



## Interaction with contemporary culture

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## About Candour

*Candour* is a monthly magazine about ministry and leadership. For more information, contact:

**Amanda Wells**  
**Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand**  
**PO Box 9049**  
**Wellington**

The articles in *Candour* reflect the views of individual ministers or contributors writing in a personal capacity. They are not representative of the Church's official position. Please approach the author for permission if you wish to copy an article.

### 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:

Amanda Wells (editor) on (04) 381-8285 or [candour@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:candour@presbyterian.org.nz)

### Advertising

**One-quarter page: \$80 plus gst** (87mm x 117mm)

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The next deadline (for the September issue) is **31 August 2009**.

### Glen Innis Vacancies

August 10 - 17	Homestead/Cottage
August 17 - 24	Cottage
August 24 - 31	Homestead/Cottage
August 31 - September 7	Cottage
September 7 - 14	Homestead/Cottage

Bookings for the summer school holidays are open to all ministers, regardless of whether they have school-aged children, from November 1.

To enquire about vacancies, please email [glen.innis@xtra.co.nz](mailto:glen.innis@xtra.co.nz) or telephone 06 855-4889. Ministers are welcome to inquire regarding vacancies due to cancellations.

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### "Calvin Rediscovered – New Zealand and International Perspectives"

*Upcoming Symposium and Son et Lumière performances in Dunedin*

#### Symposium

Dates: 24th and 25th August, 2009

Venue: Knox College

*Public Lectures both nights at Knox Church at 7:30 pm*

*Preceded by worship service at 6 p.m. on 23 August at First Church of Otago*

#### Son et Lumière production

Dates: 20th to 23rd August, 2009

Venue: First Church of Otago

*For further information, including keynote speakers, local contributors, costs, travel subsidies and registration details, please go to our website <http://calvinrediscovered.wordpress.com/>*

These events are heavily subsidized, due to the generosity of our grant providers. Be in early to take advantage of "early-bird" prices!

## Ministry Exchanges

I have received expressions of interest from overseas Ministers wanting to either exchange charges with Presbyterian Ministers or serve in Presbyterian parishes.

Please contact Juliette Bowater for an updated list of the opportunities available, or for further information: [juliette@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:juliette@presbyterian.org.nz).

### New opportunity:

#### United Church of Canada – Nova Scotia

A minister of a historic church in Halifax seeks a six month exchange from September 2010. The church has an average attendance of 150 and serves a range of people. The church is known for its music and preaching as well as its social justice work. The minister also lectures in preaching at the local ecumenical theological school. The minister would be accompanied by his wife and seeks an urban or suburban setting.

# The trouble with culture

Amanda Wells

Contemporary culture is hard to pin down. Our media and entertainment diet is so diffuse that no two people are likely to have the same “culture” in mind. A young female teenager might instantly think of a Hannah Montana-influenced world, while many retirees remain plugged into the old media of television and newspapers. Even the All Blacks, that staple of Kiwi culture, are apparently losing their all-encompassing popularity.

It would be better to talk of contemporary “cultures”, though acknowledging this reality raises more questions. You can’t make sweeping generalisations if you know that the number of cultural constructs is closer to infinity than one. Unlike 30 or even 20 years ago, New Zealanders have a myriad of choices in their work, leisure and media arrangements. I’d suggest that it’s the availability of these choices, more than anything else, that has led to the decline in church attendance.

The forthcoming issue of *Spanz* (in parishes in the third week of August) has a number of articles about churches offering new choices. Instead of holding only a Sunday morning service, they’re trying alternatives at different times that cater to different audiences, all with measures of success. Perhaps this is one way that the church can reflect contemporary culture; not its content, but its adaptable variety and multiple entry points.

If I walk home, I listen to podcasts from the BBC, which has hundreds of different types of content available for free download. You can listen anytime to something broadcast on a certain day on the other side of the world. My ability to learn about the religious complexities of Iran or the latest theories on Charlotte Bronte has never been so great. Nearly all my news comes via the Internet, though sometimes Morning Report and Checkpoint get a look in. TV news, if I watch it, makes me despair. Despite pretensions of the “OneNews” type, there is no one “media diet” anymore; I don’t know anyone (apart from my mum!) who subscribes to a daily newspaper or watches the six o’clock news with any regularity. We are a nation of diffuse and diffused consumers.

Should the Church change to meet this reality? If not, why not? We’re never going to go back to Sunday morning in church being the social focal point of the weekend. Despite people’s enduring longing to belong in community, they simply have many more options.

One interesting expression of community in Wellington is film-festival going. I managed a paltry two this year, one of which was a documentary called *Enjoy Poverty*. It features Dutch filmmaker/artist Renzo Martens travelling around the Congo, attempting to convince Africans that their poverty is a resource exploited by others. They should be exploiting it themselves, he argues, by selling pictures of their malnourished and war-torn circumstances to the media rather than letting foreign photographers make \$50 a picture. But by the end of the film, he’s seen that approach will fail and is instead urging them to accept and “enjoy” their inexorable poverty so that they aren’t doomed to lives of misery.

Described as “purposely offensive” in film festival catalogues, one person did walk out during the Wellington showing, during a scene in which Martens coaches the would-be Congolese photographers to photograph a dying child, because that’s what sells best to Western audiences. He has told film festival audiences overseas that “he wanted to be in the film himself, as an exploiter, because to try and remain neutral in telling this story is to deny the role of the West in creating poverty”<sup>1</sup>. “I can never be the saviour or the emancipator because I am defined by the structures and institutions that exploit in the first place.”<sup>2</sup>

Though lacking coherence at times, the film has a powerful impact in terms of how, when you leave the cinema, you reconstruct your own society. How do the images and entertainment we consume characterise us as a culture? Are the normal answers of aid and relief work only feeding the poverty industry (Medecins sans Frontieres and other aid agencies come off poorly in the film). Our culture has become so complex that analysis can invite paralysis. How are we called to act as New Zealanders embedded in a fragmented, intensely global culture?

I’ve had very little feedback about your preferred format of *Candour*, and I’m struggling to know how I should interpret that! Please drop me an email and make your view known – [candour@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:candour@presbyterian.org.nz). The September issue of *Candour* will have the theme “Ministry paradigms and hats” and a deadline of 31 August – spontaneous contributions are welcome.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unpackingdevelopment.com/2009/05/13/enjoy-poverty/>  
<sup>2</sup> <http://www.artslant.com/ny/articles/show/4443>

# Interacting with society through film

Kevin Ward, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, Dunedin

At the end of the film *Forrest Gump*, Forrest ponders over Jenny's grave, not sure who was right about the nature of life; Mama or Lieutenant Dan. Mama's philosophy, pictured by the feather blowing in the wind at the beginning and end, is that life is all about chance; like a box of chocolates, you don't know what you are going to get until you open it. On the other side is Lieutenant Dan, who suggests that we have a predetermined destiny, and Forrest had cheated him out of his to die a war hero like his dad and grandad. On the surface, *Forrest Gump* could not be described as an overly religious film, yet it resonates with deep questions about the human condition: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Such questions are often not far from the surface of many popular films, making it important for Christians and churches to develop an ongoing dialogue with film.

Film is now "the medium of the masses", facing us with a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is to engage with the medium, recognising the deep currents that

film stirs in the hearts and minds of people. The opportunity is as we engage to bring out the themes that resonate with Gospel perspectives and to bring in Gospel perspectives when helpful to the questions raised.

The great film director Martin Scorsese said, "when I was younger... I wanted to be a priest. However I soon realised that my real vocation, my real calling was the movies. I don't really see a conflict between the church and the movies, the sacred and the profane. Obviously there are major differences. But I can also see great similarities between a church and a movie-house. Both are places for people to come together and share a common experience. And I believe there's a spirituality in films, even if it's not one which can supplant faith... It's as if movies answer an ancient quest for the common unconscious. They fulfil a spiritual need that people have: to share a common memory."

So many films now being produced are addressing the major issues of life, death, and the survival of humanity and the planet that have come to dominate the emerging reflective spirituality of our age. Anyone wanting to

know what questions people are now asking, and where they are searching for answers, need only look at the output of the film industry. It was perhaps predictable that in a post modern world, that is characterised, among other things, by images, this was inevitable. For films not only reflect the popular mood, they also help to create it, so that people who thought they had no profound questions about the meaning of all things find that they do, when they visit the theatre to view the latest blockbuster.

Stories are one of the main ways we make sense of the often chaotic and haphazard world we live in. We script our lives by finding and seizing upon stories that fashion sense and order out of what is generally a disorderly existence. From the stories we heard as children at bed time – which told us that evil always lurked in the dark places and the good are always redeemed in the end – to

the tales, both fantasy and true, we hear through the books and films and television we enjoy. These are the building blocks of our world view. They are the

lenses in the spectacles through which we see our world and interpret it.

Often unlike propositional statements, the power of the story conveys more than just facts; it connects emotionally; it provides visual images that show the relationship between things and ideas; it motivates and inspires. It's as if we can't be without stories and we find them where we can. Stories and mythologies give us our context; they connect us as human beings to each other. Increasingly as our culture moves from that of modernity, with its linear propositional statements of truth, to a postmodern culture, meaning, ideas and values are packaged in narrative forms. In an oral culture, stories were told orally. Then as literacy advanced, especially after Gutenberg when mass production became possible, literature became the primary means. Charles Dickens and Jane Austen became the great myth makers of our culture. Literature is still important for passing on story, but far more popular today is film.

George Miller (*Babe*, *Mad Max* and *The Witches of Eastwick*) suggests that cinemas have become our covert new

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Literature is still important for passing on story, but far more popular today is film

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cathedrals. “I believe cinema is now the most powerful secular religion and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively the way they once did in church. The cinema story tellers have become the new priests. They’re doing a lot of the work of our religious institutions, which have taken so much of the poetry, mystery and mysticism out of religious belief, that people look for other places to question their spirituality.” While Geoffrey Hill in *Illuminating Shadows* writes that “As ironic modern worshippers we congregate in cinematic temple. We pay our votive offering at the box office. We buy ritual corn. We hush in reverent anticipation as the lights go down and the celluloid magic begins. Throughout the filmic narrative we identify the hero. Vilify the antihero. We vicariously exult in the victories of the drama. And we are spiritually inspired by the moral of the story, all the while believing we are modern technopeople, devoid of religion. Yet the depths and intensity of our participation reveal a religious fervour that is not much different from that of religious zealots.”

The experience of watching a film is that of being temporarily drawn into an alternative experience of reality in which we are exposed to particular stories about basic issues of human existence. The myths portrayed on the screen may offer idealised stories of how life might be lived or dilemmas resolved and so can serve as a challenge as to how we might live in the real worlds we inhabit. They can then offer an image of how we can live and act well, and so become a resource for reflecting on our own existence. The religious or spiritual dimension of George Lucas’ *Star Wars* saga has been well commented on and Lucas himself, who employed myth scholar Joseph Campbell as a consultant for the films, was quite open about the religious dimension.

In an interview with Bill Moyes, he claimed it was unfortunate that younger people no longer attended religious institutions as they had in the past and from which they learned the myths from which they gained their values and beliefs. He felt this was a great loss for society, and so what he was trying to do in *Star Wars* was to create a new myth on which people could gain a religious perspective to provide the values and beliefs for living. He hoped it was not one for any one particular religion, but one by which any religion could be carried. Alan Gordon argues that, “in an era in which Americans have lost heroes in whom to believe, Lucas has created a myth for

our times, fashioned out of bits and pieces of 20th century US popular mythology... but held together at its most basic level by the standard pattern of the adventures of the mythic hero.”

Since then other sagas such as *Harry Potter*, *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings* and now *Tales of Narnia* have clearly performed a similar function. However many more popular and not so obviously spiritual films, such as *Titanic*, *Forrest Gump*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *American Beauty* and, from a New Zealand context, *Whale Rider* also function in similar ways.

### Does art reflect life or life reflect art?

As a major cultural expression, films have the power both to reflect and shape our society. They invariably portray ways of seeing and understanding something of the world in which we live. Such worldviews can support, challenge or subvert the political, philosophical and religious foundations on which our society is built.

Irrespective of whether obvious religious themes are present, films say something about the world in which we live and about the values that we live by. Their sheer per-

vasiveness affords a huge potential for influence. This should not be underestimated. Just as politics is too important for religions to leave to politicians, film is far

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## Films have the power both to reflect and shape our society

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too influential for us not to engage with it religiously, and I would add Christianly. Without such engagement, there is no way of knowing how we as a society are portrayed by, and how we are shaped by, the films that are viewed by millions. Equally not to engage with films would be to miss opportunities to offer religious responses to the central human concerns that films are conveying.

Some of the most common questions are: Who am I? What am I here for? Where am I going? Why is there suffering? Is there hope of redemption? How do I face death? They are just some of the questions that recur time and again in films. Sometimes they are answered in a very simplistic way, which ignores the complexity of life. But nevertheless, the questions are very often there in a film if you scratch beneath the surface, even if they are not immediately obvious.

### Engaging faith and film

If we come to film with a particular faith perspective, dialogue is the key. Faith issues need to be brought alongside

the film and the two be allowed to interact. God is active in the world today, so we ought to have an openness to our faith being informed and changed by film. If we are serious about this task, we need to be open to the possibility that film will challenge us and sometimes cause us to rethink our understanding and expression of whatever faith we hold important.

Films frequently raise important issues and pressing concerns. Film is a medium that has an immediate impact and power, and has huge potential to influence people for good or bad. Alternative viewpoints and philosophies of life are also communicated to huge audiences. Consequently film presents a unique opportunity for us to meet others on their own ground and enter into dialogue.

Film can be an important dialogue partner for people of particular religious traditions who are interested in thinking seriously about their faith. In a sense film is a source of revelation – not necessarily about the nature of God or salvation or particular religious figures (although it can be). Rather, it is regularly and powerfully a source of revelation about ourselves and our world – about the “signs of the times”. Films reveal what we value as human be-

ings; our hopes and fears. It asks our deepest questions, expresses our strongest rage and reflects our most basic dreams.

Raising people’s awareness of how to think about films can stimulate them to think about and interact with others on the religious themes raised, such as:

- the search for identity; (a very postmodern issue)
- alienation and redemption;
- the sacredness of the universe;
- the concepts of grace and forgiveness;
- the nature of true love in relationships;
- what does it mean to be human;
- the nature of evil;
- the question of death;

Figures indicate that going to movies is the only collective voluntary activity that more people do over a year than going to church. For this reason, it is vital that Christians and the church learn how to engage positively and critically with this powerful cultural expression that does so much to shape the values, attitudes and behaviours of people today.

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# Interaction with film via movie nights

*Jim Wallace, Bethlehem Community Church, Tauranga*

I’m really keen to encourage a meaningful interface between popular culture and Christianity.

For example, we run “Thinking Matters”, which is a fortnightly discussion on science/philosophy and the Christian faith. A recent series was provocatively titled; “Have you enough faith to be an atheist?”

We also run a monthly “Movies and More” night. Each of the movies we use has had or is having an influence on our popular culture.

All movies are previewed a number of times and I prepare a synopsis and questions that are given out at the end of the movies.

We start at 6.30pm with welcomes and a brief introduction to the movie, its context, and something of its influence, author, director. We are careful not to give away any plot keys. Sometime we point out images to watch out for. But generally, we just leave it for people to enjoy

the movie and think about it as it is happening.

After the movie, there is a 10-15 minute unpacking. Often we use the reviews from the Hollywood Jesus website. David Bruce, our web master, does visual reviews and I usually put these onto power point. He picks up spiritual connections and key images in the movie. This unpacking of the movie is designed to highlight issues or images or set designs which may have been missed. We make sure people realise that every set is carefully constructed. Nothing is an accident in a movie.

Then we have supper.

After supper, those who want to, stay for the discussion, which is about 20-30 minutes. We encourage people to stay but have found that some prefer just to watch the movie and take time to digest it. Others don’t feel confident sharing their ideas. This is the case with many who come in off the street to watch. In the church, we are used to discussing our ideas but in the community that is

a bit threatening, and there aren't many opportunities or safe environments to share ideas. The reason for the "unpacking" of the movie after showing it is so those who do come and watch then leave actually have some insight into the reason we chose that particular movie and some key thought starters from it.

### Juno

They talk of the *Juno* effect, which saw a downwards blip in abortion rates and an increase in teenage pregnancies in the United States. (The increase in teenage pregnancy corresponded to the increased number of teenagers carrying their babies to full term for later adoption.)

### The Bucket List

People ask; "have you got a bucket list?" These are things you want to do before you "kick the bucket".

When I show the movie, I ask the question: what changes will you make to your life as a result of watching this movie? One man said – "I'm going to make contact with my two daughters whom I haven't spoken to for 20 years!" How good is that. If any of us had preached a sermon and that was the response, we would be delighted.

### The Kite Runner

This is based on a best seller that is used as a text in many secondary schools. Its key line is: "is there a way to be good again?" It's a story of redemption.

### Twilight

This movie is based on the novels by Stephanie Meyer, which have sold 17 million copies. This series is to teenage girls what Harry Potter is to tweens. It is set in a Vampire genre and really is a story about self control and handling addiction. Very interesting images throughout this movie; probably because Stephanie Meyer, the author, who is a Mormon, had a strong role in the production of the movie. She insisted certain key parts of the dialogue (about the lion lying down with the lamb) that were originally taken out of the screenplay be included.

One person who comes regularly to the evenings said, "you know we don't watch movies like we used to. Before we would just watch then and absorb what they were saying, now we "read" the movie and analyse it as we watch it. Then we discuss it afterwards. It's great. Thanks you."

I'm very happy to e-mail our discussion guides to anyone who may want to begin a "Movies and More" night.

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# Ministers in contemporary culture

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

One of the characteristics of the contemporary culture around us seems to be a growing discomfort with the features and fixtures of organised religion – and we who minister are an aspect of these fixtures. We have to work harder to be a credible presence in our communities. People tend to lump us in with all of those who come from (what I unkindly judge as) the lunatic fringe of Christian expression, and increasingly the first frontier when we meet people is to reassure them that we are of some earthly use; even that we might have something worthy to offer them. I don't think we have been helped all that much by the way clergy are portrayed in contemporary film and television. If the clergy are represented at all, they are more often portrayed as moralising, out-of-touch misfits, with sing-song voices and nothing much to say. They are set up as objects to be mocked or treated with disdain – the wet blanket and the fun spoiler.

However funny Dawn French's Vicar of Dibley is, the absence of a faith of any depth in her character Geraldine

simply reinforces the view that the church has little to offer the contemporary world other than the source of some amusement. I watch a few movies and I struggle to recall many depictions of ministers that we might call robust credible presences. The appearance of a minister is usually as a sideline character. Rowan Atkinson's brilliant rendition of the minister as the soppy, inarticulate misfit in *Four Weddings & a Funeral*, who, in his nervousness refers to God as "the Father, the Son, and the Holy Goat" only serves to reinforce the point I am making.

I was pleasantly astonished a few weeks back to read a novel where Alice, the main character, critiques the modern stereotype of the minister as wet blanket. In response to a sermon of mine, a parishioner, with a twinkle in her eye, gave me a book to read – Philippa Gregory *Alice Hartley's Happiness*. It is a rather bawdy farce and quite naughty (which, by the way, had nothing to do with my sermon). The reason she gave it to me was because

of what Alice says to the minister. In an unexpected way Alice reminds the minister (and the church) of the nature of his calling. The poor guy had arrived and was trying to do his “nice minister routine” when Alice swept into the room and let him have it:

“I know your sort!” Alice said to him with unconcealed loathing. “I’ve met your sort before. You’re cocktail vicars; you are. A little bit of this and a little bit of that. A little bit of reincarnation and a little bit of Buddhism. A little bit of meditation and a little bit of psychiatry. A little bit of counselling training, enough to muddle people up, and a little bit of humanism and liberalism. A lot of tolerance towards other religions because we’re all worshipping the same God, aren’t we. And a lot of sneering and unkindness to the old ladies on the flower rota who want to decorate the church and have a crib at Christmas. Sliced loaf for communion bread, and water instead of wine. Sweaters in the pulpit and the office hours in the vicarage.... No wonder people want magic!” Alice thundered. “No wonder people want revivals. No wonder people want fundamentalism. They ask you for bread and you don’t even have the conviction to give them a stone. You give them Play-Doh!”

“I have more spirituality in my morning cup of tea than you have in the whole of a Sunday!” she said disdainfully. “And you come around here pretending you are just biking past, to try and sell us this mish-mash of watered down half-heartedness! Good God! I should be ashamed of you if I was Jesus!”

“Yes, I would weep if I was you,” she said fiercely. “No one has a clue what you think or what you mean. You don’t even have guts to stick to a faith which has lasted two thousand years. You have to muck it about and dress it up and pretend that it’s trendy.”

“You have to mash up your faith, and mix it up so that it blends with silly little fads which won’t last two seconds.” she said, “No wonder people don’t go to church. They can get that sort of stuff at evening classes!” [*Alice Hartley’s Happiness* p135-137 Harper 1992, 2007]

I don’t think of myself as a sappy, inarticulate misfit, but I suspect that that is how many people see me. I suspect that their media-reinforced stereotype of what a minister is is the kind of person that Alice challenges.

Last year Clint Eastwood came to our rescue. He released two movies, *Changeling* and *Gran Torino* – two powerful and thoughtful stories that offer a sharp critique of the powerful ones who often misuse their power at the expense of the little people. In both movies, members of the clergy are key characters who contribute to the story in admirable ways.

In *Changeling*, the Rev Gustav Briegleb, played by John Malkovich, is a Presbyterian Minister who leads a determined campaign against police corruption in Los Angeles. His fiery name-it-for-what-it-is sermons were broadcast live on radio. His persistence offers some critical relief to the anguish of a woman whose son is missing. His courageous leadership on behalf of the defenceless is both honorable and inspiring.

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In *Gran Torino*, Father Janovich, played by Christopher Carley, initially presents as a somewhat inept

priest whose lack of worldliness is ridiculed by Clint Eastwood’s Walt Kowalski – a bad tempered, intolerant, racist, Korean War veteran with an angry growl. What unfolds is one of the most powerful stories of redemption that I have ever seen in a movie, and the priest is a key player. Father Janovich’s persistence, care, and ability to learn from what he encounters is honoured by the film maker.

It is possible that Clint Eastwood is joining Philippa Gregory in portraying what a minister of the Gospel could be rather than what he has found ministers to be like – and if that is so, then it will do us no harm to hear what he is saying.

In an era when we seem to be transitioning into people who run organisations, there is a reminder that our core and sometimes messy business is committing ourselves to the deep care of people. In an era when we are reluctant to speak out for the disadvantaged because we might upset powerful parishioners, there is a reminder that God has always had a thing for raising up the underdog. In an era where our main contacts are church people in church settings, these films offer ministers who find their way into court houses, institutions and pubs, and they learn to stand tall in those settings.

I highly recommend the movies - and if what you need is your skin thickened, then I recommend the book!



# Considering popular culture and religion

Carlton Johnstone, Youth Ministry Development Leader, Wellington

I can still recall my philosophy lecturer using the *Matrix* film as a framework for explaining the Christian view of human nature. Because I loved the *Matrix* and because it was a well-thought-out engagement with Christianity, I used this lecture with a group of young people exploring Christian faith. It made sense to them, at least I think it did, or maybe they also just loved the film. I begin with this story to illustrate that engagement with popular culture and theology can be a rewarding and productive one.

Theology has often been described as “faith seeking understanding”. Popular culture can often be one such source that provides such understanding – or at least raises questions pertinent to theology. Take the recent film *Transformers 2*, where one of the soldiers asks, “if God created us in his image, in whose image are they [the transformers] created?” What kind of discussion might this stimulate if we attempted to answer it with some friends, or a group of young people? Before I go on to explore some of the functions of popular culture in everyday life and identify some of the ways young people engage with popular culture in relation to religion, I want to firstly make an important distinction between having a consumer sensibility and having the sensibility of a fan.

Lawrence Grossberg (1992) argues that individuals and audiences interact with texts in relation to particular sensibilities. A sensibility, as defined by Grossberg, “is a particular form of engagement or mode of operation... it defines the possible relationships between text and audiences located within its spaces” (1992, 54). The sensibility of a particular cultural context, such as movies and music, which Grossberg refers to as an “apparatus”, defines how specific texts and practices can be taken up and experienced. Grossberg identifies two types of sensibility in relation to popular music: the sensibility of the consumer and the sensibility of the fan. The sensibility of the consumer in relation to cultural texts operates in the domain of pleasure and entertainment. In contrast the sensibility of the fan operates in the domain of affect or mood.

*Affect is not the same as either emotions or desire. Affect is closely tied to what we often describe as the feeling of life. You can understand another person's life: you can share the same meanings and pleasures, but you cannot know how it feels. But feeling, as it*

*functions here, is not a subjective experience. It is a socially constructed domain of cultural effects. Some things feel different from others, some matter more, or in different ways, than others. The same experience will change drastically as our mood or feelings changes. The same object, with the same meaning, giving the same pleasure, is very different as our affective relationship to it changes. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that different affective relations inflect meanings and pleasures in very different ways. Affect is what gives 'color,' 'tone' or 'texture' to our experiences' (Grossberg 1992, 56-57).*

Affect matters to fans because it is what gives their investment in popular cultural texts, such as music, weight and significance beyond the consumerist sensibility whose main emphasis is the production of pleasure.

## Functions of popular culture in everyday life

Cultural studies (a subject that I tutored in for four years at Auckland University) identifies a variety of functions that popular culture provides. Gordon Lynch (2002, 66-67) summarises three main functions:

*Popular culture can be a focus for social interaction.* People talk about the films they watch and the music they listen to. Fan culture, such as football or rugby supporters, extends from going to a match to online fan communities. “Trekkie” conventions, or the Armageddon one (think comics and sci-fi) further illustrate the way popular culture can be embedded within social interaction.

*Popular culture can be a means of escapism from ordinary “real life” experiences.* Whether it is about escaping the more mundane forms of every day life or just enjoying the pleasure of being transported to another world – such as that of the *Matrix* or *Hogwarts* – there is a level of popular culture engagement that is about pleasure and entertainment.

*Popular culture can be a means by which people communicate about their “real world” experiences.* Worship songs provide a conventional language for use in worship, much like Horton's (1956) suggestion that popular love songs have provided “a conventional language for use in dating”, or as Frith (1988, 123) puts it “they give people the romantic terms in which to articulate and so experience their emotions”. Frith contends that audienc-

es often feel words and music that are then developed by the imagination.

**Young people and popular culture**

Tom Beaudoin argues that one of the defining characteristics of Generation X is that they have been shaped by popular culture. We don't have to agree with Beaudoin's argument (I don't personally), to acknowledge the reality that contemporary culture, and popular culture in particular, does have an influence on us (and young people especially) in a variety of ways: attitudes, beliefs/faith, understanding of the world, self-image, affinity groups, sub cultures, consumption choices and habits...the list goes on. In their study on the world view of Generation Y (15-25-year-olds at the time of the study) Sarah Savage et al. (2008) suggest that there are three main ways in which we can think about young people using popular culture in relation to religion.

**i. Popular culture enhancing religion**

Drawing on popular culture to enhance religion is nothing new in itself. Our church worship often draws on popular music in the shape that it takes. Some of you might remember seeing the *Godmarks* billboards around various New Zealand cities; a creative engagement of advertising and evangelism. One such billboard reads "You did ask for a sign" – God .

Richard Flory and Donald Miller's (2000) book on *GenX Religion* provides a number of ethnographic studies illustrating some of the ways in which young people are exploring and developing new spaces for religious expression that incorporates their existing lifestyle interests. New Zealand theologian and pastor Steve Taylor (2005) explores something similar in his book *The out of Bounds church?*

**ii. Popular culture 'as' religion**

*This is my Church*  
*This is where I heal my*  
*hurts...*  
*For tonight*  
*God is a DJ*  
 - Faithless

Popular culture "as" religion is where popular culture

takes on religious or spiritual significance. The above quote is well known in club culture; it is from the dance track "God is a DJ" by Faithless, and suggests that dance clubs are becoming for some new churches where they can experience the transcendence (Lynch, 2002, 69). Or we could take rugby as an example, has often been described as our national religion. It certainly has its own

liturgical rituals, such as singing the national anthem and the haka; as well as devoted followers of the *All Blacks*, or a regional team. Gordon Lynch (2002) has explored the spirituality of clubbing culture, while others have explored *Star Trek* fandom as a quasi-religious movement (Jindra cited Savage 2002, 25).

**iii. Resourcing religion through popular culture**

Young people (amongst others) also use popular culture to inform and shape their own world view and understanding of faith and spirituality. We might think of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* (2004), or even *Harry Potter*. Books and films such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* certainly generated religious conversation. Kelly Besecke (2005) argues that the dominant "individualism" lens of religion obscures the way in which people are talking with each other about religious meaning. Besecke offers a "communicative" lens, one that highlights the important social role of interaction and communication: "Specifically, religion in the modern world is well understood not only as a kind of social institution, and not only as an individualised meaning system, but also as a *societal conversation about transcendent meanings*" (2005, 181).<sup>1</sup> Popular culture provides a deep source of conversational material for religion, faith and theology. Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor's (2003) book, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Popular Culture* is an excellent book that explores the engagement of theology and areas of popular culture such as art, fashion, music, film and advertising.

**Theological responses to engagement with film**

I would also recommend Robert Johnson's (2000) book *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue*. Johnson (2000, 41) has a helpful diagram (Fig 1) that charts theological responses by the church to movie-going using a linear timeline:

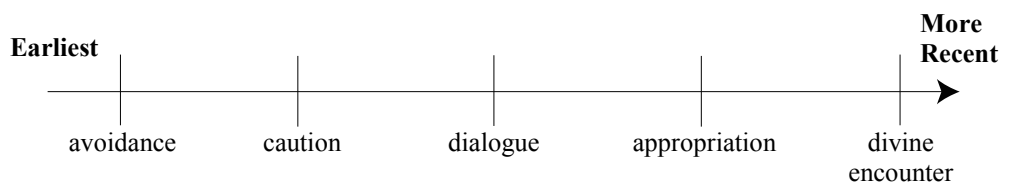


Figure1 The Theologian / Critic's Posture

Johnson also graphs (Fig 2) these five theological approaches to movies using a matrix in order "to show whether a given theologian/critic begins their reflection with the movie itself or with a theological position, and

<sup>1</sup> Besecke defines transcendent meanings as "references to a context of life that exists on a plane beyond ('transcending') apparent reality" (2005, 181).

whether a given response centers on the movie ethically or aesthetically” (2000, 44). Johnson explains that theologians (and others) who articulate an avoidance strategy do so from an ethical position. Theology, or a theological position, is the starting place for engagement with a film under consideration. In contrast, for those who are interested in exploring a divine encounter through film begin with the film itself and then proceed to make theological judgments.

is the air that young people breathe; like a fish in water, it is their environment. As discussed above, popular culture also provides various avenues of engagement with religion, faith and everyday life. In what ways does popular culture and faith mix for us?

I would love to hear your answer to this final question, especially the engagement in a church context. For example, do you make use of pop culture in your services

or other religious practices (Bible study/small groups, youth ministry etc). Please email me and tell me a story or two in response to this – carlton@presbyterian.org.nz

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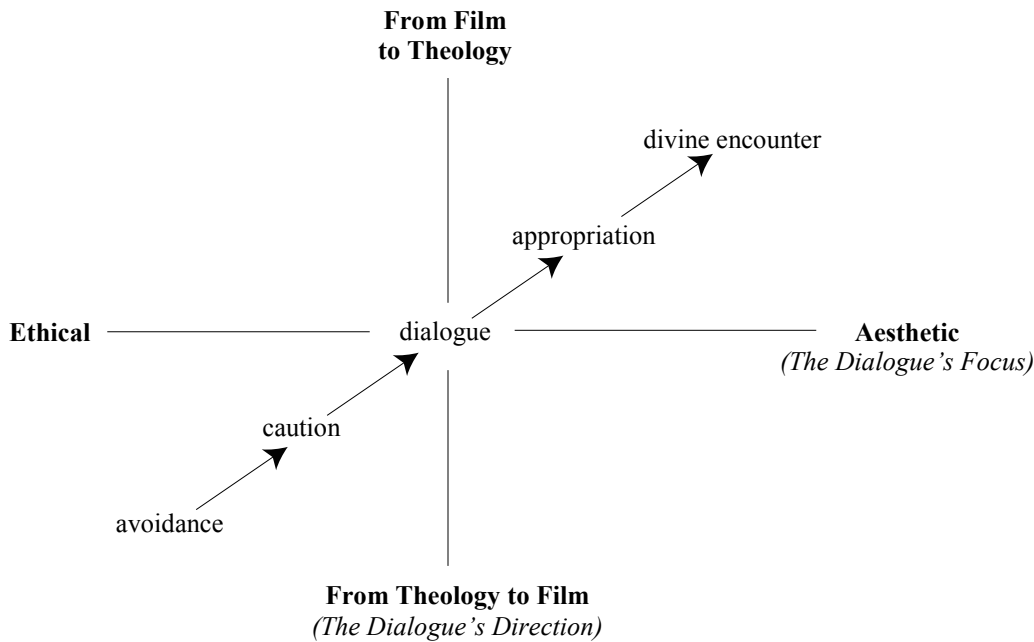


Figure 2 The Theologian / Critic's Approach

There are three other positions along the diagonal between these two contrasting approaches. For those expressing caution, the film itself is taken more seriously than those advocating avoidance, but their starting place is the same as they focus on the film's ethical stance and begin their engagement from their given theological position. For those desiring theological dialogue - the middle position on the diagram - then theology informs their filmviewing just as they allow their filmviewing to inform their theology in a two-way conversation that is both ethical and aesthetic. For those who wish to appropriate the film's meaning, the starting place is the film itself and they bring their theological perspective into the conversation, which is much more noticeable than those whose purpose is to explore divine encounters. It is, of course, possible to use more than one of these approaches in practice depending on the film under review. But Johnson points out that people engaging in theological criticism tend to use a dominant position towards film.

Popular culture matters, and especially to those who are fans of different areas of popular culture. Popular culture

# Making friends with the media

*Martin Baker, Assembly Executive Secretary, Wellington*

About ten years ago now, I graduated from the Axis Adschool's copywriting course. To get into the course, which had just 12 places, you had to enter a competition that involved conceiving and writing an ad for marine anti-fouling paint. I was lucky. The product I developed was called "Kling-on Killer". (You need to have watched a bit of Star Trek to appreciate the screen play that went with the product launch!) One guy was so keen that he camped out for a week in front of the judge's home to make sure he was noticed.

The entire course was conducted in Auckland ad agency boardrooms. This was in the days when local advertising companies were still booming. A successful copywriter with a few good campaigns and a few years' experience behind him or her could be earning an income well into the six figures. There was virtually no one over 40 writing ads. In my late 30s, a minister and with little intention of ever signing up as a copywriter, I was clearly an outsider, and even an intruder, in this process.

Without going into some of the more lurid details, it was a somewhat abusive, highly critical, creative environment. But just imagine working

on what you thought was a really good sermon, only to have the fruit of your efforts described by congregational members as "utter b.....", and you will get the idea. Encouragement and praise are nice. But the hard learning is that one of the best ways of getting better at what you are doing is to be told what you are doing wrong. In the advertising environment, no one is interested in your excuses when millions of dollars of media spend are at stake.

The course, and in fact the entire culture and industry that supported it, was, and still is, based on a fundamental premise that advertising specifically, and the print, sound and visual media, generally, play a central role in influencing people's decisions, aspirations, self understanding, culture and values. So ad campaigns seldom just tell people about a product or service, they tell people that they have a need or a want, and that that need or want can be met or fulfilled through the purchase of a particular product or service. One of the disciplines in

all campaigns relates to the SMP – the single minded proposition. If you stripped everything else away, what is the singular value embodied in this product or service? Volvo – safety, Coke – life, and so on. Great ads are not first of all about imparting information; they are about texture, feel, smell, sound, and sight.

Ad agencies can point to the fortunes their campaigns have helped create for the manufacturers of goods and the providers of services. Many of these goods and services are very similar to many others, but a successful campaign differentiates a product and gives it values that make it more attractive than a competitor.

So what does all this mean for our ministry, and our engagement with the media, and the priority we place on getting our communications right?

In a thousand different, incalculable ways messages are being conveyed to everyone who drives past your church, parks in the car park, walks in the front door, listens to you preach, or sees a newspaper article about you or your church. We can take control over some of

these messages. If we were an ad agency working on behalf of a customer, we would be very serious and very intentional about doing this well.

## Responding to the media

One of the things I remember about the course was that the group most interested in any presence you may have in the media is not first the general public, but your internal public. In our case, the members of our congregation and Church. They are the ones watching most intently.

If the camera swings in your direction, as one of our leaders, and you cover your face, or say "no comment" or appear aggressive and rude, be sure that in doing so you are nevertheless communicating first of all to your congregation, those who identify you as a leader of the Church, and then to the wider public.

I do not think that as a Church we want to convey to any of our publics a sense that we have anything to hide, that

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**It was a somewhat abusive, highly critical, creative environment**

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we are angry or confused or cross. However, we also do not want to draw attention to areas where we face some specific challenge or where there has been conflict.

It's often not straightforward. Over the last couple of years I have learned that while I can be involved in a long interview about a quite complicated situation, my contribution might represent just 20 seconds of the whole news piece. If in the interview you are at all flippant, sarcastic, defensive, combative, or just toss about a few "throwaway lines" – then you can be almost certain that those remarks will be taken out of the context of the interview and used to reinforce the particular line the reporter is looking for in the story. In any interview, work out the points you want to make beforehand, and keep to script.

Once the story has been printed or gone to air, the message will have been communicated - and no amount of indignation or expressions of naivety on your behalf will change that fact. One other point, if you are getting photographed, be very mindful of the story that image will convey. For example, a picture of you standing behind a locked church gate looking angry, with a story about vandalism, sends a number of negative messages.

In developing a positive, well-thought-out engagement with the media, you have the opportunity to convey a message of faith in ways that extend far beyond the confines of your own particular community.

## When the media seek you out

Reporters have a list of names and numbers of "go to" people. You may have some recognised expertise, be seen as a community or church leader or are known to have provided some commentary in the past on some matter. By taking a lead in areas of concern for the community, issuing press statements or offering op ed pieces to your local paper, you can develop a media profile. Reporters will come and ask you for your opinion.

The second and more likely scenario is when a reporter calls you for comment on a lead which he or she is following up. Amanda Wells, our Communication Manger, has produced some very helpful guidelines covering this scenario. The big challenge is to pause before you speak, not be caught off guard, and think about how what you say and how you say it will be interpreted by those who see, hear or read your comments.

## When you seek to have a media presence.

By far the most interesting challenge comes when you decide to seek out the media. This means getting your view across, your story published or attracting wider public attention to your church and its message. There might be different opportunities available to you, but over the last few years I have done this through: community radio, providing a regular church service for those who can't make it to church; offering op ed pieces on current debates; issuing press statements in response to some pressing social issues or to highlight interesting things my church was engaged with; and by offering to the media some initiatives to address some local issue.

I would like to think it was my written skills or wonderful new ideas that made some of these approaches successful. But the main reason some of these initiatives worked out was because I am free. If you take the initiative, in many situations the paper does not have to send a

reporter around, and they don't have to pay someone to fill a newspaper column. Reporters are always short of time, and newspapers, and especially community

ones, short of resources. If you can help them out, then everyone is happy. Don't be self righteous, make it topical, interesting, entertaining, and you will have a good chance of getting your story before the public. You also need to be thick-skinned and accept lots of rejections.

No one has the resources to pursue every opportunity that we have to communicate to our publics. The Church is not an ad or PR agency, but communication, in word and deed, is at the heart of its mission. The critical challenge is one of discernment and awareness and being intentional– working to your strengths and being aware of the aspects of your communication that do, and do not, contribute to your SMP or commitment to proclaim the Good News. Create an environment where people can be honest in their feed back to you. Try to do what an ad agency would charge you a great deal for – a communications audit. How does the church sign, the welcome at the door, and the hospitality of your congregation feel? Ask a trusted elder to give you critical feedback on your presentation, don't be offended and seek out opportunities to improve your skills.

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You have the opportunity to convey a message of faith in ways that extend far beyond the confines of your own particular community

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# Exploring the Twitter phenomenon

*Reuben Hardie, Somervell Memorial Presbyterian, Auckland*

I suspect we are all very familiar by now with Twitter, the social networking/micro-blogging phenomenon that has grown increasingly popular over the last few years. Barak Obama used it in his presidential campaign, the people of Iran used it to voice their dissent at the recent elections when other forms of media were banned, and celebrities used it to share their grief at the death of Michael Jackson. Twitter is now one of the leading forms of internet communication. For some the very name is off-putting – those who use Twitter are sometimes referred to derogatively as “Twits”. And yet, as a social and business networking forum, its growth is remarkable. It may be that it is a passing fad. It may be soon replaced by another breed of cyber communication. In the meantime, it is pretty hot. Whatever we make of Twitter, it does raise questions about the way we communicate these days. It raises questions about the way we interact with others.

## **The dangers of Twitter**

I suspect all those who are technophobes are highly suspicious of Twitter. In fact, if you are a technophobe ( i.e. have an aversion to technology) and you are still reading this – then good for you. I am not sure such a phobia, however, entitles you to write off this new cyber-based form of communication. My late grandmother at the age of 86 became internet savvy. For her it was a way of staying in touch with grandchildren who lived in various parts of the world. If she could overcome her technophobia, then anyone can. There are, however, some very real concerns about Twitter and all social networking sites, for that matter. Let me mention briefly four such concerns.

Firstly, these modes of communication demonstrate a trend towards a faceless society. Increasingly people are spending huge amounts of time maintaining relationships via Facebook, Twitter or even email, without any face-to-face contact. According to Wittgenstein the eyes are the window to the soul - not a computer screen. I am reminded of that phrase we find throughout the Bible, which in a few words captures a certain quality of relationship: “with him I speak face to face” (Numbers 8:12). In a world where it is increasingly easy to communicate and relate in so many different ways, perhaps we do well to remember the value of relationships that we are able to maintain face to face. I guess what I am saying is that for all the new forms of communication available by way of the internet, there is nothing like sitting down with someone over a cup of coffee, and catching up in person.

Second, the observation has been made that these social network sites, and Twitter especially, demonstrate a growing narcissism in our society. As you may know, Twitter invites participants to send frequent responses to the prompt: “What are you doing?” (in less than 140 characters). To imagine that anyone would want a running commentary of every moment of your life is the height of narcissism. Third, users of Twitter or Facebook appear to be remarkably open about what is happening in their life in these forums. It is incredible what you can learn about someone via their Twitter feed or Facebook page. Many people appear willing to share their deepest thoughts – while, of course, many others keep it light and bright. One wonders whether it is prudent to share so much personal information via mass media. How safe is it?

## **The advantages of Twitter**

So then what does Twitter offer? Let me offer some advantages. As a social networking tool, Twitter allows busy people to keep in touch. People often complain these days about the pressures on time. Whether we are spending more and more time at work, in traffic, or in front of the television, people are increasingly looking for efficient ways of staying in touch or maintaining friendships. This very notion, of course, should ring warning bells. Friendships, true friendships, are not meant to be efficient. Nevertheless, the reality is we all have to squeeze our social interactions around the demands on our time. Twitter is not just a social network; it also operates as a knowledge network. It enables users to gain answers to questions and follow leaders in particular fields of research.

Twitter also operates as a business network; it provides businesses with the ability to track product launches, to track what is being said about ad campaigns and to follow and direct publicity in real time. In fact it is the “real time” capability that is one of the great advantages of Twitter. One is able, via Twitter, to discover instantly what is going on with others, or to learn instantly public reaction to a new movie, political agenda, etc...

Another great advantage of Twitter is the number of people who use it. It is a form of mass communication, and the more people who use it the more advantageous it becomes. Finally, in countries like Iran and China where freedom of speech is still very limited, Twitter enables people to express their views.

## Christians on Twitter

It may interest you to know that some churches have been taking interesting steps to explore how they too can hop on the Twitter bandwagon. There are churches, in Scotland for example, which update their websites with prayer requests in the form of tweets.<sup>1</sup> The head of the Catholic Church in Ireland encouraged people, in a recent interview with the BBC, to tweet a prayer every day. He claimed that “Such a sea of prayer is sure to strengthen our sense of solidarity with one another and remind those who receive them that others really do care.”<sup>2</sup>

The Church of Scotland even set up a Twitter account for its recent General Assembly. Furthermore, there are some churches that have gone so far as to encourage twittering during the Sunday service, while other churches have established special Twittering services. In these Twittering services, the tweets are flashed up on the screen for worshippers to see and range from – “I love that jumper you are wearing Jo” to “Nothing u do 4 the lord is in vain” and “Awesome music today.” There is even a Christian version of Twitter now available called Gospelr. It is hoped that it will become a Christian alternative to Twitter and an effective way of sharing the Gospel.

## Theological Twitter

One of the worries of engaging in Twitter in a church is that we can end up trying to reduce complex ideas and perspectives into a few words. This is not always possible, and the result is often a bumper-sticker theology. In a world that so often looks like it lacks any real depth, the Church stands as a bastion where reflections are offered on matters of life and faith that seek to go beneath the surface. This has Biblical precedence. Remember the invitation Jesus made to Peter at the beginning of Luke’s gospel to go with him into the deep (Luke 5:4).

On the other hand, the Gospel writers and Jesus himself all show a wonderful ability to communicate complex ideas in short concise statements. For example, John 3:16 is less than 140 characters and would make it in its entirety onto Twitter. The Lord’s Prayer may take three or four tweets but it is wonderfully brief. Jesus invitation to the disciples to “follow me” would easily make it into the Tweet. We don’t just find this in the New Testament either. One of the great things about Biblical Hebrew is its ability to be concise. Whole sentences in English are communicated in Hebrew in just a few words. Clergy, myself included, are frequently guilty of being long winded in prayers, sermons, and explanations, and maybe this is

1 <http://www.standonline.org.uk>

2 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/northern\\_ireland/8020285.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/8020285.stm)

not the way to really connect with busy people in a busy world.

## Presbyterian Twitter

Is the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand ready for Twitter? No, possibly not. I expect this all sounds ridiculous to many of you who are reading. Should the Presbyterian Church be making some more progress by way of cyber communication? Yes, I think we should. The launch of the new national Presbyterian website is a good opportunity to reflect on the ways that locally and nationally we are communicating as a Church via the internet.

According to the national website, over 100 Presbyterian churches in New Zealand have websites. In a quick survey of these websites most of them are directed at providing newcomers with information about what a particular Church offers. It is hard to fathom what information current members would gain from these websites that they did not already know. Some attempts are being made to improve cyber communication. There is a growing trend for Presbyterian ministers to email mid-week reflections or weekly prayers and from my own experience this has proved to be a great way of keeping in contact with busy people.

I have also heard of some Presbyterian ministers who are beginning to use Facebook to promote activities. I am a Facebook friend of Howard Carter the Student Soul Minister up in Auckland and I notice he uses Facebook to keep people up to date about events that are taking place and to offer his perspective on recent movies, books etc.... There are other glimmers of hope. Auckland Presbytery launched a Media Centre late last year lead by Jamie Worn, the tech-wiz at St Columba Botany. I would be very interested in learning of other progress made in this area of cyber communication – and especially any churches in New Zealand who are experimenting with Twitter. More is needed. At the very least, perhaps we should explore Twitter for our General Assembly next year – I am sure I will be able to find a few other “Twits” there wanting to tweet!<sup>3</sup>

3 Editor’s note: feedback on the kind of communications you want to see at GA10 is welcome and can be sent to [amanda@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:amanda@presbyterian.org.nz)

# Finding God in comic books

Stephen Garner\*

Popular culture is often seen as primarily films, music, and television, and that is typically where most of the Christian community's engagement with popular culture has been focused, often with some sort of missiological emphasis. The comic book and the graphic novel also present within the worlds of popular culture, though their presence is often missed or discerned only from others' sources. Certainly the fact that they are rarely sold outside of specialist shops has lowered their profile, though if you attend a local popular culture expo, you will find more comics enthusiasts and New Zealand comic creators than you might expect.

Most people, however, probably consider comic books, if they consider them at all, to be aimed at children, and to a certain extent that was true. However, some of children of 20-30 years ago who read comics, grew up and still want to read them, and so the storylines in most comic books now are aimed at an adult audience. Titles such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986-7); Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986); Will Eisner's *A Contract with God and other Tenement Stories* (1978); and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1989-96) all shifted comic books from a bright and shiny world to one with substantially more darkness and mature content.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the comic book publishers are recreating new "kid-friendly" lines of existing comics in an attempt to recapture the children's audience that they lost.

This shift also moved comics away from being primarily concerned with spandex-clad superheroes (though that's still a strong emphasis), to embracing the use of sequential art organising space and time to tell all manner of stories. Out of this has come the graphic novel, which deals with lengthy and complex storylines but in the form of a comic book. For example, *Pride of Baghdad* tells the story of the American bombing of Baghdad in 2003 from the perspective of the zoo animals caught up in it, while *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman is a memoir about being a Polish Jew during the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> Both are narratives created for a mature, adult audience.

Comic books have also given us a number of cultural icons that have entered everyday culture, even if they have now become adrift from their original source material, with superheroes such as Superman and Batman instantly recognisable regardless if one has ever read the comics. Moreover, comic books are frequently the source

for cinema and television, with obvious connections to superhero films such as *Spider-Man* (2002) and *The Dark Knight* (2008), and television shows like *Heroes* and *Smallville*. Less obvious connections include films such as *The Road to Perdition* (2002), *V for Vendetta* (2005), *Constantine* (2005), *The Spirit* (2008) and *300* (2006). It may be, as David Hughes argues, that the comic book movie has become a kind of morality play for the current generation:

Why this sudden fascination with comic book heroes? Perhaps because so many directors and studio executives grew up (as I did) on Marvel and DC comics - an entire generation learned about morality, heroism and the difficult choices faced by heroes not from the classics, but from *Spider-Man* and *The Hulk*, with mythologies as potent and powerful as those of the gods of ancient times.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that while comic books and graphic novels might be considered minor players in the world of popular culture, they do exert some measure of influence in their own right and as an influence upon other genres and media. What might not be so clear to many though is that comic books and graphic novels serve as an interesting source for religious engagement and reflection. Biblical material is being deliberately adapted to the medium, comic books are sometimes used as evangelistic tools, and people both inside and outside of the Christian community are using comic books as a vehicle for theological and spiritual reflection.

## Adapting the Bible to graphical form

One of the most obvious places that religious faith and comic books intersect is in the adaptation of the Biblical text to a graphical format. The motivations for doing this vary: some are looking for a way to make the Biblical story more accessible to visually oriented audiences; others are looking to grow new commercial markets for Biblical translations; and still others find opportunities to explore their own personal faith in allowing the Biblical story to engage with the issues of the everyday world in that world's own language.

At one level, this adaptation is a simple retelling of the Biblical material, and particularly its narratives, in a fairly conventional way. The words spoken are verbatim from a particular translation of the Bible, and the imagery confirms to familiar Sunday School Biblical im-



agery. This, of course, highlights the tension that arises with any adaptation of Biblical material into graphical format – namely, that the format of the medium requires that the writer, artist and inker interpret the Biblical text in a particular way in order to represent it in the comic book format, compressing detailed textual material into one or more panels.

Not only does this have the potential to remove the role of reader's imagination in encountering Biblical text but, as Burke and Lebrón-Rivera remark, it can lead to some interesting tensions. The Biblical text "domesticated" by tradition and familiarity may now be displayed in a way that renders it "foreign" to that domestication, setting up a kind of unsettling dissonance for the reader.<sup>4</sup> The white, middle-class, blue-eyed Jesus of the imagination may explicitly and disturbingly appear graphically as the first-century Palestinian Jew in a Middle Eastern country occupied by a world superpower.

Parallel to the more traditional graphical interpretations of the Bible, are those where the creator is using the medium to explore questions or issues related to their own faith. An example of this is the recent Manga Bible created by British comic book artist, Siku, which uses a mixture of European and Japanese styles to explore the Biblical text. For Siku, the work includes his own reflections on the power and unknowableness of God:

*Jesus is not cuddly in this Manga book. In the desert, he's actually more terrifying than Satan. He's hooded and his face is shaded. The Devil is more vanilla-flavoured looking - very, very plain. I've deliberately made Jesus more imposing than anyone else throughout the story, and darker. He's creepier.*

*I don't just see God as a shining light thing. I also see him as a dark, brooding force. I've tried to inject that into how I see Jesus.<sup>5</sup>*

One of the notable things about Siku's adaptation of the New Testament is that he doesn't shy away from dealing with non-narrative material like the Epistles. Rather than just concentrating on the Gospels and Revelation, which lend themselves to easier adaptation, the epistolary material is dealt with in an engaging fashion interwoven with material from the Acts of the Apostles. For example, the whole page spread of the Galatian "super-apostles"

brings out a striking contrast of light and dark in their portrayal underlining the clashes of authority between them and Paul.

This personal exploration of the Biblical text is further developed in the work that sets the Biblical stories within the contemporary world, and uses them to engage with issues within the everyday world. The work of both Steve Ross and Douglas Rushkoff falls into this category, the former with his retellings of Mark's Gospel (Marked!) and more recently of Paul (Blinded!), and the latter with his reinterpretation of the Genesis Akedah narrative in

his Testament series. Ross situates his Jesus as a construction worker in a contemporary Middle Eastern country occupied by a Western superpower. The overall

path of Markan text is followed, but the adaptation allows critical engagement with not only that Gospel, but also with issues of globalisation, media power and imperialism in the contemporary world.<sup>6</sup>

Rushkoff's work is far more radical in its treatment of the Biblical text and its underlying religious foundation, seeking to "rewrite" the relationship between the deities Yahweh, Molech and Astarte present in the Ancient Near East. In fact, Rushkoff ends up with an almost Marcion-like separation of the God of the Old Testament into two separate deities – a benevolent Abrahamic God and a more malevolent God linked to the Canaanite gods. What is interesting about Rushkoff's adaptation of the Biblical text is how he has a number of related narrative strands running through each issue. In particular, the Akedah narrative (Gen 22), where Abraham is called by God to sacrifice Isaac, is portrayed in parallel to a contemporary story in post-9/11 America where a father is being asked by the State to "sacrifice" his (and others') children by implanting tracking chips in them for security purposes.<sup>7</sup>

Rushkoff's depiction of the Genesis story is an uncomfortable and unorthodox reinterpretation (and definitely not for children), and follows his own agenda, but it is an interesting example of how Biblical material is being used by some in a different way to a more literal adaptation of a narrative. Similar adaptations of Biblical material with contemporary slants include Archaia Studios Press' Some New Kind Of Slaughter, or Lost In The Flood (And How We Found Home Again): Diluvian Myths From Around The World and The Lone and Level Sands. The former juxtaposing several ancient flood stories (e.g. Noah, At-

rahasis) with contemporary narratives of global warming and rising sea levels, and the latter looking at the Exodus story from the perspective Ramses II.

### **Finding religion in the comic book literature**

As well as material directly sourced in the Biblical texts, issues of religion and faith also crop up when religious themes or persons are dealt with within secular comic books and graphic novels. The creation of a world in which to situate narratives, whatever their genre, requires the author to define what that world is like, and the worlds that characters like Superman and Batman exist within have remarkably well-developed cosmologies with natural and supernatural dimensions.

At times engagement with these supernatural dimensions is dealt with superficially. For example, characters in the Superman universe such as The Spectre (God's agent of vengeance) or Zauriel (an angel of God who invokes Christ's name as a source of power and who serves with other superheroes) are often disconnected from any detailed description of the God that they serve. At other times, however, the theological connections are explicitly part of the narrative. Mark Waid and Alex Ross' mini-series *Kingdom Come* is set within the DC Comics Superman universe and deals with the idea of divine justice being delivered on the world of superheroes as seen through the eyes of a struggling Christian minister. Similarly, the theologically trained comic book writer John Ostrander often explored the nuances of vengeance, revenge, and redemption within that same comic book world.<sup>8</sup>

Moviegoers who were familiar with movies such as *Spawn* (1997) and *Constantine*, may also be interested to note that both of those films are based on comic book material that has well-developed religious cosmologies. In the case of *Constantine*, that universe is interwoven with the common universe of both Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* and of Superman and Batman. It is these well-developed cosmologies that allow for death to be something of a revolving door in comic books.

Mainline superhero comics like Superman also engage with concepts of religious belief and practice with a view to offering some sort critique upon them, with the recent stories *Angel* and *Redemption* highlighting this. *Angel* deals with how a person copes with the belief that others have that they have been divinely sent to protect them, while *Redemption* offers a commentary on American Christian fundamentalism by asking what if a Superman had been raised in that environment.<sup>9</sup>

More could also be made of characters in mainline comics such as Superman, the religious allegories they perform, and the ways in which they reflect the aspects of their creators' own ethnicity, religion and life situation. For example, Superman, originally created by immigrant Jews and reflecting elements of that in his origin story, has since been reinterpreted by some through Christological lenses using the various Superman movies.

### **The comic book as religious tool**

As well as the adaptation of Biblical material and religious themes in the wider comic book world, the comic book genre is also used for explicitly evangelistic or polemical communication or as a resource for those within the Christian community.

Probably the most common form of the evangelistic or polemical material that people come across is that of tract-like publications, and probably the most well known of these are the "Chick Comic Tracts" produced by American publisher Jack Chick.<sup>10</sup> These are short evangelical-themed tracts produced in booklet form that attempt to get the reader attention through a particular topic or slogan, present a particular understanding of the Gospel, and then end with a call to receive Christ. The tracts themselves also serve a polemical purpose, criticising other parts of the Christian Tradition (e.g. Roman Catholicism), other religions and ideologies, and ideas such as evolution, and ideas in the tracts are sometimes developed in a range of longer colour comic books focusing on particular issues of faith and biblical interpretation.

Tract-like material is only one particular way in which comic books are used to communicate the Gospel, and in recent times there has been a significant increase in not only evangelistic material in comic book form, but material that serves as a resource for those within the Christian community (especially targeted at children and young adults). This material may be overtly biblically based, or draw upon Christian themes and values portrayed through historical figures, superheroes or relationships. Moreover, the material might not even be represented graphically, as in the case of David Zimmerman's book, *Comic Book Character*, which uses examples from comic books to explore the Christian moral life.<sup>11</sup>

### **The comic book as place of spiritual reflection**

A final place where one might see faith, spirituality and comics intersect is in material produced in order to critique or explore spiritual or theological ideas without being caught up in a preexisting comic book universe. Some of this might be explicitly religious or spiritual, but some of it may be in the eye of the beholder. New Zealand com-

ic creator Dylan Horrock's Hicksville graphic novel falls, I believe, in the latter category.<sup>12</sup> Set in contemporary New Zealand, it examines issues to do with identity and self-understanding that some might see in spiritual terms. Other more explicitly spiritually exploratory material can be found in graphic novels such as *Blankets*, *The Rabbi's Cat*, Will Eisner's *A Contract with God*, and J. Michael Straczynski's *Midnight Nation* series.<sup>13</sup>

In the autobiographical graphic novel *Blankets*, writer Craig Thompson explores his teenage years being brought up within American Protestant fundamentalism. It reflects upon the effect that environment had upon his relationships with his family and others, and how his reaction to that upbringing shaped the person he became. As such, it serves as a vehicle to allow others to reflect on how their own religious upbringing and teenage years, and to examine their own faith (or lack thereof) and the web of relationships they find themselves in.

If *Blankets* represents a personal, autobiographical reflection, then Straczynski's *Midnight Nation* (2000-2) comic book series represents a more philosophical and theological one. Straczynski, who is also responsible for the science fiction television series *Babylon 5* and *Jeremiah* both with significant religious themes, uses the theme of journeying to explore the concept of theodicy. In the series, the central character, accompanied by an angel sent by God, must walk across America to confront a Satan-like figure in order to save his soul. The journey is both physical and metaphorical, and over its course the protagonist wrestles with issues such as the relationship between God and evil in the world, sacrifice, his own sins, and the concepts of freedom, death and love. It displays a level of engagement with those topics that draws the reader into some stimulating theological reflection.

It should be apparent then from this brief examination of different ways in which faith and comic books meet, that while comic books are not as visible perhaps as cinema, music and television, they can represent a rich source of material for theological and religious engagement. Some of this reflection occurs as we encounter Biblical material that has been adapted to a graphical format, perhaps forcing us to look again at the images we have "domesticated" in the Biblical text. Comic book material produced from outside of the Christian community is also full of resources for reflecting upon, and not just upon theological issues, but also how religion in general is appropriated and perceived in the wider world. This in turn opens doors to all kinds of interesting possibilities for dialogue and engagement with that world.

*\*Stephen Garner is the Director of Undergraduate Studies in the School of Theology at the University of Auckland, where he lectures in Practical Theology. He has a long time interest in science fiction and comic books, and is currently teaching the undergraduate course The Bible in Popular Culture. He lives in West Auckland with his wife, Kim, and their family, and attends Massey Presbyterian Church.*

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John Newton, *The Double Rainbow: James K. Baxter, Ngāti Hau and the Jerusalem Commune* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009)

Reviewed by Jason Goroncy

John Newton's engaging book, *The Double Rainbow: James K. Baxter, Ngāti Hau and the Jerusalem Commune*, examines the Ngāti Hau community that Aotearoa's best-known poet James K. Baxter was instrumental in establishing at Hiruhārama, on the Whanganui River – "the country's first and most influential experiment in 'hippie communalism'" (p. 38). As Newton notes in his Introduction:

The double rainbow is Baxter's symbol for a mutually regenerative bicultural relationship. He recognised that the Pākehā majority ignored Māori culture, not just to the cost of Māori ... but also to its own detriment. Pākehā, he wrote in 1969, a few months before he first moved to Jerusalem, 'have lived alongside a psychologically rich and varied minority culture for a hundred years and have taken nothing from it but a few place-names and a great deal of plunder'. Pākehā culture's material dominance was accompanied by an arrogance and ethnocentrism which left it spiritually impoverished.

He cites Baxter:

*'Ko te Maori te tuakana. Ko te Pakeha te teina ...' The Maori [sic] is indeed the elder brother and the Pakeha [sic] the younger brother. But the teina has refused to learn from the tuakana. He has sat sullenly among his machines and account books, and wondered why his soul was full of bitter dust ...*

And then offers the following commentary:

*The cost was everywhere to be seen, but nowhere more plainly than among urban youth. For Baxter, their wholesale disaffection was a realistic verdict on the society they had inherited, a mainstream culture whose spiritlessness and meanness – to say nothing of its arrogance towards its neighbours – deserved no better. In the Māori world, by contrast, and particularly in Māori communalism, he believed he could see an alternative to this atomised majority culture – a system of values that answered to the longings and frustrations that he recognised, both in himself and in the young people around him. To establish an alternative Pākehā community that could 'learn from the Maori side of the fence' was to help restore, symbolically, the mana of the tangata whenua and to begin to resuscitate a Pākehā culture that was choking to death on its own materialism. (pp. 11–12)*

Such constitutes the earth from which a functioning intentional community at Hiruhārama budded, a community made up largely of those for whom mainstream Aotearoan society meant fatherlessness.

While concerned not to diminish Baxter's part in the formation of the Ngā Mōkai community but rather to place it in the context of a larger "utopian experiment" (p. 88) Baxter initiated, Newton seeks to "offer a stronger account of what Baxter achieved at Jerusalem by bringing into focus its collaborative dimension" (p. 16). He properly contends that what the 41-year-old Baxter set in motion, and towards which the baby-boomer "orphanage" of the damaged that was his living poetry bore witness to, was something considerably larger than Baxter himself, and that the unique cohabitation and set of cultural negotiations that were embodied in the Whanganui River communities (particularly Ngāti Hau, Ngā Mōkai, the church – which was "threaded through the life of the river" (p. 59) – and the Sisters of Compassion) draw attention to implications far beyond both Baxter or to the communities themselves. This, of course, is of the essence of Baxter himself, that before he was a hippie, he was "a Catholic, a Christian humanist, and an aspiring Pākehā-Māori" (p. 36), he was a poet-prophet charged not simply with interpreting the social environment that he inhabited, but of actively improving it, of giving material shape to it. The book is loosely divided into three main sections: an introductory phase that addresses the pre-history of the community and Baxter's first year of residence; a middle section that covers its heyday; and a downstream phase that describes the community's various offshoots and considers its legacy. The result – for the reader prepared to follow the narrative – is the stripping away of "cultural safety".

Newton details further upon what we know of Baxter from other places while eloquently introducing us to a host of other equally-fascinating characters – Father Wiremu Te Awhitu, pā women Dolly, Alice, Lizzie and Wehe (who are often remembered as "substitute" mothers (p. 89)), Aggie Nahona, and Denis O'Reilly among them. He also highlights Baxter's visionary kinship with French-born nun Marie Henriette Suzanne Aubert with whom he shared "a staunch commitment to Māori, and to spiritual love as the first principle of a hands-on social mission" (p. 45). Newton argues that this part of Baxter's history "doesn't get acknowledged in Baxter's rhetorical point-scoring at the expense of the mainstream church. Without it, however, his own Jerusalem 'orphanage' would never have eventuated. In one sense the debt is symbolic or poetic: the presence of the church at Jerusalem draws te taha Māori into dialogue with the other key spiritual driver

of his later career, namely his Catholic faith ... Baxter brought his showmanship, and his personal (some might argue, narcissistic) sense of mission. But he also brought with him – embodied, or enacted – the self-interrogation and social radicalisation that had seized hold of the Catholic Church globally in the wake of Vatican II. After the Berrigans and the draft card burnings, after liberation theology, what did the Christian mission imply in the context of ongoing colonial injustice?” (pp. 46, 47)

Jerusalem was Baxter’s riposte to all those Pākehā institutions – the churches, the university, the nuclear family and so on – whose lack of heart and small-minded materialism were now failing Pākehā youth in the same way that Pākehā culture had always failed Māori. In looking for a remedy for the failings of Pākehā society, he found his prime inspiration in the communitarian virtues that he saw among Māori: aroha, mahi, kōrero, manuhiritanga. This was ‘learn[ing] from the Maori side of the fence’: his community was to be modelled on the marae. Of course, in offering this open door the commune depended entirely on the hospitality of Ngāti Hau ... But the commune was not just a place to live – a material shelter for whomever happened to be there ... it was also a piece of political theatre. And the commune’s significance as a political intervention depended for its fullest expression on publicity: it was intended, at least in part, to be a spectacle, a City on a Hill! At the same time, it was integral to the kaupapa that it be open to all comers. This was the paradox that Baxter was confronted by: the more effectively this vision was communicated, the more would it lead to a pressure of numbers that would overwhelm the commune’s own capacity to provide for itself, and which eventually must wear out the patience of the local community. (p. 65)

Yet Newton is at pains to point out throughout his study that Hiruhārama is more prodigious than Baxter. Indeed, the bulk of the book is given to defending and illustrating this thesis, that Hiruhārama after Baxter entered into a period of unforeseen maturity, and particularly the maturity of its relationship with the pā. Community life under Greg Chalmers’ leadership may have been less eventful, but those years from 1972 do more to fulfil Baxter’s hopes of regenerative partnerships than those prior.

Two chapters are concerned with articulating events birthed following the final closure of the community at Hiruhārama, and to highlighting that while a distinctive phase of the Ngā Mōkai narrative had reached its end, its impulse did not die with the community itself. Newton draws attention to a network of loosely affiliated houses – from flats and private homes, to crashpads and urban

shelters, to far-flung intentional communities – which functioned as homes-away-from-home for a diasporic Ngā Mōkai whānau, a “network of initiatives which imported the Jerusalem kaupapa back into urban contexts” (p. 154), and there “offering a dispersed community the chance of reconnection, reaffirmation and renewal” (p. 164). He recalls Hiruhārama’s various germinations at Reef Point, Wharemanuka and Whenuakura. “With the shutting of the original commune, these ‘shoots of the kumara vine’ [became] the focus of the Ngā Mōkai story. It’s here, in this ramshackle archipelago, that those who had been touched by Jerusalem attempted to keep alive the kaupapa” (p. 131).

The penultimate chapter, “Baxter’s Wake”, re-spotlights Baxter, and is given to argue that Baxter’s literary legacy and his social legacy are “shoots of the same vine” (p. 169):

*‘Jerusalem’ was never an alternative to the poetry; it was part of it, its logical destination, even its most vivid accomplishment. In his burial on the river we find Baxter the poet and the Baxter the activist inextricably entwined. This integration was precisely his ambition, and the fact he achieved it is what makes these events still resonate. (p. 171)*

So Newton appropriately accentuates Baxter’s formulation of the poet’s ethical task to be no mere interpreter of society but one who endeavours to make society more just. “It is this sense of embodied ethics ... which leaps into focus when we think about Jerusalem” (p. 179).

The Double Rainbow is the fruit of an incredibly-impressive amount of extensive and laborious research. Newton commendably resists romanticising Baxter, Baxter’s vision, or the Ngāti Hau “classroom” itself. Those engaged in Baxter’s work and who want to better understand his Jerusalem Daybook or are interested in his biography, those seeking to understand, assess and inform Aotearoa’s multi-cultural, historical and spiritual landscape, those wanting to listen and to speak intelligently into contemporary debates about the relationship between government authorities and badge-wearing gangs carving out their own neo-tribal identity, and, more broadly, to a nation fascinated with re-carving a new national identity which buries settler mono-culturalism in its wake, and those devoted to the challenging work of inspiring, creating, leading, building, replanting and closing local and grassroots communities will be well-served to have Newton’s essay in hand. An invaluable and timely record certain to inform, impress and inspire.

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Few conversations tell me more about the differences and similarities between our Church and other churches in the Pacific than does a conversation about the role of the minister and the place of the church in our respective communities.

It is lunchtime on the second day of our Council for World Mission Pacific region management group meeting. I have just had a conversation with a prominent minister from our partner church in Papua New Guinea, the 700,000-member UCPNG. To get to his village, he flies for an hour on a fixed-wing aircraft that lands on a remote dirt strip 200km from Port Moresby. He then gets into a small boat that travels along the coast for 3 hours before turning up a tributary, which they carefully navigate for another hour. His village has no running water and in the dry season, village women walk two hours a day to the nearest waterhole, which they share with alligators, large tusked wild pigs, and various other creatures. He tells me that the animals and humans have a way of taking turns.

Ministry in such communities consists not only of preaching, pastoral care, rudimentary literacy education and health care but also, especially in the highlands, the development of ceremonies that enable warring tribal groups to mollify escalating feud wars. He tells me that since proliferation of shotguns and rifles, wars that would often result in non fatal arrow and spear attacks have taken a far more deadly turn. One of the great challenges in these villages is to develop local enterprise that gives young people income opportunities and mitigates the desire to move to Port Moresby, where conditions for many teenagers are desperate. Papua New Guinea has the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the Pacific region, as well as tuberculosis and malaria.

It is interesting that in terms of aid and development, many agencies are now recognising that Churches have the most robust and intact networks in the Pacific. One of the biggest aid donors, the Australian Government's Oz Aid, has recently established significant partnership agreements with a number of Churches because of these networks.

A minister serving in most of our Pacific churches will have all their and their family's living needs provided by their local communities, and, most commonly, receive a very small sum of money from their congregation. In Samoa, a minister may receive these benefits as well as a far more significant income. However, unlike our Church, with that income will come expectations from the local community that the minister will share much of that wealth with those in need – he (almost always “he” in

Samoa) acts as a kind of local welfare agency, dispensing food and money to those in need, sick or in mourning. The minister may also act as a kind of “banker” for the keeping and distribution of high value customary gifts, like fine mats. The minister is an integral part of the local spiritual, as well as economic, infrastructure.

While various New Zealand commentators will, from time to time, bemoan the demands some Pacific congregations make on their members, I think we need a special sensitivity in terms of the transition issues faced not only by people coming to live in New Zealand from the Pacific, but the complex mix of social, economic and ecclesiological understandings that can form part of this transition.

Sitting with my Pacific colleagues, I am also reminded of the vast discrepancies in personal wealth and opportunity. For most of those at our meeting, the only way that they could ever travel abroad is through the assistance of an external aid or mission agency. For example, the cost of travelling from the Solomon's to our meeting in New Zealand is about ten times the annual stipend of a minister serving in our partner church, the UCSI. There is just one plane a week for the representative from Nauru to catch, and from some of the more far-flung places in the Pacific, it can take twice as long and cost twice as much to get to New Zealand as a flight from Auckland to London. The average GDP of our partners in the Pacific is one tenth of New Zealand's.

When it comes to the Church's involvement with aid and development, we really need to wrestle with the great claims of Christian unity that we find in our faith. There is an inter-dependence when it comes to the things of salvation. We need to think of an ideal based on a sense of shared destiny and of true partnerships reflecting a commonality of faith and hope and purpose. In practical terms, you and I need to know the name of someone in Honiara we can text message to ask “how is it going”, and our congregation needs to find another in the Pacific with whom to share in an outreach and mission programme.

The CWM meetings remind me that the quality of our relationships and the grace and generosity of our giving are the two sides of the coin in our Church's effective engagement with our Pacific brothers and sisters.

