Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

Candour

News and views for ministers *Number 1, February 2009*

Christian prophetic voice

Contents

About Candour

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

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Contributions

We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:
Amanda Wells (editor) on (04) 381-8285 or candour@presbyterian.org.nz

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The next deadline (for the March issue) is **6 March 2008**.

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March 16 - 23	Cottage
March 23 - 30	Homestead/Cottage

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There is **refundable $50 booking fee** for Glen Innis. This fee is payable to Margaret Black and refunded on arrival at Glen Innis.

Internet resources

Towards the end of last year, the editorial committee held a teleconference to plan the Candour themes for this year. I'm grateful to the advice of the committee, who are for 2009: the Rev Howard Carter, the Rev Mary Jane Konings, the Rev Allister Lane, the Very Rev Garry Marquand, the Rev Nathan Parry, the Right Rev Dr Graham Redding and the Rev Dr Kevin Ward.

One of the things we discussed was how to make it easier to share useful online resources. Perhaps we should have a regular column, by a different person every month, outlining what they find most useful; or perhaps we should just encourage people to send in snippets or urls pointing to good resources. If either of these approaches appeals to you and you have something to contribute, I would love to hear from you.

Please email candour@presbyterian.org.nz

Ministers' Information Forms

Ministers' Information Forms are an essential tool for ministry settlement boards looking to make a call. They are also an effective way for ministers to record their achievements throughout their career – including any additional training they undertake.

Ministers are strongly encouraged to update their Ministers' Information Form every three years so that the information remains current. If you would like to update your Form please email Juliette on juliette@presbyterian.org.nz for a template. Alternatively, you are welcome to send additional information to PO Box 9049, Wellington.

Predicting reactions to prophecy

Amanda Wells

What is prophecy? The word makes me think of Old Testament guys with beards, bizarre New Age fads (remember *The Celestine Prophecy*?), and the occasional verging-on-uncomfortable outpourings during a church service.

You might say that prophecy is supposed to make you uncomfortable, and I wouldn't necessarily disagree. According to my dictionary, prophecy means the "foretelling of future events". That sounds like fortune telling or horoscopes, both of which pander to humanity's seemingly insatiable appetite for foreknowledge. But in terms of the concept "prophetic voice", prophecy isn't about specifying who you will marry or whether a career change is a good idea. It's about speaking out, perhaps even offering a warning or outlining the future consequences of a current action.

One of the problems in deciding to speak out as a Church is agreeing on what we should say. It's not that everyone has to agree with every word, but that most of the wider Church needs to feel comfortable with anything said on its behalf. This introduces a necessary element of caution and reflection. For example, caring for Creation and the consequences of climate change are areas ripe for prophetic comment, but Christian views on the topic aren't always unanimous.

Even atheists can't agree on their message. Perhaps you've heard of the United Kingdom's "atheist bus campaign", in which £135,000 was raised through public donations to place an atheist ad on 800 buses in London and other main centres. The actual message was the problematic part: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life". Many atheists had problems with the word "probably" and online debates are filled not with outraged Christians but with atheist vs atheist/agnostic arguments.

It is fair to point out that the idea for the campaign came as a reaction against the "Jesus said" ads that ran on London buses in June 2008. These ads displayed the address of a website that stated non-Christians "will be condemned to everlasting separation from God and then you spend all eternity in torment in hell … Jesus spoke about this as a lake of fire prepared for the devil".[1] Obviously that's the kind of public voice prepared to turn some of the audience from neutral/uncaring to actively hostile.

The concept "prophetic voice" implies an audience; why speak without a listener? When we talk of the Church's prophetic voice, who do we envisage as listening? Perhaps ourselves. But surely we also envisage a community of interest: perhaps in your locality, perhaps New Zealanders at large. How ready is this audience to listen? Does this audience, tolerant or even demanding of pluralism, need the message couched in words it can hear?

Before we consider our message, we need to think about what our audience can accept. This isn't about compromising the message. Imagine everyone in your audience has a strong dislike of the colour blue, and shows agitation when confronted with blue objects or signs.[2] If you choose to print your message on blue flyers, it doesn't matter what you say. The message will not be heard. More relevantly, if your audience is overwhelingly secularised, using language straight out of the Old Testament will evoke noncomprehension or hostility. We don't like what we can't understand. Tailoring a message to an audience is about making it palatable to them in the sense that they hear and comprehend it before they reject it, rather than vice versa.

This doesn't mean watering down prophecy. The most memorable public service campaigns of recent times have been uncompromisingly harsh. "If you drink and drive, you're a bloody idiot"; "the faster you go, the bigger the mess". Compare these to the unhelpfully nuanced and forgettable"it's not the drinking, it's how we're drinking". Our society isn't averse to bluntness.

Recently I've read Lynne Baab's excellent new book *Reaching out in a Networked World*, which reiterates the useful truth that the messages we hear about ourselves play a huge part in shaping self-perception and therefore who we actually are. Using one of her examples, if a church often mentions during its services the importance members place on prayer, members and newcomers are more likely to pray more and to think of themselves as prayer-focused. Sometimes the message comes before the reality. Perhaps sometimes the repetion of a prophecy will make it true.

1 My information about the atheist bus campaign comes from the Guardian Online, www.guardian.co.uk

2 In the movie *The Village*, the villagers have been taught to fear red, to interesting visual effect.

Prophecy: Yesterday and today

Rob Yule, Greyfriars Presbyterian, Mt Eden, Auckland

In the early 1990s, there was considerable debate regarding the phenomenon of prophecy in the Church today, occasioned by the passing prominence given to the "Kansas City Prophets". Though there no longer seems to be such interest in the subject, it is my conviction that prophecy is too important to be neg.lected. I regret that it is not taken more seriously by many ministers and churches.

A far from trivial matter

Personal prophecy has often been trivialised, but it brings genuine encouragement whenever it is properly exercised. The most accurate bringer of personal prophecy I have ever met was Australian Ken Newton. He prophesied that I would write many small booklets and articles. "Scholars write long books that few people read. You will write many small pieces that lots of people will read." As someone who had addled my brains for three and a half years unsuccessfully trying to do doctoral research, I found that an enormous relief and encouragement. Here was a complete stranger, who read my temperament and giftedness exactly! It freed me from a burden of failure, and gave me confidence in my ministry.

> To be a prophet is no sinecure. We see the Biblical prophets at times overwhelmed and almost crushed by God's call

Sometimes prophecy is far from trivial. In 1911, the Russian Orthodox monk Seraphim said, "An evil will shortly take Russia, and wherever this evil comes, rivers of blood will flow because of it… It is not an ideology, or a philosophy, but a spirit from hell." The prophecy was preserved by Mother Barbara, who lived in the Russian convent on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and was herself an intercessor for the nations.[1]

William Hechler was Anglican chaplain at the British embassy in Vienna, where he struck up a friendship with Zionist leader Theodor Herzl. Hechler outlived Herzl by a quarter of a century, and died in 1931. Towards the end of his life, Hechler repeatedly warned of a coming massacre of Jews in Europe that would make the Crusades and Inquisition look like "child's play".[2]

During his world tour in 1924, the Maori prophet and healer Wiremu Ratana – who at that time still regarded himself as a Presbyterian layman – visited the Japanese Emperor Yoshihito in the imperial palace in Tokyo. Challenged by the imperial staff, if he really was a prophet, to bring a prophecy for the emperor, Ratana is reported to have said: "Your status as a god will be taken from you. Your people will be turned to dust when you see two bright lights above you. Give up your godship or God will bring your to your knees."[3] Ratana was an admirer of Japan, so he can hardly be accused of prophesying out of his own spirit.

Personally, I am convinced that prophecy is not just a Biblical phenomenon, but occurs today. It occurs not only in the sense acceptable to liberal ministers and theologians, as the Church's exercise of social justice (though it may include that), but in the charismatic sense of intuiting what God feels or says, impresses or discloses about a matter.

Prophetic inspiration and experience

Prophecy is hearing from God, and speaking what God says or shows. A twofold responsibility is involved: accurately hearing or discerning what God is saying, and effectively communicating this so that other people understand what God is saying and act upon it. These two elements are respectively the divine and human aspects of prophecy.

The *divine aspect* of prophecy is well described by the apostle Peter: "no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

1 It is quoted by Michael Green, *I Believe in Satan's Downfall* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1981), p. 232.

2 Paul C. Merkley, *The Politics of Christian Zionism, 1891-1948* (London, Frank Cass, 1998), p. 34.

3 Keith Newman, *Ratana Revisited: An Unfinished Legacy* (Auckland, Reed, 2006), p. 143.

The prophet is a spokesperson of a revelation from God, declaring the mind and heart of God on a particular subject. What could not be known by natural insight, intelligence or discernment is communicated through the prophet to people by the moving of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the inspirer of prophecy, just as prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit.

The divine aspect of prophecy is underlined by the variety of terms the Bible uses to describe a prophet or a prophetic call.[4] The prophet is a "seer" (*roeh*, 1 Samuel 9:9), someone who is granted a vision of the Lord or of a particular situation, and tells what they have seen. The most common Hebrew word for a prophet is *navi*, meaning God's "announcer" or "spokesperson", someone who announces to others what God has first revealed to them. The objectivity of this prophetic revelation is indicated by the Hebrew word *massa*, which refers to the divinely given "burden" or "load" of revelation placed on a prophet by the Lord – in contrast to false prophets who prophesy "from their own minds" without the Lord having spoken to them (Jeremiah 23:16-32). In the New Testament the Greek term *prophetes* simply means "one who speaks forth" the mind of God on any matter, whether past, present or future.

The *human aspect* of prophecy refers to the prophet's background, call, experience, character, capacity and response to God. The struggle of the prophet is not about the theoretical issue of whether or not God speaks. It is with the burning practical issue of how to handle it when God does. Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel identifies this anguish or pathos as the heart of prophetic experience: "The prophet is not a mouthpiece, but a person; not an instrument, but a partner, an associate of God…. The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, *a sympathy with the divine pathos*…. The prophet hears God's voice and feels His heart."[5]

To be a prophet is no sinecure. We see the Biblical prophets at times overwhelmed and almost crushed by God's call. "Woe to me! I am ruined!" cries Isaiah when he sees the vision of God's holiness (Isaiah 6:5). Jeremiah, the "weeping prophet", is Job-like in his questioning of God (Jeremiah 12:1, 14:13), and ceaselessly cries out in anguish (4:19), tears (9:1) and loneliness (15:17) because of the nature of his calling. Ezekiel is not even allowed to mourn the death of his wife (Ezekiel 24:15-18). Amos's uncomplicated southern rural lifestyle is rudely shattered by God's call to preach justice to complacent northerners (Amos 1:1, 7:14-15). One can sympathise with Jonah for taking a ship in the other direction – but that was no recipe for an easier life either!

The glory and the terror

So the exercise of prophetic ministry, far from the glibness that surrounds it in some circles, is an awesome responsibility. In the Old Testament, it was a life or death matter (Deuteronomy 18:20-22). The Lord himself undertook to deal with those who "speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD" (Jeremiah 23:16, 34-36). Prophets were personally accountable if they heard from God and failed to warn others (Ezekiel 33:1-20). Who would dare take this ministry upon themselves? "Prophecy is the most demanding of the ministries", writes Clifford Hill. "It is an awesome responsibility, a task that no one should covet. Those who do seek it are usually not those who are called by God."[6]

Even those who are genuinely called can mishandle prophetic ministry

Even those who are genuinely called can mishandle prophetic ministry. There is a dramatic story in 1 Kings 13 that illustrates its glory and terror. A young, unnamed prophet from Judah turns up just as Jeroboam, the headstrong first king of the breakaway northern kingdom, is about to consecrate his alternative altar. In an action which could have cost him his life, the young prophet cries out against the altar. He prophesies that a future Judean king, Josiah – whom he actually identifies by name – would burn the bones of rebellious priests on this very altar – a prophecy that was precisely fulfilled over two and a half centuries later (2 Kings 23:16). The prophet then gives a sign to confirm the truth of the prophecy: the altar will split apart and its ashes be poured out.

Dramatically, as King Jeroboam reaches out to apprehend the prophet, his arm shrivels up, and the altar splits apart.

4 There is a popular account of these terms in Lance Lambert, *Till the Day Dawns: The Relevance of Biblical Prophecy* (Eastbourne, Kingsway, 1982, pp. 18-25.

5 *The Prophets*, Vol. 1 (New York, Harper and Row, 1969), pp 25-26.

6 *Prophecy Past and Present*, 1st ed. (Crowborogh, Highland Books, 1989), pp. 294-5.

The king stands before the ruined altar, humiliated. He asks the prophet to pray for him to be healed. It's the prophet's moment of triumph. His prophecy has come true, and the king is healed through his prayers.

But temptation strikes, and ultimately tragedy. The prophet has been told by the LORD, "You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came" (1 Kings 13:9). Will he obey the Lord's word for himself, or only for his prophetic ministry? To begin with, he obeys. He declines the king's offer of hospitality. Then he meets an old prophet, who lies: "I too am a prophet…. An angel said to me by the word of the LORD: 'Bring him back with you to your home so that he may eat bread and drink water.'" (1 Kings 13:18). Deceived, the young prophet wavers in his resolve, and goes and has a meal at the old prophet's house.

As the two are dining, they are found out. A word of the LORD comes to the older prophet, exposing his deception and announcing that young prophet will not be buried in his family grave. On the journey home, the young prophet is killed by a lion, and his mauled body is found on the road. It's a tragic ending – as if an electricity linesman were to repair a high voltage cable, then, returning home, be electrocuted changing a fuse.

How do we responsibly handle prophetic ministry, and how can we identify, train and encourage people with a prophetic motivation?

Getting it right

This salutary story teaches a number of lessons about prophetic ministry,[7] and indeed about godly living in general – since prophets are often burden bearers and object lessons for the rest of us:

1. God desires obedience in the personal life and character of prophets, as much as in the exercise of their prophetic ministry.
2. The moment of our greatest triumph may be the moment of our greatest temptation. Prophets should avoid the limelight, and be scrupulously careful about matters of remuneration and hospitality (see also 2 Kings 5:15-27).
3. Genuine prophets are still sinners: they are vulnerable to sin and flattery, can deceive or be deceived, like other people.
4. A true word of God may be given by a flawed or sinful person, as it was by the older prophet.
5. We should, therefore, exercise personal discernment in hearing or receiving prophecy. A prophetic message shouldn't be accepted uncritically, even when brought by an experienced prophet with a good track record. Even if someone we respect brings a word from God for us, we shouldn't accept it uncritically, but "ponder it in our hearts" (Luke 2:19), "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1), put it on the back burner until independent guidance objectively confirms it, and until clearly persuaded otherwise continue conscientiously on the course that God has originally impressed upon us. Failure to do so was this young prophet's undoing.

A prophet's responsibility is not confined to the prophetic message; it also extends to what I would call the prophetic manner. Prophets are responsible not only for what they say – but also for how they say it. This is where many a true prophetic word has been disqualified by a prophet's censorious attitude, carelessness, or wrong sense of timing.

A Biblical example of the right way to deliver a prophetic message is the wonderful story of the prophet Nathan, sent by God to rebuke King David for his compound sin of adultery (with Bathsheba) and murder (of her husband Uriah) (2 Samuel 12). Consider the situation. Put yourself in Nathan's sandals. How would you handle this assignment and present God's rebuke – so that it achieved the intended goal of David's repentance and amendment of life?

Can you imagine how Nathan must have prayed and sweated over the right line of approach? If he didn't get it right, he risked losing his life and provoking David to compound his error. In the event, he told a simple story of covetousness and injustice. David took the bait and gave judgment, convicting himself as he did so. It gave Nathan the opening he needed: "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says…." (2 Samuel 12:7).

Recognising prophets

In emphasising prophetic responsibility, my intention is not to stifle prophecy but to help us recognise and cultivate the real thing. "Do not treat prophecies with contempt", urged the apostle Paul. "Test everything." (1 Thessalonians 5:20-21). Both cautions are in order, as David Pawson rightly observes: "Too low a view of prophecy leads

7 Psychologist John White discusses this passage in his fine article on 'The Kansas City Prophets,' *Renewal,* No. 172 (September 1990), pp 12-15.

to *contempt*, which shuts out the Holy Spirit. Too high a view leads to *credulity*, which lets in other spirits."[8] The latter tendency, towards gullibility, characterises many charismatics. The former tendency, towards scepticism, afflicts many conservatives and liberals. On the one hand error and excess; on the other doubt and denial.

My chief concern in this article is not the usual one of pastors – how to regulate prophets or evaluate prophecy. Nor is it the usual one of theologians – what is the relationship between Biblical and contemporary prophecy, and whether the latter is valid or not. It is the much less usual one, on behalf of prophets – how do we responsibly handle prophetic ministry, and how can we identify, train and encourage people with a prophetic motivation? Many prophets miss their calling or become discouraged through lack of recognition or support. The church needs to recognise them and provide an environment in which they can exercise their ministry and mature in its development.

John and Paula Sandford offer some helpful clues to recognising budding prophets in our midst. "Great tragedies *may* signal God's special preparation in a life. People who are dreamers and visionaries... should be watched, for among them *may* be a prophet. Burden-bearers, or those who often take into their own beings empathetically the burdens of others, *may* be fledgling prophets."[9]

To these I would add some predisposing childhood characteristics: being less sociable and more of a loner; having an interest in true or factual things rather than imaginative pursuits; preferring to read history or international affairs rather than novels or fairy stories.[10] These are hints to watch, provided we remember that the decisive thing is not temperament but God's call and constraint in a person's life.

Prophetism has always been regarded as one of the central features of Hebrew religion, but till recently almost nothing was written about its role in the early Church or the Church today.[11] The charismatic renewal changed all that. Major academic books have appeared evaluating the phenomenon of prophecy in the early Church.[12] Fine books have appeared defending the exercise of the charismatic gifts in the post-apostolic Church.[13] And several helpful practical books have been published about the exercise of prophecy in the Church today.[14] There has even been an interesting study of prophecy in our New Zealand Churches.[15]

In the end, though, I find myself musing. Would we have accepted these strange characters, the Biblical prophets, if we had been their contemporaries? Do they meet our criteria for acceptable ministry? Are we not, by our comfortable religiosity or our theological reservations, in danger of regulating prophecy out of existence, of quenching what the Spirit is saying to the Church today?

How would you react if a prophet showed up in church this Sunday, and your altar fell apart? Like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor: "Why have you come to interfere with us?" Or like Moses: "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29).

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8 'Prophecy and Scripture,' *Renewal*, No. 173 (October 1990), p 20.

9 *The Elijah Task: A Call to Today's Prophets and Intercessors* (Tulsa, Victory House, 1986), p. 60.

10 See the childhood characteristics of prophecy listed in Don Pickerell, *Motivational Gifts* (Greenacre, NSW, Calvary Chapel, 1980), p. 11.

11 A rare exception was H. A. Guy, *New Testament Prophecy: Its Origin and Significance* (London, Epworth Press, 1947).

12 David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Basingstoke, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), David Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983).

13 Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Voice of God: How God Speaks Today Through Prophecies, Dreams, and Visions* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1988), Jon Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Postbiblical Miracles* (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

14 Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, Crossway Books, 1988), Clifford Hill, *Prophecy Past and Present: An Exploration of the Prophetic Ministry in the Bible and the Church Today*, 2nd. ed. (Guildford, Eagle, 1995).

15 Alistair Reese, *The Presence of God and His Prophetic Voice: A Study in the Development of the Prophetic Voice and its Significance for the Church Today* (Paengaroa, published by the author, 2002), containing interviews with New Zealand Christian leaders and prophets.

Christian community and the prophetic

*Geoff Stevens**

'You must be the change you want to see in the world.' Mahatma Gandhi

Christianity is, at its centre, a communal venture, not an individualistic or private enterprise. Jesus' coming was an invitation to enter a new communal reality as a starting and end point of a new order. His community, the Church, is intended to be a pilot project, a sample, a model for the new order; an anticipation and demonstration of what is to come. "The Church is called to be now what the world is called to be ultimately" (Yoder, *The Kingdom and Social Ethic*). Using Kodesh (Hebrew: "set apart" or "holy") residential Christian community in Avondale, Auckland as a model, I will attempt to show several ways in which such a group exercises a prophetic function to the Church and the wider community in which it is set.

A glimpse of what is to come

While it is clearly understood that a true "Kingdom lifestyle" would include an array of attitudes, values and aspirations that can only be fulfilled in the coming Kingdom, this does not exempt us from seeking to bring into effect some aspects of that future reality now. At Kodesh we only have part of the picture, we are only a very small part of the whole body. "We know only a portion of the truth...we don't yet see things clearly. We are squinting in a fog, peering through a mist" (1 Corinthians 13: 9, l2 *The Message*).

Thus, we realised when Kodesh was founded that we could only attempt to live out in a very limited way what we were perceiving of the future Kingdom. We decided to build our common life around five values: prayer, simplicity, hospitality, corporateness and servanthood. This is by no means an exhaustive list of what a true Kingdom lifestyle might incorporate. Our intention was to live counter-culturally or prophetically together in a way that we were unable to do individually.

We soon discovered that another aspect of limitation was our perspective of time. Initially we believed we were being realistic to plan for about five years to set up the legal process and draft a constitution. Upon seeking mature spiritual guidance for our undertaking from Father Theo (advisor to Catholic religious communities), in the Coromandel, we were told to consider a nearby kauri tree. "It has taken 500 years or more to reach that size," he commented. "Are you sons and daughters of eternity or not? You need to be thinking at least three score years and ten to begin such a project!"

It's amazing how perspective changes when a different time scale dictates one's work and life other than the frenetic, deadline-meeting pace so prevalent today. Life takes on a different rhythm, which Eugene Peterson so wonderfully renders as "the unforced rhythms of grace" (Matthew 11:29 *The Message*). We are to become "friends of time" rather than slaves to it (Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*). This attitude is counter-cultural and prophetic.

We find that life's starting and cut-off points of birth and death no longer dictate the way we live. We are projected into a different time framework, eternal life: the life of the age to come in the here and now. A community birthed by the Spirit of God will tend to grow slowly according to God's timetable, not ours. "God's Kingdom is like a pine nut that a farmer plants. It is quite small as seeds go, but in the course of years it grows into a huge pine tree and eagles build nests in its branches" (Matt 13:31 *The Message*). Our advisor warned us to start small and grow slowly.

Rhythms of life

So, in l985, a nuclear group moved into a large home in Avondale. It very quickly became evident that what we had got ourselves involved in was a "laboratory in living" where we would be taught how to love. According to Jesus this is the ultimate evangelising sign: "This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples - when they see the love you have for each other" (John 13:35 *The Message*). We had to learn to live in forgiveness towards our own weaknesses and failings, as well as those of others. We were not seeking some utopian idealised society. We had simply come together to seek to support each other in personal and corporate spiritual growth and to increase our effectiveness in reaching out to the needs around us. It was about being church rather than going to church: experiencing a quality of relating and fellowship more akin to the New Testament idea of *koinonia*.

It became critical that we find some effective, life-giving rituals and rhythms to give spiritual heart and sustenance to this embryonic community. Initially we pooled our incomes to meet expenses, out of necessity not idealism, and shared meals together. The most important thing,

however, was establishing regular times of communal prayer and Eucharist; five mornings each week in the early days, and later a more sustainable three mornings a week with one midday prayer time. This rhythm of prayer is at the heart of the community and accounts for the relatively conflict-free years since it started.

Hospitality in the "church you can sleep in"

One day I received a phone call. In broken English a voice asked "This is Wo from South China. Can I come over and sleep at your place?" Wo was told by friends in China that in New Zealand there was a church you can sleep in. He had searched Auckland for several days, but only found churches that were either empty (during the week) or had hard wooden seats that were not suitable for sleeping on.

Wo's friends in Avondale told him, "It could be that place at the end of the street." Unknown to us he came to look around the property, and then phoned. I invited him over to meet us and shortly afterwards he moved in. Living with Wo, who at this stage had never heard the Gospel, was like living with Jesus.

He initially started attending an active local church with a neighbour but eventually stopped going. I asked him, "Wo, why are you not going to church anymore?"

He said, "I sit on the wooden seat and the man at the front talk, talk, talk to us. I'm afraid that he's brainwashing us like the Communist Party used to do."

Eventually through friendship, shared meals and many searching conversations Wo declared himself ready to be a follower of Jesus and became part of a local church in Hong Kong on his return home.

Hospitality, the exercise of the gift of welcome, was initially one ministry expression of the community, especially to those marginalised by society due to emotional and social problems. Now, it has become the one undifferentiated function from which all the other ministries of the group flow. An invitation to "come and live with us" meets a need in a way that an invitation to a worship service or meeting cannot. Even an invitation to "come and eat with us" is more effective than, say, "come to a Bible study with us".

The door of open hospitality is especially effective when offered to the alien and stranger, as it has the potential to bless the host as well as the guest. "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews l3:2). The new immigrants, foreign students, refugees and asylum seekers of Auckland represent a potentially fruitful mission field. As a result of such outreach, Kodesh now consists of a multicultural mix, which has greatly enriched our lives and strengthened the community.

In my years as a ministry enabler to parishes in the Auckland Diocese, I would often ask vestries "what is your greatest asset?" Usually I was pointed to various aspects of their church programme or church plant and worship space. Never did any mention the homes of their church members, which are potentially every congregation's most effective evangelistic tool. "While we are greatly pressured to pull up the drawbridge when it comes to our own homes, the challenge is to lower it for the practice of hospitality" (Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*).

Simple acts of hospitality are the most obvious starting point for reaching out

Simple acts of hospitality are the most obvious starting point for reaching out; moving the focus from our church facilities and plant to our homes by providing a place of welcome, friendship and true spiritual fellowship. In homes, opportunities can be created for agenda-less heart-to-heart sharing of our joy and pain; opportunities to be listened to, encouraged and healed. Just hanging out together is often all that is needed. True hospitality is difficult to achieve in a congregational setting unless it crosses the threshold from the church to our homes.

It has been noted that we are living in a generation in which "belonging precedes believing". While the core of Kodesh consists of reasonably mature believers, many of those who come to live among us are not believers. Some do eventually make commitment to Jesus, and others don't, but all belong and are accepted equally as part of the Kodesh family. Many continue to maintain their contact with the community after moving on, and still treat it as their home, *marae* or family. In this sense, such a community becomes a sign of hope to the wider society – a beacon of friendship and a place of acceptance.

'Whole of Life' spirituality

The worship life of the community reflects the Celtic

understanding of the sacredness of the whole of life. Margaret Gunther captures this perspective succinctly in the title of her book: *Every Bush a Burning Bush*. Ignatian spirituality also teaches us about "finding God in all things – that God is revealed to us in the events, encounters and happenings of our everyday living". It has been the experience of many of us that some of the most significant turning points, markers, spiritual insights and numinous moments have occurred beyond the church walls, unexpectedly and serendipitously, in the course of our everyday lives. For me, two of the most life-changing moments and turning points in my life occurred in the context of giving or receiving hospitality.

Malcolm Muggeridge has said, "everything happening, small and great, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the secret of life is to get the message". In this regard, regular dialogue with a spiritual director is a practice we have found helpful. It is the task of the spiritual director (or "soul friend") to assist us, the directees, to recognise God's movement in our current life circumstances and happenings. Realising the value of this, several of us also trained to provide spiritual direction as a ministry of the community. This role of helping others to discern God's voice in the movements of their life is primarily a prophetic function.

Locality

The more a community deepens and grows, the more integrated it must be into the neighbourhood. Thomas Merton, the Trappist Monk, referred to this as the "spirituality of place". A critical issue for us has been how to live as grounded, stable, 21st Century Christians in a highly mobile society like New Zealand where people, on average, live in one house for only seven years – one of the most highly mobile populations in the world, according to recent statistics.

When committed to a particular place and context for the long-haul a Christian community becomes a catalyst for truly transformational work to begin. Only after Jesus had lived 30 years in obscurity, during which he fully entered into the times, life and culture of a Galilean village, bearing its burdens and sharing the brokenness, did he begin to act publicly and visibly. It seems from his example that it will normally take a very long-term commitment to a particular locale to really begin to understand and be equipped to grapple with all the complexity of the issues found there.

Kodesh has been in Avondale for 25 years. At this stage we are just beginning to be in a position to appreciate, understand and get involved in the local and wider issues through serving groups such as Parent Aid and Restorative Justice. We also attend regular networking meetings with other social agencies in our area, and an increasing flow of local immigrants are dropping in for company. The measure in which community members are able to demonstrate true servanthood to the wider community will be the measure in which God will enable them to have a prophetic voice into the issues confronting the area.

Diversity and grace

A hallmark of the community called into being by God is seen in the diversity of its members. "God seems pleased to call together into Christian community people who humanly speaking are very different, who come from different cultures, classes and countries and of different temperaments." (Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*). Since no ideal community exists, it is a question of loving those whom God has set us among. We have come to recognise that this is one of the most blessed and, at the same time, one of the most difficult aspects of living together. God is always, it seems, creating harmony out of diversity, unity out of difference.

We live, as Jesus lived, in a state of vulnerability and weakness

The miracle is that a measure of harmony can be achieved by God's grace. We live, as Jesus lived, in a state of vulnerability and weakness. We are learning that loving means becoming more open to others, letting others reach us and becoming sensitive enough to reach out to them. Also we are learning that not all problems, personal or communal, are fixable. It is important to learn to live with patience and fidelity within the constraints of the "what is-ness" of life. This requires faithfulness to the daily round of simple things like mowing lawns, cooking meals, making beds for guests, doing washing, paying bills, praying and celebrating life.

Humility and trust are foundational to the interdependence that cements the community together. We are constantly reminded that we are not as mature, strong, or in-

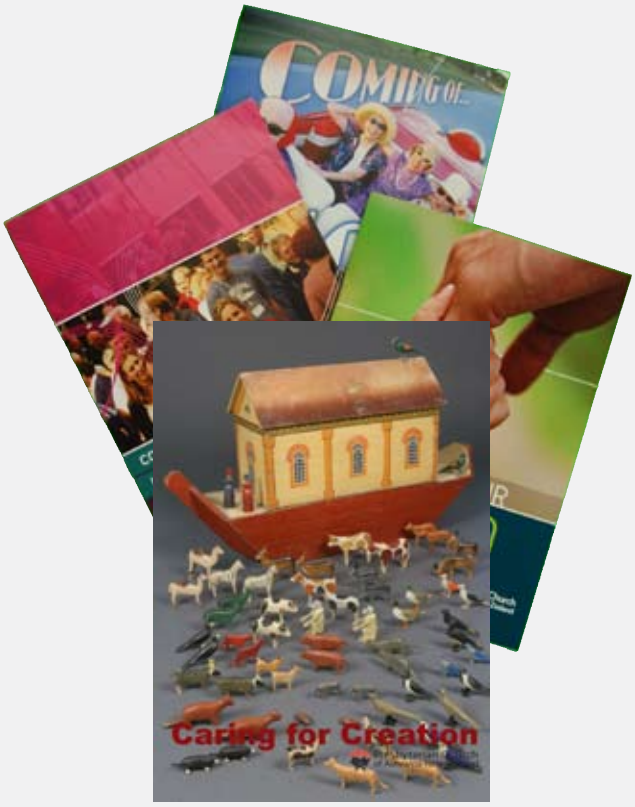
dependent as we might think we are. Sometimes our true strength is shown in our vulnerabilities and weakness in that we become more open to both receiving and giving love. Our imagined "accomplishments" often don't help us in this regard.

"It is the Christian's duty… to carry into the actual world of the present day elements which belong to 'the eschaton'. By so doing he fulfils a prophetic function" (Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*). We only have a right to speak out and address areas of the culture that need change to the extent to which we have personally allowed our own lifestyle to be challenged and changed by Jesus. Community helps us to such transformation of our human condition, our earthen origins. We discover that God has put in finite bodies the seeds of eternity.

**The Rev Geoff Stevens with his wife Gayle started their married life living in the Bethany Fellowship Christian Community in Minneapolis, United States. They graduated from the Bethany College of Missions in 1965. Geoff was ordained in 1970. They were foundation members of the Orama Christian Community on Great Barrier Island and later foundation members of the Kodesh Community in Avondale Auckland, where they now reside.*

Geoff served as an industrial chaplain for several years and has held various roles in Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian churches. Geoff and Gayle have lived in Christian community for over 40 years

Caring for Creation



Caring for Creation is the latest Presbyterian Church social issues booklet. It examines issues that affect the Earth and what we can do about the ecological crisis we face as individuals and congregations. The booklet also examines the many ways that Christians are leading the way by being faithful stewards of God's Creation.

Your parish will be sent eight copies of the booklet by the end of February, and more free copies are available on request.

Caring for Creation is the fifth in a series of group study booklets produced by the Presbyterian Church to encourage congregations to reflect about contemporary issues that are impacting our communities.

Copies of the previous four study guides, *House to Home*, *Caring for our Children*, *Connecting with Young People* and *Bring on the Baby Boomers* are also still available.

Email info@presbyterian.org.nz or phone Sandra on (04) 801-6000 and let us know how many free copies you would like.

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‘What’s good news in these hard times?’

Mua Strickson-Pua, Auckland

Mr Mister
All I hear is what you say
Here is what you say
I be on my way

Why things got to be the way they are
Even though you know the outcome
You close your eyes
And believe them lies
A generation’s hope
Well it starts with you and I
[Mr Mister by Nesian Mystik]

A collective failure
to make hard choices
and prepare the nation
for a new age
of responsibility.

If you play it straight with them
if you explain it to them
then the American people
will rise up to the challenge.

The challenges maybe great
but they will be met
we have chosen Hope
over fear.
[President Barrack Hussein Obama]

Na ou valaau ia Ieova I lo’u leo;
ua faafofoga mai foi o ia ia te au
mai lona mauga paia. Sela.

O loo ia Ieova le faalataga;
o loo I luga o ou Tagata lou manuia. Sela.
[Salamo 3: 4 & 8 Samoan Bible]

I call to the Lord for help,
and from his sacred hill
he answers me.

Victory comes from the Lord
may he bless his people.
[Psalms 3: 4 & 8 Good News Bible Catholic Edition]

Whakaatu/Introduction

It is early morning and still dark. Aotearoa-born Samoan-Chinese-English mokopuna (grandchild) Dremayer Liberty Choir Ah Yek Strickson-Pua, who is three years old, helps me to set up our lounge to watch and celebrate the inauguration of the 44th President of the United States of America, Barrack Hussein Obama. Dremayer wants to know, why is this so important? I find myself couching the answers for her; appreciating the clarification of my reflections, acknowledging my biases, and attempting to be responsible whilst owning my feelings.

Remember it is still only 4:30am and challenging to be an adult and caring grandfather who can’t wait for history to unfold shared with a loved granddaughter. Let alone an excited Presbyterian Pacific islander. A Minties moment of the positive kind. She is concerned that the TV reporters are going on about “black this” to “black that” and why is it a White House? I stop to look at our beautiful brown moko, thinking she does not see people as colours. To Dremayer, they are aunties and uncles; all part of our human family of God’s creation.

“Obama is brown papa because his mother is Palagi and so is his nana and papa. Like me, he has a family from God’s rainbow. He has lived in Hawaii, where auntie Marianne and uncle Nu’u now live, here in our great South Pacific. His time with our Chinese side means he really is like me Papa. He is a brown president and I like a pink house for his family”. I see connections with her insight; father from Kenya and living in white America but now being a bridge for all people. Giving a message of hope for our faith, culture, economics, politics, peace and our planet. “Papa, this is like one of your sermons. We are watching the news. Would this be Good News?” Me, I am still chuckling about the pink house.

Tauivi/Struggle

“Rev, why aren’t more Island Ministers on our picket line? They should be supporting these awesome mothers who want to get a raise being cleaners for these rich financial institutions in the heart of Commercial Business District. Their families are barely surviving. Yet they are holding down so many part-time jobs to pay the bills. They have to be away from their children. So the family time is a quick check of the kids. Feed them and a shower, then off to the next job. While the older children are expected to babysit the rest of the whanau. Meanwhile,

mum's own health is beginning to run down. Rev, is this fair and where is God?"

A passionate Palagi feminist unionist named Jane has a love for the Pacific Island and Maori mother cleaners who are protesting outside a respectable finance house in Queen Street, Auckland. It's lunch time, peak time, and this is part of an ongoing campaign in Aotearoa, Canada, the United States and Australia called the Clean Start campaign. What I learn is a lesson on global contracting. A certain cleaning company from overseas holds most of the cleaning contracts in our hospitals, government departments, and finance sector here in Aotearoa. Thus the contracts are set at the lowest level depending on which nation's market is convenient for making larger profits. This is then dictated to other countries and other markets.

'Rev, is this fair and where is God?'

Initially, when confronting on the local level, the mother cleaners would be referred overseas, as a delaying tactic and flicking-off exercise. Mother unionist quickly learnt that for their collective voices to be heard, they needed a local and international coordinated campaign. So these humble mothers organised themselves locally and globally. "Rev, is this fair and where is God?"

Fala, our Tuvalu sister/feisty unionist, now intervenes: "hey, give our minister a break, he's here. Brother Mua, we would like to meet with our Pacific Island ministers about why they should be involved. This is a Church issue and it's about Atua's people. They hardly have any money but they still support the Church. Where is the Church on low income families, poverty and justice?" I hear our ecclesiology debates from the hall haunting me. "Concrete actions of aroha require us to be with the poor and oppressed," she gently reminds me. When you're the only Pacific Island Presbyterian minister on the picket line, you accept and understand where God's people are coming from. It's a challenge to us ministers and the Church as a faith community. What does the Good News mean for our shared Church ministry in Aotearoa in these hard times?

Fa'atuatuaga/Tumanako/Hope

I am seated in the presence of my old Bible Class teacher, now an esteemed semi-retired New Zealand sociologist, Dr Cluny MacPherson. He reminds me of his time of being a good Presbyterian elder. Doing the whakapapa/gafa (family lineage) exchange, which makes for a process of spiritual, cultural, and political critiques, we have a discussion that assists us with our ministry and community work. Times have changed; as my revered teacher he would respond to my challenges of the Church. Now Cluny shares an insight built upon his faith and life experiences, processed by his sociological reflection. He's brutally honest about the disappointments of missing the working class Pacific Church that served its families and communities, with the Church now being an ineffectual, dying, middle-class Church of the successful. Cluny worries that we have forgotten our faith history and what the Good News meant to our parents.

As we have our Koko Samoa and pani popo (Samoan hot chocolate and buns in coconut milk), we laugh loudly for those loved ones who have joined the ancestors. "You're the minister: did we get it wrong and have we been assimilated and integrated?" He now searches my face for some sign. I tread carefully, for the bottom line is that he is a respected academic, elder, orator, and family member. As our old people would say, he has earned the right to ask the hard questions and deserves an honest answer.

I attempt to respond by noting that we are currently drowning in an ocean of bad news, negativity and no hope. Rather we need to find for ourselves what the Good News means for us in this context of great economic turmoil. As mum would say, "hey, why you scared, don't you believe in Atua, where is your courage and where is your faith? Our God of the good times is also that same God for the hard times, silly boy why we send you to university?" I think we just didn't realise what precious taonga they were in our lives. Cluny laughs hearing one of mum's village wisdoms (Whakatauki in Maori and Alagaupu in Samoan).

The Good News is that a loving God gave us his son. We have personally experienced the grace and healing spirit given freely for all people. In these hard times, there is Good News that needs to be practised and lived.

Fa'a'uma/Whakamutu/Conclusion

I work with young, at-risk students who continually challenge me, my faith, my ministry and my community work. Yet these have been my opportunities to learn and further live out the Good News amongst our families and communities. They have taught me to have a Bebo page, how to text on a cellphone, use ipods and X-boxes. Teaching

me what the Good News means to our rangatahi (our autalavou; our young people).

We opened with words from Nesian Mystik's latest hit song "Mr Mister", a beautiful Pasifika Hip Hop waiata pese that expresses a story about hope in the language of our young people. I am also biased because the "Mr Mister" video clip ends with Dremayer singing the words "*All I hear is what you say, here is what you say, I'll be on my way"*. This is the Good News launching us in our life journey of hope.

Obama's words for me are about the Good News in these hard times. As a Pacific person we love oratory. It's refreshing to hear our leaders have a sense of integrity and leadership that is required for the hard times. All people want to be respected and loved. Barrack Hussein Obama, you did not forget the people. Your process was inclusive and the snow could not dampen the aloha. The Psalms still continue to feed my soul, because the Good News is liberating and empowers the struggles of humanity in these hard times. May our Presbyterian Church hear the poor and oppressed calling for justice and social change. Atua is calling us to be the salt and light; praise God.

The place for public prophecy

Malcolm Gordon, St Paul's Katikati, Northland

How should the Church engage with the world? How should the Church speak? Who should we be talking at or too? Who gets to do the talking? In this article I will investigate how we might understand the concept of the "public" and discuss what subsequent conversations should (or shouldn't) look like. Drawing on the work of local and international theologians, I hope to suggest a path that invigorates our self-understanding as the Church, our worship and finally our mission and prophetic proclamation.

If there was only one Church and one public, this question would be much simpler to answer. Most denominations affirm there is one Church, but it is couched in terms like "universal" and "invisible", which results in its unity seeming almost indiscernible at times!

Perhaps the structure of Catholicism gives it a head start in terms of addressing the world in a unified sense. After all, there is only one Pope, the Vicar of Christ. This advantage is evident in the Vatican's ability to issue statements and edicts more efficiently than other churches. As a Presbyterian I feel that our form of church governance almost guards against bold public statements. Having leaders called 'Moderators' tends to see them taking a middle way between divergent groups within the Church, rather than striking out boldly in a particular direction.

A preliminary question to ask then is not just "How should the Church speak?" but "How can this or that church speak in such a manner that does not deny its distinctiveness?" For certainly the "public statement" kind of speaking does not gel well with a Presbyterian mindset, where consensus is valued above personality, and charismatic leaders are often viewed with suspicion rather than respect. For those in Reformed churches, there are any number of "anti"s that contribute to this reservation, from "anti-authoritarian" to "anti-Episcopal" (with an undoubted hint of "anti-English" creeping in from those with a Church of Scotland background!).

This is to say that it is not upon an entirely theological basis that such a system of governance has developed. Presbyterianism did not develop in Calvin's theological laboratory tucked behind his church in Geneva. It is culturally formed and shaped, and while acknowledging this, Presbyterians also require their prospective ministers to testify that their governance is "agreeable to the Word of God".[1] If this kind of Church is to speak publicly then, it will not speak through press releases and public statements, for to do so would be to deny part of its identity. How then, should this Church speak?

A second preliminary question is to ask "which public?" Max Stackhouse discusses this dimension and includes the religious public, the political public, the academic public and the economic public in his definition.[2] It is important that Stackhouse includes (and indeed begins with) the religious public, for a popular understanding might understand this question as positing the Church over and against the public world, which only perpetuates the secular understanding of religion as a private pursuit. The Church therefore is "a public" and its in-house dialogue should not be regarded as mere maintenance to enable other more important discussions to take place. In fact, I want to argue that this discussion must be given priority if conversations with other publics are to have any substance to them.

Gordon Preece, an Australian Anglican theologian has adopted Jewish ethicist Michael Walzer's use of "thick" and "thin" language to speak of public discourse for the Church. Preece's interpretation is fairly easy to grasp: thick discourse is the full story; the kind of conversation we have within our Christian services of worship and theological halls. Thin language is abbreviated and simplified to make it more accessible to those not familiar with the whole story. Preece insists that,

> *We need to learn, like missionaries in a foreign culture, or newly arrived immigrants, to translate our thick culture and language into the thinner terms of public debate, while seeking to thicken up the soup of so-called secular polity, without accepting it as foundational.*[3]

While Preece advocates thinning as an end to an eventual thickening, my concern is about what may be lost in the process. Here I see two issues, one is the risk of a "de-Christocentrised" ethic (or losing Jesus from the centre of the picture to put it simply), and the other is the question

1 www.presbyterian.org.nz/4176.0.html (accessed 22/8/08)

2 Max Stackhouse 'Public Theology and Ethical Judgment,' in *Theology Today,* 54:2 (July 1997) 166.

3 Ibid, 5.

of redaction (or editing). The first concern relates to the simplifying of our theological language, so that it is more accessible to those of different publics. Most thin theological language I have heard ultimately ends up speaking about values, values that for the speaker are rooted in the witness of God in Christ, but are pitched in such a way that they appear to the listener as simply a smart way to be alive.[4] William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas deal swiftly with this kind of thinking when they write,

> *If Jesus had put forth behaviour like turning the other cheek when someone strikes you as a useful tactic for bringing out the best in other people, then Jesus could be justly accused of ethical naiveté. But the basis for the ethics of the Sermon of the Mount is not what works but rather the way God is. Cheek turning is not advocated as what works (it usually does not), but advocated because this is the way God is – God is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.*[5]

To make our theological talk fit this therapeutic mold demanded by much of secular society is to risk losing its distinctive character. A further threat is to the centrality of Jesus in our theological dialogue. When we begin to speak about values instead of Christ, or even theology instead of Christ, we risk the word that was made flesh being made word again.[6] This idea of thin theological language risks a reversion into Platonist philosophy, where there are pure abstract ideas, like truth and justice, that are embodied in Jesus Christ; but this is serious case of getting the cart before the horse! Hauerwas and Willimon, cited in Preece's article, state,

> *The church really does not know what these words [peace and justice] mean apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth.*

These concepts are not good in and of themselves, but only because they are embodied in the Christ event. Our ability to acknowledge the presence of peace and justice depends on our connection with the life of Christ, the life, which gives these concepts meaning and power. We cannot speak about values without speaking about Christ, anymore than we can talk about a wine without reference to the grape.

The second problem I have with thin theological language as simple theological language is that of redaction. Preece states that

> *[Thick and thin language] helps me have my Christian cake but eat it or offer to others in bite-size morsels in public.*[7]

The question is if the witness of God in Jesus Christ makes up the bulk of our Christian cake, do we have any right to offer anything other than the totality of God's revelation? I liken this to the debate between topical preaching and lectionary preaching. The debate goes, as I understand it, that lectionary preaching helps us avoid riding our hobby horses too often and makes us confront passages of the Bible and consequently, aspects of Christ that we might rather evade. When we take the task of thinning down theological language upon ourselves, do we risk compromising the breadth of God's self-revelation in Christ? Preece writes that,

> *One of the problems in much Christian public speaking is the attempt to always be prophetic, to thump the pulpit and speak in black and white tones. However, this isn't always appropriate to the ambiguity of social policy where there is often room for empirical disagreement.*[8]

What of the ambiguity of Christ? I would question whether a black and white handling of the Gospel is fitting anywhere! My contention is that it is not. There is diversity within the Christian Tradition to rival that outside of it, and the idea that we must tread more carefully outside the Church in our public discourse implies a monolithic Christianity, which anyone who has attended a General Assembly will testify is not the case! Finally this approach suggests that we are the possessors of Christ, that we have somehow comprehended the fullness of God that dwells within him, and from that revered position we will dole out the amount that the world can handle. We must not forget that we are learners too, pilgrims who do not have a complete grasp on God's interactions with humanity, and whatever thinning we do must be done remembering that we still only "…see in a mirror dimly…"[9]

There must be consistency in our speech. We must not reduce the witness of Christ. My concern is that if we become so apt at presenting a thin gospel, we may lose track of the thicker version. This dialogue must never be seen as separated from the life of the worshipping community either. Willimon and Hauerwas categorically state that Christian ethics (and presumably discussion of them) are church dependent.[10] Murray Rae points to the importance of liturgical remembrance in shaping the lives of Chris-

4 Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1989) 72.

5 Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989, 85.

6 Keith Clements, *Learning to Speak: The Church's Voice in Public Affairs,* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995) 3.

7 Preece, 2002, 4.

8 Ibid, 6.

9 1st Corinthians 13:12

10 Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989, 71.

tians and consequently their ability to speak and live publicly as Christians. Rae's article is primarily critiquing the rift between the concepts of mission and maintenance, but I believe the principles are fitting. Both our ability to engage in mission and in meaningful dialogue with other publics, I believe, rely on our familiarity with the narrative we are a part of. Rae wants to suggest that in order to tell the Christian story, our congregations must know the Christian story, and where is it proclaimed, week in and week out? In the liturgies of our Sunday worship services.

We cannot abandon or downgrade the internal dialogue within the religious public for the sake of engaging more effectively with the rest of the world. Our very effectiveness will depend on how deeply we are rooted in the story we are trying to communicate. Rae goes on to point out that a proper liturgical understanding ought to enrich, rather than diminish the capacity of a congregation to engage with the world beyond itself. Understanding, for example, that hearing the call to worship at the beginning of each service parallels the fact that God's presence in our lives and in the world is God's initiative will impact the way parishioners go about their public lives.[11] Ian Stackhouse helps to guard against an insular and isolated expression of church when he states,

> *We see ourselves not as persons saved out of a fallen world, but rather as persons called to be that very world reconstituted as the social space, and thereby the worldly reality of God's rule.*[12]

Tertullian's simple statement regarding the early persecuted Church is particularly poignant: "See how [these Christians] love one another".[13]

I have not advocated for a talkative Church. It is important that in our haste to take a stand for our Faith, we do not destroy our basis for ecclesial belonging. Consequently, from my perspective as a Presbyterian I have sought to encourage an ethically active Church, which is constantly reminding itself of the story it belongs in through its practices of worship. With regard to "speaking', I would suggest that the Church first ensures it has a rich, thorough and sustainable conversation going on within itself that will feed and inspire engagements with the rest of the world. It must not show itself to be needy of attention or respect, but rest in God's mandate for its existence.[14] We must be careful not to replace Christ with a list of commendable values or edit him into a more palatable shape, for we belong to Christ and not the other way around, remembering that when "Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die".[15] We must not try and make the radical claims of Christ easier for the world to swallow, least we,

> *...Inoculate the world with a mild form of Christianity so that it will be immune to the real thing.*[16]

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12 Ian Stackhouse, *The Gospel-Driven Church: Retrieving Classical Ministries for Contemporary Revivalism,* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004) 269.

13 Tertullian, http://www.tertullian.org/quotes.htm (accessed 8th August 2008).

14 "The Christian congregation arises and exists neither by nature nor by historical human decision, but by divine *convocatio."* – Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline,* 7th ed. (London: SCM Press, 1960) 142.

15 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship,* (London: SCM Press, 1954) 73.

16 E Stanley Jones in Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989, 90.

How strong is our prophetic voice?

Pamela Tankersley, St David's, Palmerston North

I reclaimed my Christian faith as an adult in the midst of one of the more exciting periods in our Church's history, when the prophetic voice of the Presbyterian Church was being clearly and strongly heard in NZ, in tune with the voices of the other mainline denominations. In the late 70s and early 80s, the question would be asked: "what do the Churches think about this?" and our well-researched and thoughtful voice was headed. I was part of St Andrew's on the Terrace, from whence the very active Public Questions Committee operated – lead by the inimitable Rev John Stewart Murray. The issues of the day were the anti-apartheid protests and the Tour, keeping NZ nuclear free, and the challenge that the resurgence of the role the Treaty of Waitangi played in our nation. It was from this context that I knew a call to ministry - in part, a call to prophetic ministry. It was a shock to me to find on my arrival at Knox Theological Hall that many in the Presbyterian Church did not necessarily share my good liberal passion!

But for me the excitement in this new journey in faith was the interpretation of these "causes" with a theology of justice and compassion. God was (and is) being revealed not only through the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, but in Jesus Christ, as holding a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, the *anawim.*[1] Proclaiming God's justice with mercy is the Church's highest call; confronting the systemic, corporate, societal sin of injustice is where our Church "should" put its energy. To pray: "'Give us this day our daily bread' and then when the prayer is answered to refuse to share, is blasphemy."[2] This conviction, though broadened and deepened, remains with me and has been a strong part in the theology of the theme of my years as Moderator: calling the Church to be "Christ-centred and community-facing."

The theologian who gave me a framework for this understanding of the Church's call to be prophetic was (and is) Walter Brueggeman, in his studies of the prophets of Israel and Judah. Much of what I learned then has remained with me as valid and helpful. I offer you some of this wisdom as we consider now: what will it mean for the Presbyterian Church to speak with a prophetic voice?

1. The Christian prophetic voice is not to be thought of as merely a call to social action. Neither is it just about the return of Christ in a new age. Liberal Christians have all too often lurched from issue to issue, from one just cause to the next; Evangelicals have ignored social reality as being irrelevant to the coming Kingdom. Engaging in prophetic ministry holds it all together – justice and compassion are intrinsic to the coming Kingdom, which is near at hand – Christ works with us and through us to bring it about.

2. We need to keep imagining a different way of being, what Brueggeman calls an *alternative construal* of the world, one that takes Scripture and tradition seriously, and yet provides a container for hope of alternative consciousness grounded in Christ. This is firmly embedded in Jesus' ministry - his life, death and new life inaugurating the Kingdom of God. Being prophetic is about creating a societal paradigm shift; a change of attitude that in turn changes our behaviour. We are empowered to change by the hope this new vision generates.

3. *The task of prophetic ministry is to hold together criticising and energising*[3]*:* criticising the dominant culture **and** energising for a new vision arising from the promises of God. By its nature it criticises, names evil and abuse of power, but is also about bearing ***hope*** with this alternative vision. Its goal is a realm where the values we hold are the ones society will live by. It recognises what pleases God; what makes for a future with hope. It is essential to work within the dialectic tension of both criticising and energising, of both tearing down and building up.

For example:

- to tackle poverty in New Zealand means we do our research well and we do the food bank stuff but we also believe in a possibility of a world where all New Zealanders have adequate food and resources;
- we must link our anti-violence against children with our stance as Kids Friendly, where all children loved and treasured;
- we can't prophesy against racism without looking at our own power and prejudices and imagining a world where the diversity all races is celebrated;
- we can't raise our voice for the planet with integrity without every community being committed to sus-

1 Hebrew word for "the little ones", referring to the oppressed and marginalized of Israel and Judah in the time of the Prophets

2 from a CWS poster in the 80s

3 Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p 14, Fortress Press, 1978.

tainable environmental practices and knowing the sacredness of God's good Creation.

4. Prophetic ministry is necessarily grounded in the situation of the *anawim* – those who are most vulnerable and most on the margins of society. The prophetic voice must stand in active solidarity with the least, the lost and the last – and wherever possible, empower those whose stories are being told. As the Presbyterian Church, we will do well to continue to be in active partnership with the likes of Presbyterian Support, which is our social service arm. We should keep ourselves well informed, asking where power lies and who will benefit from our speaking out. How are we complicit in oppression? What is role of repentance in prophetic ministry?

5. The ancient Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah remind us that the prophetic voice is mostly creative, imaginative, passionate and visioning; we will hear it from the poets, artists, story-tellers, dramatists, musicians, liturgists. It is a timeless voice sometimes from the edge of society, sometimes from the centre, yet is also applicable to immediate social realities. The challenge of the prophet may arise out of a specific context, but is not always and only for that occasion. And let us not be daunted by the expectation that "a prophet will not be well received in their own town"[4] and that indeed being prophetic is usually costly and unpopular.

6. Our Christian prophetic voice will proclaim the distinctive voice of Christ and yet also recognise that other "secular" prophets will exist in the community who are in tune with Christ's voice. We should listen and work with them, not curtailing the freedom of God's voice. Standing with our ecumenical partners such as the New Zealand Council for Christian Social Services is essential. The scandal of our disunity can diminish our voice, but combining our wisdom and experience encourages well-researched, powerful critique of systems and practices in NZ.

In our present time, strategically it makes sense to understand well our theology of justice and compassion, then focus on a few salient issues where we can make a difference. In the couple of years of my term as Moderator, we chose to look at the wellbeing of children and youth, stand alongside our older citizens, challenge housing policies and now we are taking even more seriously the climate-change issues and caring for creation. Our policy has been to use the role of Moderator, well supported by the Assembly Communications team, to be prepared to speak on any of these issues as the occasions arise. At the same time, great work has been done in producing booklets on the topics for our congregational members, and these have been very well received.

Looking ahead? In my view, there are two major arenas in which we should be engaging our best theologians: the impending recession and its effects on the poor and most vulnerable in New Zealand (families, Maori, immigrants, elderly) and continuing with the issue of a sustainable environment. In the past, we Presbyterians spoke from the majority platform: our critique came from within society. Now that we are in the minority, do we have a new opportunity to proclaim the Kingdom of God from a different place? From the margins?

However, it seems to me the prophetic voice of the Presbyterian Church is becoming very thin and reedy. Consider the last Assembly: by the time we had dealt with all the internal matters of faith statements, clergy assessment and rearranging presbyteries, there was little interest or energy in the one or two issues of justice brought to the Assembly: the plight of ni-Vanuatu workers in NZ, the issues of land under the Treaty, the struggle of immigrant families (especially Pacific Island families) to hold their own in our society, the growing number of other faiths in NZ and the need for dialogue, and the support of AIDS education. Maybe we spent an hour and a half on all these in total? God must weep – we have forgotten our history and ignored our Scriptural imperative to proclaim the Good News. We have become concerned with our own internal structures and hoped-for growth; our prophetic voice is being drowned by apathy and congregational struggles for mere survival.

Maybe we need a prophet to speak ***to*** the Church, to criticise and dismantle the powers that do not work for the good of the *anawim.* Maybe the Church needs to hear again the Spirit of Christ who proclaims a realm where all live with justice and compassion, not just a privileged few. Will the Church hear? Will it be energised by this vision?

I do not know, but I will pray that it be so… that PressGo will concern itself with justice, that the Kids Friendly movement will continue to work for the safety of all children, that our Global Mission will capture the passion of the Church, that the youth will embark on radical initiatives to challenge the complacency of the adult world, that the 101 congregations working hard at engaging with their communities will speak out in the name of Christ, and that our very valuable buildings will become sanctuaries that offer hospitality to the least and the lost.

Let's keep our voice strong – in the name of the one true Prophet.

4 Luke 4: 24

Mixing prophecy, politics and publicity

Angela Singer, Senior communications advisor, Assembly Office

We have heard with increasing urgency over the past year the call to "grow the Church", and there have been suggestions of projects that might achieve this objective. Recently, I have been pondering the idea that the Church could achieve growth by having a greater public voice. When I have mentioned this idea to people in the Church, they respond with what they see to be either the benefits or the risks of the Church speaking out.

One potential risk, that I have heard more than once, is the idea that the Church will lose people if it has a greater public voice. My initial reaction to this idea is that, like other denominations, the Church is already losing people, so a more visible Church could possibly draw people back or encourage new members. Would a more vocal, more visible Church really drive people away? On further thought, I wondered if there is an example the Church could look to. The Uniting Church in Australia, and its more high-profile community-services arm Uniting Care, is one such example of a declining Church and a potential opportunity for growth.

Last year, for *Spanz*, I interviewed Lin Hatfield Dodds, head of Uniting Care Australia, and a national director of the Uniting Church in Australia. Lin told me she grew up in the Church, loves the Church but acknowledges that "it is dying", which offers, "a huge opportunity for the Christian church to think differently about what it means to actively engage in mission with its communities. I don't think my children will be worshipping in a traditional congregation".

Because Uniting Care is growing in almost direct proportion to the shrinking of Uniting Church congregations, it's possible that if the Uniting Church was to engage in more of the high-profile community-advocacy work that Uniting Care is well known for (that is, speaking with and on behalf of those who are the most vulnerable and disadvantaged), the decline of the Church might be stemmed.

As Lin puts it, "that's the reality in a post Christendom world, a moral voice is not enough and no one cares anymore; you have to speak from more than that." Or to put it another way, people want out of the pews and to actively, publicly engage in helping those in need; they want to belong to a Christian group that shows how Christian faith can directly impact on, and serve, those outside the Church's walls.

Both within and without the Church, there are those who would argue that the role of the Church is not to be an advocate for the vulnerable within the community, that a public voice on these matters does not fit with the Church's core mission of making Jesus Christ known, and that the Church "should be and do church". Others would argue that a public voice sits very well with the Church's mission of, "responding to human need, through seeking to transform society, through caring for God's Creation".

The Church, although apolitical, is hard pressed not to speak out on political issues when they impinge on Christian values

With such diversity of opinion, and with Presbyterians to be found on all sides of the political spectrum, sensitivity is required when choosing issues on which to speak out. Speaking out publicly on social justice issues in particular could offend or even alienate some Church members.

The Church, although apolitical, is hard pressed not to speak out on political issues when they impinge on Christian values. There is a large sector of the Church that would argue the Church has an obligation to be heard when vital moral issues and fundamental ethical values are at stake (and they would also argue that doing so is an important part of the Church's mission).

In a forthcoming *Spanz* interview with Linda Bales, HIV/Aids advocate and director of the Louise and Hugh Moore Population Project for the US United Methodist Church, Linda told me that the Church must find and encourage its people who are willing to speak out on issues important to the Church. "We mobilise people to be a prophetic voice", even though, "of course, not all agree with every position we take".

New Zealand Churches' ability to speak out publicly is in sharp contrast to the restrictions placed on US churches.

As non-profit organisations, they are prohibited from engaging in anything that could be interpreted as "political propaganda"; they risk losing their tax-exempt status if they engage in any "political activity". The IRS has effectively put itself in the role of assessing whether the content of a sermon is "political". Many ministers see this as a breach of their First Amendment rights to free speech and say they have the right to discuss any and all topics within their communities of faith.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand was recently granted charitable status by the Charities Commission, but the Commission places no such restrictions on speaking out. The recently passed Electoral Finance Bill also should not impact the Church in an election year because the Church is apolitical.

Under the Electoral Finance Bill, an organisation is not allowed to, "…encourage or persuade voters to vote for or against any of a candidate(s), party(ies), or type of candidate or party…" If an organisation fails to comply with the Bill, they may be prosecuted; the penalties are a maximum fine of $40,000 and/or two years jail.

Election year is the time when the Church might expect to be most criticised for raising its voice on issues considered to be political, as happened in March 2008.

Had the denominations been too silent on these subjects prior to 2008?

The heads of the Presbyterian, Methodist, Anglican, Baptist, Catholic and Salvation Army churches joined with the New Zealand Council of Christian Social Services in calling on the Government (current and future) for more action on issues related to poverty, families and children, older people and housing. They said these were issues that should, "be big enough to transcend party politics… the New Zealand public should be in a position going into the 2008 election where they know more about the commitment of individual politicians to just and compassionate policies on all of these issues…from our shared Christian perspective our starting point for the type of society we want to live in is a conviction that our humanity is constituted most profoundly by our relationships with each other and a commitment to the common good".

Predictably, criticism swiftly followed the release of the Church leaders' statement. TV3 News suggested that the Church leaders might be "over-stepping the mark", but did give the right of reply.

The harshest attack came in a NZ Herald editorial that accused the Church leaders of being silent on, and taking no action on, poverty for the past 10 years. In what amounted to a severe telling off, the editorial said that, "if churches have resources to put to work on political advocacy it is a pity they do not use them better...The churches have been silent on these social issues for too long…Their return to the fray at this stage can be taken only as an attempt to keep Labour in power and, should that fail, to prepare for a renewed campaign against a National government."

Had the denominations been too silent on these subjects prior to 2008? If the Churches had been more vocal about the work they were engaged in prior to the election, would the New Zealand Herald have written such a damning editorial?

Responding on behalf of the Church leaders, in a letter to the editor of the New Zealand Herald, Archbishops David Moxon and Brown Turei of the Anglican Church wrote that the churches had indeed been active in the previous years, "groups including the Anglican Social Justice Commission, Caritas, the Salvation Army and other ecumenical church bodies have worked consistently over the last decade on the Hikoi [of Hope] themes, in terms of social service action, advocacy and political engagement".

"Towards the end of 2007, for example, a cross-section of church leaders from various denominations [including the Presbyterian Church] met the Prime Minister and various Cabinet ministers specifically to challenge the government and confer with it on housing, violence and aged care. Three well-researched papers from the churches' own social service agencies [including Presbyterian Support] were considered at this meeting.

"The churches were also major contributors of policy advice for the Working for Families package.

"The editorial ends by appearing to suggest that rather than engage in political advocacy, the churches should restrict themselves to providing instruction on building better marriages, families and parents.

"This ignores the reality that, outside the state, the churches are the biggest providers of social services in this country. This field is our daily reality. Challenging political policy and wanting to influence the shaping of

policy with Christian values in these areas is crucial. It always has been and always will be."

To its credit, the New Zealand Herald published some of the letters it received in defence of the Church leaders' statement. These included those from Massey University, UNITEC and Child Poverty Action Group. Dr Louise Humpage, a sociologist at the University of Auckland, wrote: "Despite the criticisms made in a Herald editorial, recent research shows that the [NZCCSS and Church leaders] call for action is in line with the concerns of average New Zealanders".

In April, other prominent newspaper commentators added their voices in support. Retired Anglican Bishop John Bluck, writing in the Dominion Post said, "it was a surprise then to read the hostile reaction that the six mainline Church leaders received to their list of issues worthy of election year attention. The New Zealand Herald slagged them off as time-warped and out of touch, then rather patronisingly advised them to stick to family care and stay out of politics. Perhaps the paper didn't know that the churches involved represent the country's biggest social service providers outside the State and speak with grass and flax-root experience… So when the leaders of a faith held by over half the population make a suggestion about what they think matters most, then the smart candidates might use that advice as a trigger to start some honest talking about the priorities that will make or break us".

Left-wing commentator Chris Trotter, also in the Dominion Post, had this to add: "the response…to the accompanying statement of support from representatives of the Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian and Salvation Army churches, has been mixed to say the least…. [in] The New Zealand Herald, in an editorial entitled "Church call to go back 17 years", the council's initiative was pilloried for seeking to gear the economy to the circumstances of the most vulnerable members of society.

"The editorial went on to chide the churches for not putting their "political advocacy" to better use. 'Greater responsibility in marriage, family formation and parenting would go a long way to reducing the incidence of poverty and hardship, particularly for children'. The churches, of course, are deeply involved in all of those issues. But serving Christ requires more of the believer than a lecture in family values".

The idea that the Presbyterian Church speaks out only in an election year is erroneous. Presbyterians have a proud history of raising their voices to draw attention to injustice. During the spread of the Social Gospel movement in the mid 19th century (which lost popularity due to too narrow a focus on social justice issues), Protestant organisations spoke out on behalf of, and assisted directly, the weakest members of society.

In New Zealand in 1906, Scots settlers in Dunedin began what would become Presbyterian Support, an organisation still strongly associated with the Church (to many people, indistinguishable from the Church) and still a strong advocate for the most vulnerable.

In the past year, the Church has spoken out publicly on its work nationally, and in parishes, on issues identified as important to the Church. The Church's media releases, for example on its environmental parish projects, and work on behalf of the RSE ni-Vanuatu workers have resulted in high-profile, highly positive coverage in the mainstream media.

If the Church is to raise its voice more in the coming year, there needs to be recognition that not everyone in the Church, not everyone in a congregation, will agree with every position the Church takes. Yet congregations do need a greater sense of ownership of issues the Church speaks out on because only with broad-based support can the Moderator's voice be amplified.

So, how can congregations help to narrow down the issues they strongly want to support? And should the Church speak out on all, or just on some of the many places in the world in conflict or in deep spiritual and moral crisis?

To a large extent, the Church adds its voice to statements made by its ecumenical and interchurch partners, such as the Christian World Service (CWS) Church leaders' statement on Gaza, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches' (WARC) statements on Iraq and Zimbabwe, and the World Council of Churches' (WCC) statement on Myanmar. But that does not mean that the Church cannot and does not speak out on its own.

Time and resources are a factor in how responsive the Church can be to responding, but determining what issues congregations strongly wish to support will help to make the Church's voice heard more effectively and more frequently.

Reviews

Spiritual Direction – a practical introduction by Sue Pickering (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2008). Available from Church Stores, Auckland, approx. $40.00..

Reviewed by Andrew Dunn.

This fresh and extensive presentation of spiritual direction is the first to be written in New Zealand. It comes out of Sue Pickering's work as a spiritual director, as Co-ordinator of Spiritual Growth Ministries Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme and from her pastoral interests as an Anglican priest. The aim to introduce Christian leaders to contemplative spiritual direction is achieved attractively and winsomely. By "contemplative spiritual direction" she means working with people's actual experiences of God and grace.

The first 40 pages, exploring the question "What is Spiritual Direction?", move through clearly presented material on the historical and Biblical roots of this ministry, contemporary models of it and what it looks like in practice. Her comments on what makes a good spiritual director are timely and encouraging.

Then follow chapters on listening and responding to God, to ourselves and to others, which I haven't seen presented elsewhere in such clarity, sensitivity and detail. Listening to disappointment or anger with God, to pain and abuse, faith crises, grief, issues around sexuality, transference and the perceived absence of God (among others) are apt and practical.

The final chapter on spiritual direction in parish, chaplaincy and community contexts uses material gleaned from New Zealand writings, stories and practical experience, and extends the vision of direction into the heart of pastoral and community engagement.

As Archbishop David Moxon says in his foreword, "Sue's book offers us a careful and finely tuned manual for the art of spiritual direction. There is such a thirst for this art now that this book deserves to be widely used and widely shared, and we will all be blessed and encouraged in our pilgrimage."

For those for whom this is in their ministry, there is much to stretch, encourage and strengthen.

AES Column

Dear colleagues

As well as the escapist reading I look forward to in the holidays, I somehow ended up reading two other books that would not normally have made my holiday list. They were both fascinating. The first was A N Wilson's wonderful *The Victorians*. He describes a world of extraordinary change. A world in which the writings of Malthus, Dickens, J S Mill, Adam Smith, Marx, Hegel and Darwin mixed with arguments over the place of religion, science and the established Church, the aristocracy, slavery, notions of empire, industrialisation and the place of the poor.

The book *Power and Glory: Jacobean England and the Making of the King James Bible* by Adam Nicolson, looks at the circumstances in 17th century England that form the context in which the King James Bible was written. Religiously, the country encompassed every shade of belief from Roman Catholicism, which was outlawed, to the ultra-Protestantism that denounced crosses in church as idolatry and had no respect for the rule of kings. The subtleties of translation that conferred on King James a pope-like power (the Geneva Bible, which the translators of the King James Bible were keen to supplant, translates, in places, the word "king" as "tyrant") reflected the not-so-subtle power mongering of the age, and reminds us of some interesting differences between the Scottish Presbyterianism of James' upbringing and his embrace of the Church of England that bestowed his kingship. Even in this world, we find its great thinkers struggling with different forms of knowledge, thinking and analysis: for example, reconciling Biblical understandings of punishment with the seemingly random ruination caused by the plague, and questions of how Jesus' disciples could have misquoted the Old Testament (they were reading from the Septuagint).

We sometimes handle our contemporary differences with a kind of dualism that takes little account of the origins of the thinking behind the differences. Setting "creation" against "evolution", or "fundamentalism" against "liberalism", for example, confers a kind of intellectual integrity or systematic purity on each concept that neither allows reference to the context in which such perspectives have emerged nor recognises that our life experiences, learning and new events always mean that our perspectives are shifting.

The fact that Darwin could give an approving nod to the extermination of aboriginal people in Tasmania, or that a Church's bishops could participate in the torture and death of puritans who did not recant from their belief that a Presbyterian system of government was more consistent with Biblical truth, cautions us to the ethical consequences of our best theories and strongest-held beliefs.

Reading the books, my own context (aside from trying to fish and body surf) was sharing a week of conversation with a member of Narcotics Anonymous. Some years ago my friend had been a guest of Her Majesty's at Mt Eden Prison for activities associated with maintaining a significant drug habit. The 12 steps of NA help addicts overcome the disease. In references to a (step 1) realisation that an addict is powerless over their addiction, that only a belief in a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity (step 2) and to make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God (step 3) it is impossible for me not to see the parallels to a particularly Pauline theology of the power of sin and our dependence on God for salvation.

What I found especially interesting is the way that NA organises itself. It is almost entirely voluntary, actively "non professional", and designates those with special responsibilities as "trusted servants", with the only requirement for membership being a desire to stop using narcotics.

I doubt that I would go to the rack arguing for the superiority of the Presbyterian form of government. But I wonder if the future of our church planting, outreach and evangelism will depend on a kind of non-doctrinaire simplicity. Smaller groups attracted not by the music, projector graphics or even the oratory but by some subtly recognised common need or focus or life situation. My children have just returned from the Parachute festival. The consensus from their youth group was that the best speaker, from World Vision, addressed the challenge for the Church of getting its priorities right by placing Jesus' concern for the poor at the top of the list. As we plan to spend $150,000 on, say, a new church kitchen, perhaps the first question we need to ask is "who are we inviting for dinner?"

The personal transformation that faith in Jesus Christ brings, without a concurrent commitment to those who long to hear the Good News in the fulsomeness that Jesus intended, relegates our faith to yet another self-help course of the nature that we can pick up cheaply in the remainder section at Whitcoulls.