelihood of a long-term effective ministry. “Tenacity” and “perseverance” are key words. The requirement for a CV appointment to go no more than 10 years – notwith-

standing recent changes in this area – is a disincentive for ministers seeking a long-term mission leadership opportunity.

The key issue affecting whether a minister stays long term in a rural parish (as in any other) is the personal relationship between the minister and the parish leaders. Simply put, it’s about how well they get on with each other.

An incarnational approach to ministry is critical in rural ministry. Who you are, what you do and the way you live impact as much in the long term as what you say. Isolation and the need for personal and professional support are key issues in rural ministry. Rural New Zealand is a mission field crying out for people who will make a commitment to long-term, mission-focused ministry in a rapidly changing world.

Reasons why no minister stayed longer than five years in the 28 years of Ellesmere Cooperating Parish being a CV were particular to each situation, in each case reflecting the life stage and personal situation of the minister concerned.

## Rural Ministry

Here are some issues that were highlighted in responses received. They apply to both CV and single denomination churches in rural situations. They are not new, but are factors affecting all ministry in rural New Zealand.

### Travel

Even in a relatively compact rural parish, distances are an issue both in terms of

- the time spent travelling,
- the cost to a parish of paying mileage allowance.

Rural parishes are often at the smaller end of the parish-size scale, but many have to pay their minister large mileage allowances. In my own parish of Ellesmere Cooperating Parish, I have averaged 1183km per 4 weeks since commencing ministry here, which will amount to over 14,000km for a full year. In the suburban South Auckland parish from which I came, my travel amounted to about 5,500km for a full year.

There is also the significant personal cost to a minister and his/her family if they wish to travel to a major centre for personal reasons, be it health, education or entertainment.

### Rural parishes as first parishes

In the past at least, rural parishes were seen by all denominations as places for newly trained ministers to go for their first parishes. There they would cut their teeth, get ministry experience and generally prepare for ministry in the cities. Many rural parishes had that experience repeatedly, and became almost resigned to it. Several people commented on this issue; it has been a pattern for all denominations.

### Isolation and Personal Support

In rural ministry, you have to be strong inside yourself – mentally, spiritually, and psychologically. There is little personal collegial support easily available. There may or may not be clergy of another denomination in the same district. Even if there is, they won't understand the issues you experience within your own denomination.

In earlier days, visits from a Ministry Resource person, or a staff person in the Parish Development and Mission

Department (Presbyterian), brought encouragement and ministry suggestions. I was hugely appreciative of the support I received from Robin Lane, David Grant and Simon McLeay in earlier rural ministry. Sadly, financial constraints have meant that this is no longer available – and rural ministers wear out and burn out faster because of it.

It is a 90-minute return trip for me to Christchurch, and a minimum of 90km. For reasons for both cost and time, I seek to restrict myself to one Christchurch trip per week. There are other support groups and training programmes I could access if I lived in the city.

### Family educational needs

Excellent primary schools are available in most rural communities. However, the situation is different when it comes to secondary or tertiary education, and ministers must take seriously the needs of their family's education when considering a place to minister. Thus it is likely that most ministers in the period of mid life – when they have both energy and often ministry experience – will be unavailable to rural areas. Other people also referred to this issue in their responses.

### Other family needs

Employment opportunity for a clergy spouse will probably be limited in a rural area. Thus if a spouse is professionally trained – and many are – it will be difficult for them to find employment. That second income is often critical in saving for the future.

There are also the needs of shopping and entertainment. The supermarket bill becomes a whole lot larger if you have to travel for half an hour or more to the nearest supermarket.

### Affinity to the land

It is a huge help in rural ministry if you like farming or agriculture, and are genuinely personally interested in the issues affecting lives of your parishioners and on their farms.

### Working with small groups

If you're going to be in rural ministry, you have to understand that you will almost always be working with small groups of people. The vision of a large, multi-programme, multi-staff church is not one for scattered rural communities. The Sunday congregations in the four churches I minister to range from six to 40. From extensive experience in rural parishes – I've served in five of them – I know it is a lot easier to lead worship for 40 people than it is for four. Critical mass does make a difference.



## **The rural downturn and shrinking churches**

In the late 19th century when many rural churches were established, each community had its own church – as well as its store, garage, school and maybe bank and transport company.

The movement of people to towns, the increased size of farms and reduced requirements for farm labour have dramatically reduced the size of rural communities. This downturn continues to affect the church. Many of the stalwarts of rural churches are long-time residents who accept, and maybe welcome, change in their farming and business practices. However, they have difficulty in accepting change in the church.

## **Time Off**

Ministry is a lot like farming. There's always something to do, and you can always find an excuse not to take time off – to the detriment of self, marriage, family and parish. Step outside the gate and there are people to see and who "could do with a visit". Turn the computer on and there's stuff to read, preparation that can be done.

The most effective time off is that taken outside the parish area. Physical distance means that in a rural parish, which by its nature encompasses a significant geographic area, you have to travel to get that freedom. That in itself is a financial cost. This is an issue that ministers in urban areas do not face.

I am grateful to my wife for being strong in encouraging, pushing and at times demanding that I take time away from the parish. Overnight stays and days away in districts outside the parish area enable me to switch off from parish work and its issues, however valuable and interesting they may be. It helps to look in on the parish work "from the outside".

## **Personal Observations**

### **The rural mission field**

There are now significant areas of rural New Zealand with little if any intentional, active, missional Christian witness. If there are problems with ministry in towns and cities, these problems are exacerbated in rural New Zealand.

I believe that rural ministry is the poor relation of both the Presbyterian and Methodist churches, however unintentionally. There are a number of ministers who give the impression they think rural ministry is second-class ministry.

Let me say right here that I love rural ministry. I love the people, I love farming, I love the wide open spaces, I love the changing seasons and their activities, and I love living in a rural town. But I can only do this because my children are grown up and fending for themselves – in the city and overseas - and because my wife is willing to live with the uncertainty of relief teaching and drive considerable distances each morning to the various schools of rural Canterbury. Rural ministry needs to be marketed!!

## **Long term ministries**

I say without apology that for rural ministry to be effective, we must be encouraging and supporting people to develop long-term ministries in rural communities. The Uniting Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand need to be proactive in encouraging long term ministry in rural CVs. The Cooperating Venture model works against this, and those involved in JRCs and the Uniting Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand must recognise this and help change this, if they are really serious about the mission of Christ in rural New Zealand.

## **Ministry of the People**

The Scriptures clearly speak of the ministry of the whole Christian community, the body of Christ. In that community, everyone has their place in the team and plays their part for the community's benefit. This applies to all churches everywhere.

A number of financially struggling rural churches no longer afford a professional clergy person and have moved to a model of ministry teams, a model known as Local Shared Ministry, supported by a professional clergy ministry enabler. As the church seeks to develop "ministering communities" – faith communities that can minister to themselves - it needs to recognise that residential professional clergy people continue to have an important place. They have a role in speaking into a community, coaching and encouraging the development of local ministry, and being the visible face of the church and Christian faith in a rural community. They often bring to a rural community professional leadership skills and a wider world view that are otherwise lacking.

In a rural district, a minister can fulfil a role that no-one else can. They can be a focal point, not involved in the history or the politics of the area. Time taken to walk the main street of their country town, participation in community activities and events, and involvement in community organisations is time well spent. The church in a rural community is often the source of spiritual sustenance for people from a wide range of faith backgrounds. They all carry their own baggage, their own practices and ways of

expressing things that they particularly value. When people come together in study groups or special occasions and recognise and celebrate their diversity, relationships are grown. We weave a witnessing faith community from all these people together. In a city many of us would drive past one another going to our “own church”, whereas in the rural community you don’t have the choice - unless you’re prepared to drive zillions of kilometres.

Worship leaders try to acknowledge the differences in music and language that will connect with people of different faith backgrounds. Different forms of administering communion need to be considered. That’s just a fact of life in the places we choose to live.

## Our Ministry Model

The model we have of ministry hugely affects the way we think of and plan for the churches future.

### Pastoral Model

Traditionally, we have brought to ministry a pastoral model. A defined geographical area, and an established group of people who gladly associate themselves with the church. It works moderately well where there is an underlying assumption that the community is generally Christian. It is an inward-looking model. The hymns we sing on Sundays largely reflect this. It is a model that passed its used-by date in the middle of last century. Sadly, the wider church is only just realising this, and at a local level it is so much easier to continue to think in this way. A three to five year period of ministry leadership works alright if your ministry model is a pastoral one, where the minister’s first role is looking after the people who already belong to the church.

### Mission Model

A mission model of ministry addresses the reality that we are now living in a post-Christian world, where for most people the Christian message is an irrelevance. The mission model means we look at our work as ministers through a different set of glasses, and with different assumptions about what our priorities are.

Local church leaders and regional church courts are often still caught up in maintaining the pastoral model. Creative courageous long term imaginative leadership may be a big ask in rural New Zealand – but it is the cry of the Gospel.

*This is a heavily edited version of Chris Bedford’s report. For a copy of the full research report, please email Chris at [cksrbedford@clear.net.nz](mailto:cksrbedford@clear.net.nz)*

Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry*, IVP, Illinois: 2005

Reviewed by Nathan Parry

I don’t think I’d be alone among clergy in finding that my bookshelf can sometimes be a source of sinful pride. So, when I was offered this book in return for writing a review of it, I was torn between “yay! A free book!” and “oh no, not another book about the Church ‘post-modernity!’” This was the topic of my synthesis, so I have read many of the latest books on the subject. Generally my preference was for Kiwi books rather than always looking to the US.

The situation in this area is quite different in the USA from NZ. The Church there still has a lot of influence in society, so changes in culture and thinking threaten to curtail that influence and thus tend to be resisted. Through my reading, the US Church has come across as quite polarised; with the more conservatively evangelical a church is, the more antagonistic to this “post-modern thing” it usually is. This often results in evangelicals who are trying to constructively engage with this culture change being pushed to the fringes of the evangelical movement, causing them to devote large chunks of their books to trying to convince their suspicious colleagues that no, they aren’t heretics really - without actually getting to the point.

As this book is published by IVP I was wondering if I would be subjected to that frustration yet again, but happily I wasn’t. This is a very concise and direct book; I could easily have underlined every second sentence. A factor in this could be them side-stepping the modern/postmodern controversy by often calling them the “Newtonian” and “Quantum/Apostolic” ages.

As the publisher indicates, Gibbs and Coffey are very strongly evangelical in theology (and even charismatic with occasional mentioning of the demonic and their desire for the recovery of the apostolic ministry), but yet are very positive towards the opportunities for mission that post-modernity creates. I found their vision constructive and optimistic. I also liked their format: each chapter concludes with a series of questions or activities for church leaders to look at.

It opens with as good an introduction I have read to the emergence of post-modernity, the marginalisation of the Church, and the current culture change going on in the West. It sets the scene well without romanticising or glossing over unpleasant realities. This is followed by a

discussion of mission and the Great Commission, devoting a lot of space to the marketing approach to church growth. The authors affirm that the latter “seems to have a lot in common with the incarnational approach to ministry as modeled by Jesus” (p.43), but also look in depth at the potential dangers of that approach.

Chapters three and four left me cold as they were too “big picture” for my tastes, but would probably appeal to others. An alternative vision for structuring individual congregations and indeed entire congregations was laid out, as well as a new paradigm for training ministers. As a recent grad I was interested to see how our current training regime fared in their eyes, and it didn’t seem to do too badly – “We will need comparatively few graduate schools of theology and comparatively more professional schools of ministry” (p.100). Chapter five was back on my level with a discussion about the current renaissance of spirituality; the meditative, mystic and Puritan resources churches can mine to help engage this new context; as well as the tension between, and need for, both orthodox teaching and authentic experience.

The next two chapters address evangelism and the fostering of a living faith in our new world. What is the nature of true worship? What is its role in evangelism? How do we foster the desire for transcendence without falling into entertainment or sentimentality? What is the future of the seeker-sensitive approach? Who does it attract, who does it leave cold? Should we be welcoming seekers or out seeking the lost? Chapter eight continues looking at evangelism and the belonging-before-believing paradigm. They also give a series of examples of an alternative, Biblical way of sharing the good news with people with specific issues (personally I found these very disappointing and not particularly new or alternative).

The final chapter tries to integrate the whole. I found that this quote sums up many of the themes of the book, “The burden that runs through this book is that evangelical churches in the new millennium must expand from their suburban strongholds to impact urban and rural communities. Some (particularly in the USA) need to move beyond their preoccupation with baby-boomers to give more attention to reaching those under thirty five... without whom there will be no church of tomorrow... From a strategy of *invitation* the churches must move to one of *infiltration*, to being the subversive and transforming presence of Jesus.” (p. 212, italics mine)

At the end of the day, I would rate *Church Next* highly. I would readily recommend it to church leaders grappling with issues of being church, worshipping God, and doing

mission in our new and constantly changing cultural context (especially to the missing generation of under 40s). It contains little that is original, but is a direct and concise summary of thinking on a very wide range of mission/culture-related topics. *Church Next* is also a very sane, readable book.

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Clifford Hill, *The Wilberforce Connection*, Monarch Books, Oxford: 2004

Reviewed by Jane Bloor

“William Wilberforce and his friends transformed society. How can we transform society today?” These words, boldly highlighted on the cover of *The Wilberforce Connection*, sum up the thesis of this book, that 21st Century Britain is as much in need of God’s saving grace as was Wilberforce’s Britain 200 years before. Clifford Hill is an evangelical scholar and theologian who sees in Wilberforce and his friends an inspiring paradigm for modern mission, and he does not shy away from provocative argument to present his case.

The first part of Hill’s book traces the history of Wilberforce’s conversion to evangelical Christianity in 1784, his membership of the Clapham Set (a group of evangelical members of the Anglican Church, centred around John Venn, Rector of Clapham Church in London), and his growing interest in social reform, including the abolition of the slave trade throughout the British Empire. Hill sets the work of the reformers in context with chapters on the industrial revolution, religion and revival, evangelicals and reform, and evangelicals and social change.

According to Hill, this positive Christian movement for social transformation is on the wane by the end of the Victorian era (the influence of Darwinism, Biblical criticism, and socialism being some of the contributory factors), and it was further exacerbated by the social and cultural revolutions of the late twentieth-century (Hill cites the rise in pop culture, feminism, and the growth of libertarianism as examples). To answer this state of affairs, Hill proposes that the Church puts mission foremost; only when it is changed by this imperative, can the nation be changed too.

As a final comment on this book, Hill’s historical perspective is one that needs challenging at times, as does his description of the current state of the Anglican Church. Despite these caveats, I found *The Wilberforce Connection* a stimulating contribution to the contemporary debate on mission.

## **Focal conference**

*Nathan Parry*

The weekend of 30 June – 1 July saw the first-ever Focal (Forum of the Christian Left) conference, held at Wellington Central Baptist Church, with a strong Presbyterian turn out.

The topic for this gathering was “Church and Society Post-Election ’05,” with the intention to reflect on the high level of Christian involvement in last year’s election and to foster better relations between church leaders and politicians. Unfortunately the latter wasn’t achieved as Wellington airport was closed on the Saturday due to fog, and half a dozen well-meaning MPs were left stranded around the country. The three who did make it, however, made a valuable contribution.

There were four sessions over the two days. Each had a main speaker who was followed by responses from a panel, and each concluded with an open question and discussion time from the audience. A lot of passion was expressed through this format! The first of the main speakers was Peter Lineham, discussing “the fundamentalist agenda and its chances”. His hypothesis was that one of the problems the left has to grapple with today is that often they know what they’re against without having much certainty of what they’re for. Thus, the fundamentalist bogey-man can be invented or exaggerated by the left to give them a rallying point and a sense of identity.

James Harding kicked off Saturday morning with a presentation on the prophets and the role of justice in their writings. His main focus was on King Ahab and the story of Naboth’s vineyard, looking at issues of land and reflecting that onto last year’s foreshore and seabed dispute. What could a prophetic and Biblically inspired Christian response to that issue have been?

Chris Marshall followed, asserting the political nature of Christ’s mission on earth. He maintained that Jesus’ preaching of God’s kingdom or “government” was highly political, eventually resulting in his crucifixion as some form of insurrectionist. Does an over-emphasis on Christ’s divinity at the expense of his humanity blind us to this aspect of the Biblical witness?

Anthony Dancer concluded the conference with a talk entitled “towards a just society.” He looked at justice in terms of economics and politics, and how hard it can be these days to define what is left and what is right. He also suggested that issues like justice are contextual, differing from situation to situation. Accordingly, it’s safer to have

strongly held principles that we apply to each situation we encounter than to have a solid pre-thought out framework of behaviour. This highlighted an interesting division in those attending this conference, between those (usually younger) who were comfortable with this contextual approach, and those (usually older) who desired a solid, coherent ideology or basis for action.

The terms “left” and “right” came up for a lot of discussion over the weekend. Do these categories really exist? Are they pagan enlightenment constructs that Christians stand apart from? Although concerned for both, is Jesus’ teaching more compatible with a right wing focus on the individual or a left wing concern for communities? Are theological conservatives necessarily right wing in their politics? Are those more liberal necessarily on the left?

The panelists who responded to the main speakers covered a range of opinions and perspectives – for example, Glyn Carpenter, head of the evangelical Vision Network; Kim Workman, head of Prison Fellowship; Helen Beaumont, assistant parliamentary commissioner for the environment – and inspired a lot of discussion.

The number of workshops on offer was drastically reduced due to all the missing MPs! Still, Gordon Copeland did an informative discussion of “Christian views on just taxation”, while Nandor attracted most of the youth in attendance to a presentation on our most pressing environmental issues. Jenny McIntosh of Spirited Exchanges discussed ministry on the fringes of the church; James Coyle, president of Young Labour, explained how to effectively lobby politicians; and a team from the proposed “Peace and Conflict” research centre came to present their goals and the progress they have made to date with this venture. Some people found the workshops more satisfying than the main sessions, as they provided an opportunity to get away from the theory and really get to grips with particular issues.

Overall, the Focal team was pleased with the turnout and the constructive dialogue. Their next aim is to help facilitate bringing together Christians with expertise on topical issues, such as women in society, environmentalism, race relations, to construct plans for action and to give the Church a relevant and alternative voice. Their next conference has already been booked for 14–15 Sept 2007 at North East Valley Baptist in Dunedin. The proposed title is “Gender and Sexuality in the Kiwi Church” and would be addressing possible issues, such as: women in leadership across cultures; Christianity and masculinity - why don’t men go to church?; the Da Vinci legacy and the divine feminine; and issues facing female ministers.