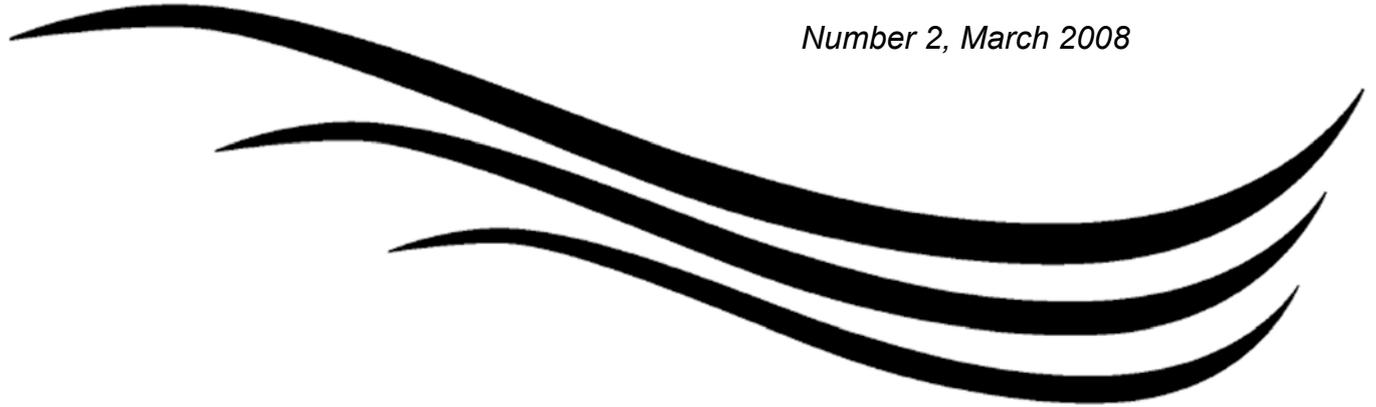


CANDOUR

News and Views for Ministers

Number 2, March 2008



Prayer and spiritual disciplines

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Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

Noticeboard

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

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

Contributions

We welcome responses to published articles. If you would like to write a piece replying to any of this month's featured articles, please contact:

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

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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.

Hitting yourself with sticks

Amanda Wells

I'm sitting in a car park in Queenstown, trying to write this editorial. I wanted to do it yesterday; everything else in the magazine is written, edited, laid out, proofed and corrected, but somehow I always leave my creative part of the process till last.

On the plane this morning, it seemed half written in my head. But now the caffeine has metabolised and a rotten cold pounds my sinuses. Writing is a discipline – and here I sit, notebook against the steering wheel, disciplining myself to do it. It's easy to fancy yourself an author till you decide to get serious and practice everyday; habit isn't the greatest incubator of innovation. And when you're not getting hoped-for results, you start to question the discipline's worth.

Flying too frequently, I'm not very good at listening to the cabin announcements. But recently I've noticed some anomalies; when you land, often you are permitted to switch on your mobile when the plane parks at the gate and the air-bridge door opens. But if you're hopping off directly to the tarmac, you mustn't activate the phone till inside the terminal building. Why? Do dangerous cell-phone rays leach out the open door but are blocked by the air-bridge walls? And once when I landed in Wellington and a gate wasn't available immediately, they told us we could switch on our mobiles as we were off the runway. I don't have the right facts to understand the logic behind this; I don't have access to the bigger picture in which these instructions and practices fit.

When I was involved in Navigators¹ at university, learning Bible verses off by heart was very big. Topical-memory-system cards were common accessories and there was respect for those who learnt the verse of the week. I'm not questioning that this discipline has its worth. But there is a sterility to Scripture taken out of context without a clear understanding of the rationale behind the practice; and of the context in which that verse belongs. Perhaps my younger self missed that part of the system; perhaps achievement-oriented mindsets are inevitably programmed to feel guilty at any failure to memorise accurately or regularly.

I've flirted with other spiritual disciplines with similarly shallow results. Saying the Lord's prayer every night can be a remarkable way to wring all meaning from it; writing a long list of people to pray regularly for can set the bar very high. Last year when I was chronically ill, I felt if only I did the right sequence of actions/thoughts/vitamin supplements, all would be well again. It's hard to accept that a random virus can strip your energy and joy for months no matter how stringently you fight it. I tried Christian meditation - one way of connecting with God that wasn't a continual "make me well". But it's really hard to sit and focus for 20 minutes every day (and it's supposed to be twice a day!) when work drains most of your concentration and a chronic headache kills the rest. And back again we come to a perceived failure to achieve an adequate standard of discipline.

What's bizarre is that all of this conflicts with my fundamental picture of Christianity; love the Lord your God, and love others as yourself. Why continually try to adopt and hone spiritual disciplines? Are they only sticks with which to beat ourselves?

You will have better answers but I have one to offer. It's the good times. When life rolls along well and you feel content, it's easy to disconnect from God. I know where God is when it hurts; I'm crying out to him. But when I'm happy and satisfied, he doesn't seem so vitally needed. This is wrong and that's why spiritual disciplines are healthy. They're not sticks, they're marker poles that point out the track when your focus keeps straying. But perhaps they're not so vital when moving slowly on your knees.

So I'm still in the car park and I've done the editorial. Even typed it into my laptop. Even enjoyed writing it. Discipline's funny like that.

Now I'm off to "standing out" in Cromwell; enjoying the chance to step out of my usual office/writing/editing zone, despite the concomitant need to keep those business-as-usual practices in motion.

The next issue of Candour has the theme "Growing leaders". The deadline is Wednesday 26 March and contributions spontaneous or otherwise are very welcome; please email them to candour@presbyterian.org.nz

¹ Navigators is an evangelical Christian movement with an emphasis on discipleship that was strong on several New Zealand campuses in the 1990s.

Jesus the Intercessor

Graham Redding, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, Dunedin

“Prayer is as simple as picking up a telephone to speak to a close friend. Jesus is always there for you. Just tell him what is on your heart.”

I still remember that first instruction on prayer, which I received not long after becoming a Christian twenty-five years ago. It conveyed a sense of immediacy and intimacy in relation to prayer that, for a new Christian, was helpful.

As time passed, however, I found that the telephone model of prayer didn't quite cut it anymore. For a start, it seemed to favour speech above silence, talking above listening, babbling above waiting. It seemed to portray Jesus more as a kind of cosmic buddy than Lord of the cosmos, thereby undermining the otherness and sovereignty of God.

Moreover, as I became familiar with the New Testament, I discovered a much more nuanced relationship between Jesus and prayer than the telephone model was able to convey. I noticed in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, for example, Jesus' instruction on prayer, including the template for prayer that became known as the Lord's Prayer, and I pondered the possibility that prayer might be as much a learnt activity as it is a spontaneous outpouring of one's innermost feelings. I noticed Paul's exhortation to seek the mind of Christ, and wondered what role prayer might play in this task and what kind of disciplined attentiveness might be required. And then I noticed those texts that refer to Jesus praying for his disciples (John 16:26; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25), and I began to think about Jesus as Intercessor.

As I studied the book of Hebrews, I noticed that the reference to Jesus as Intercessor was linked closely to his perceived role as High Priest. I found it fascinating that the author of Hebrews used the liturgical symbolism of the priesthood in ancient Israel to interpret the ministry of Jesus, and not least his prayer life.

As James Torrance points out,¹ in ancient Israel, as in Israel to this day, the central act of worship and prayer took place on the Day of Atonement. That was the day in the year that gathered up the worship and prayers of

every other day. On that day an offering was made to God that gathered up every other offering made daily in the sanctuaries. On that day, the worship and prayers of all Israel were led by one man, the high priest, “the one on behalf of the many”. The climax came when the high priest, with the names of all Israel on his breastplate and shoulder, laid his hands on the head of an animal and sacrificed it, vicariously confessing the sins of all Israel. He then took the blood of the sacrificial victim in a vessel, “ascended” into the Holy of Holies and there interceded for all Israel that God would remember his covenant promises and forgive his people. As he was praying in the holy presence of God, all Israel was praying outside, one great volume of prayer ascending to God, led by the high priest. He then returned to the waiting people outside with the Aaronic blessing of peace.

The declaration that, as High Priest not just of Israel but of all humankind, the Risen and Ascended Jesus exercises an ongoing ministry of intercession is of immense theological significance. It suggests, first of all, that the redemptive work of God in and through Jesus of Nazareth did not end with the events of Easter. It is ongoing; it is continuous. As Andrew Murray, in his classic book on prayer, says of Jesus in this regard, “He lives to intercede.”² What a remarkable affirmation to make!

This suggests, further, a Trinitarian view of prayer, in which the Son prays to the Father in the Spirit, and we, for our part, are drawn by the Spirit into the eternal prayer-life of the Son. Thus conceived, prayer is not so much something that *we* initiate and do; it is something in which, through the activity of the Spirit, we are privileged to participate.

In this regard, I find the Johannine concept of abiding in Christ rather helpful. Often, Christian discipleship seems to be portrayed predominantly in terms of *following* Christ, and the Christian life one of *imitating* or following the example of Christ. I'm sure we've all heard the advice given to young people to ask themselves in times of temptation, “What would Jesus do?” And some of us may have seen the car bumper stickers that read “WWJD”, or, “What would Jesus drive?”

1 James B. Torrance, “Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ”, *A Passion for Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry*, Handsel Press, 1999, p.56

2 Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Whitaker House Press, 1981, p.194

Now while these questions are valid to a point, they do presume a certain understanding of discipleship that focuses on following the example of a man who lived 2000 years ago. John, however, would have us think about discipleship in slightly fuller categories of participating or abiding in the ongoing life of the One who participates or abides in the life of the Father and who assures us of his prayers. Under this model, our task is not to somehow second-guess what Jesus would do or say in a given situation, but rather to share actively in his risen life and allow that life to permeate and transform every aspect of our lives, including the activity of prayer.

I was intrigued to discover a few years ago, during the course of my doctoral studies on prayer, that the vast

majority of the earliest Christian liturgical prayers and doxologies appear to have followed a Trinitarian pattern: prayers were offered to the Father, *through* the Son, in the Spirit. This pattern explicitly recognized the mediatorial role of the Son in relation to prayer and worship.

Regrettably, it is a recognition that the Church has not maintained consistently in its worship. I invite you to take note of the prayers next time you are at church. I would say that, as often as not, you will find them to be Unitarian (directed to God, singular, with little or no recognition of the mediatorial role of Christ) and Pelagian (portrayed as something that *we* do – *we* offer thanks and praise, *we* confess our sins, *we* intercede for the life of the world).

When intercessory prayer follows a Pelagian pattern in public worship, it tends to come across as something we feel we ought to do: we ought to pray for others because, following the example of Jesus, we should be concerned for the world. Thus conceived, prayer becomes a kind of Christian duty. Often such prayer seems to be tacked on to the end of the worship service, almost as an afterthought to the high point of the service, which is the sermon.

Understood in terms of sharing in the eternal intercessory work of the Risen and Ascended Christ, however, intercessory prayer takes on an entirely different character. It is interesting to note that Diebold Schwartz, one of the forerunners to the Genevan Reformation, located the prayer of intercession within the Eucharistic prayers of consecration and thanksgiving, thereby acknowledging that intercessory prayer is inextricably linked to the in-

tercessory work of Christ in his role as High Priest. John Calvin continued this practice.

In conclusion, it seems to me that acknowledging Jesus as Intercessor necessarily involves four things:

A recognition that, through the activity of the Spirit, our prayers (and indeed our worship) somehow share in the eternal energy of prayer and worship that flows within the Godhead. There is a sense in which, through these activities, we share in what one theologian, Bar-

bara Brown Zikmund, describes as the Triune God's "eternal dance of togetherness".

A disciplined seeking after the mind

of Christ, as we try to look at the world through his eyes and pray as he would have us pray. I like to think of this in terms of praying in the shadow of the cross. It is there that we encounter the casualties of life and history, and hear afresh the revolutionary perspective of the Beatitudes.

An acknowledgement that our prayers do not start and finish with us. Jesus is the Pioneer and Perfector of our faith, our Advocate and Intercessor. His prayers precede, perfect and follow ours, which means that we need not be ashamed of our rather meagre and stumbling efforts or feel obliged to cover everything in a single prayer.

Maintaining the link between thanksgiving and intercession. We pray in a spirit of thanksgiving for what God in Christ has done and continues to do in our place and on our behalf. We do not know how to pray as we ought, but Christ prays for us, with us and in us. As James Torrance puts it so eloquently, "prayer is the Father's gift of grace in giving us Christ to stand in for us and in giving us the Holy Spirit to teach us to pray, and lift us up in prayer into a life of loving communion."³

In the 19th century, Scottish theologian John McLeod Campbell described prayer as the "utterance of participation in the life of Christ." I have yet to find a better definition, and believe it conveys in a nutshell all that I have said above about the nature of intercessory prayer and the role of Jesus as Intercessor.

A discipline in public prayer

David Grant, minister emeritus, North Shore

I don't know a lot about spiritual disciplines – the theory of it anyway. I only know what I practise, and that is pretty modest. I practise a prayer that has context; it comes from somewhere. So a friend of mine in a study group recently said, “thank God for the poor. If we didn't have the poor we would have no public prayer!” That got me thinking, so at the next service I led, (the text could well have been “The rich fool”, Luke 12:13ff) I disciplined myself to write this prayer – discipline because the prayer had to linger in pew and pulpit. (Too often we indulge in “promiscuous prayer” – savouring the moment, but slipping too soon to the next part of the liturgy.)

God, often you hear from us prayers for the poor,
or the social outcasts,
or the unfortunate and victims of tragedy or neglect.
We are always sincere about those prayers,
and we are practised at uttering them and listening to them.

Even today if we were to speak these prayers,
we all know what they would be;
victims of the shooting massacre in Virginia, and their families.

The awful situation of Iraq.
Those in the Solomon Islands
devastated by earthquake and tsunami.
And they are all so far away.

We still pray for them.
But today we pray for the rich, and they are so close to us.

Those who carry the heavy burden of keeping up appearances,
or concealing their wealth,
expending so much energy
in flaunting or falsifying their affluence,
so robbing themselves of giving attention to their inner spirits,
and so robbing themselves of being human and humane.

We pray for those worried about protecting their ill-gotten gains,
or their well-gotten gains,
with high fences,
or high insurances,
or high, covetous restlessness,

or high acreage.

We pray for those who enjoy and endure
the endless possibility of excessive choice in whom to
give support,
if to support at all.

We pray for them as they make their ever-changing judgments
on the merits of people and their causes,
following the dictates of limited conscience,
withdrawing finance and withholding donations,
when someone falls short
of their own low threshold of acceptability.

We pray for those where the dominant motivating verbs
are
buy, spend, want, acquire, accumulate, grasp,
with a scarcity of verbs like, give, be generous,
share, restore, do without, relinquish.

For when in grasping, accumulating mode,
fear is not far behind, and loss is a threat,
and anxiety is an uneasy, vexing companion.

Persuade the rich to major in verbs that serve the neighbourhood,
and so avoid the debilitating nouns of fear, loss, and anxiety.

So we pray for the rich,
who seldom enjoy freedom, and release from encumbrance,
and seldom anticipate an open future,
uncrippled by needless restlessness.

And here, at this table, God,
we meet you as we would expect,
in the presence of the less than wealthy Christ Jesus,
with nothing in a wounded hand,
except a morsel of bread, and a sip of wine,
and an affirmation that there is enough daily bread for the day,
and enough generous life given for our complete delight.

Hear our prayer, ever so reluctantly uttered,
yet in the name of Jesus,
whose last possession and only cloak was gambled away.
Amen.

I don't know if the prayer made any difference at all (did you notice, we are the subjects of that prayer?), but to my mind the practice and discipline of public prayer is to rehearse another and alternative possibility for life in the presence of the worshipping community, and in the presence of a listening God. We understand this God will engage us in mysterious ways to transform possibility into reality. That requires us to propose another world, other than what our fellow conversationalists in the broad arena of public life entertain.

However, it seems to me that too often, the rhetoric of public prayer reinforces the position of the pray-er, and protects the privilege of the listeners, in such a way that it would not look out of place in those glossy religious tracts of rampant consumerism, *House and Garden*, *Metro*, *North and South*, and *Next* magazines. Prayers too often borrow the line (or a variation of it) from Psalm 16:6, "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage." One (of many) readings of that text is that the lines of demarcation between me and the rest have fallen in my favour, and (unfortunately) not in theirs, but praise God anyway. The spiritual discipline is to see through our well-cosseted, safe lives, and mourn our favoured status, and seek some point whereby we may begin change in self.

The discipline is made all the harder because we, the purveyors of public prayer, are so captured and shackled by the world of being consumer, insisting on rights (which create victims), and freedoms (which evoke little commitment), and individual salvation and piety (which shafts healthy community), and equality (which sabotages service).

It seems to me that Jesus was not too concerned about the welfare of a well-polished soul, or even its passage into an imagined heaven, (that's God's business, not ours), but more concerned about daily bread for each one, and access to community symbols/rituals, and community gatherings, and community assets, and community well-being. Take a look at the encounter of Simon the Pharisee, Jesus, and the woman who opened the alabaster jar of ointment and anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36ff). Here two worlds collided, Simon's and Jesus'. "How porous are the boundaries of the assembly", Jesus may well have asked Simon? And Jesus may well still be asking?

That question is asked 1000 times through the story of God's people, and it is a bias of the Gospel; a bias we seem not to notice, we who are intent on playing it straight and maintaining boundaries. The practice of public prayer is such a demanding discipline, especially for us who are

practised in spiritual things, and not so practiced in caring about the well-being of the earth and its peoples, and the health of a community of faith (not community of certainties) that is meant to look as disparate in function and in form as the various parts of a human body (1 Corinthians 12:12ff). ("O you who wear glasses; less than 'pure' are you, yet are you any less a part of the body of Christ?").

To change the metaphor, we tend not to notice that weeds and wheat should have the freedom (and responsibility) to live in the same paddock (Matthew 13:24ff), and the sorting out is God's business. We tend not to notice.

You, reader, occupy high and daring office, always dragging people beyond being spiritual, and toward being Jesus in the home, work place, office, club, church, leisure activity. Thus our discipline is to notice when people are disadvantaged and disenfranchised, even those disadvantaged by God!

Let me explain that as I see it. The book of prayers that I wrote, *Grant us your Peace* (Chalice Press, 1998) is founded on the thesis that a form of public prayer is to notice what God has said in one context, and then repeat it back to God in another. So, in Exodus 34:5-7, God discloses self to Moses (this is after the golden calf incident) with a series of astounding adjectives, describing God as merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness etc – astounding, because the last government Israel had to deal with was the exact brutal opposite. How Moses could not notice, one wonders. This is the first time (in the canon) that anyone hears such a revelation; the narrator, I suspect, places the revelation here so that we might notice.

Forty six chapters of the canon elapse before Moses feels forced to remind God of what was once claimed. Apparently, even within sight of the land of so much promise, God had had enough of these recalcitrant Israelites, so resolves to eliminate them and start again with Moses. Moses notices that such a plan is to the severe disadvantage of fellow travellers, so Moses confronts the angry God with those very same words first disclosed back at Sinai. "Didn't you say you were a series of astounding adjectives pointing to a series of astounding verbs that actually do something...?" says Moses (my interpretive italics added). "And besides, if you go ahead with such a plan, what will the neighbours think? If you want to be a God, you had better act like one!"

I imagine this interchange is characterised by awe and trembling, and not by arrogance or holier than thou. The point is, Moses noticed word first spoken, and Moses, I

suppose in prayerful protest, tells God, in serious verbal exchanges, that from his perspective, there is another way, and that way is of grace and forgiveness.

That, I believe is the discipline of prayer, public and private – to notice, and to swing with the bias of the “Gospel” even to God’s own face. You can find the whole argument in the introduction to the book, and the rest of the book is dedicated to noticing what the Psalm for this Sunday says, and reflecting it back to God in serious conversation.

On one memorable occasion, the Psalm of the day was Psalm 13, a protest Psalm, and in the reading of the Psalm, I detected anguished accusation of God and charges on the part of the psalmist, of fault in God, so I put that in the prayer. It seemed to me, the Psalm permits the believing community to voice an uncommon candour, uncommon, I think, because public prayer can become an exercise in self-deception. Here is the prayer:

Lord God,
we come Sabbath by Sabbath,
desperately hoping for a breakthrough into satisfying fulfilment.
How long must we come?
We seek to be faithful,
but we question your faithfulness.
We are disabled, incapacitated, impotent;
we feel disqualified, marginalised, helpless,
and it is your fault!
For you are the only one who can act for us.
We know, because we have ventured into self-improvement programmes
and ‘how to’ books
and seductive ideologies,
and they do not work;
they peter out,
they fall crumpled, outside their promise.
Only you can act,
so when will you intrude into our paralysed, nerve-vacated life?
Consider and answer us, O Lord our God!
Because it is urgent, for your sake and for ours;
for our impotence suggests yours;
our lack of nerve infers yours;
our incapacity hints at yours;
and the enemy prevails.
Now we trust you,
the giver of abundant steadfast love.
Now we rejoice,
for you deliver salvation.

Now we sing,
for you come with bountiful forgiveness,
reinstating us as covenantal partners.
Amen.

Emeritus Professor Angus Ross (Professor of History, University of Otago) was in the Congregation, and he questioned me at the door (he was tall and commanding, and I ...). “Can we find fault in God?” he demanded. “Well, the Psalmist seems to,” was my reply, and I could see him turning it over in his head. He was brought up on excessive “sovereignty of God” rhetoric, and the descriptive appendages of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience, none of which are Biblical words; Israel’s theologians were far too smart to attach those distancing adjectives to their God, because Israel’s God met with, and attended to the serious conversationalist, not the forever deferential conversationalist. Prof Ross accepted the explanation and possibly the necessity to notice what the texts say or suggest, and the need to bend the text, and reflect “Gospel” bias in the conversations with and about God.

The Bible does this constantly. On return from exile in Babylon, Israel’s question is, “who belongs in the new community?” A quick look at Deuteronomy 23 gives the answer, but the writer of Isaiah (Ch 56) says that is not good enough. That writer has noticed the bias of the “Gospel” and has gone with the bias. Including people in the community is to be the norm! Jesus went the same path in the “you have heard that it was said...” passages (Matthew 5:21ff), broadening the perspective of who belonged in the conversation.

In his book, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000) Walter Brueggemann leans heavily on this concept of text use and re-use as a way of extending boundaries, making available new, as yet unspoken conversations between players in the drama. In typical Brueggemannese, he says, “I will consider several examples...of the way these lingerings of tradition become explosions of utterance that makes the world oddly different in the present” (p2). The writers know the texts, then notice the similarities, dissimilarities, and bias, but they don’t merely reiterate the words; they bend the words to the bias of the “Gospel” so as to make available a new thing to the community.

We must do the same; that is our discipline, a discipline our forebears knew – abolition of slavery (the news reports say that one still needs attention); freedoms and status for women (haven’t finished that one yet). Then there is our intolerance of violence (still to work on that one);

Essays

our attitudes to those of other religions (a lot to do there); a re-discussion on what it is to have dominion over the earth (just started that one); who is in our community and who is out (right in the middle of that one); a re-look at who the wider community is and who we are, and how we might begin to talk together again (some of us are doing that). What is the bias of the Gospel as we engage these issues and these people?

I reckon (which doesn't make it right, necessarily), that our raw material for public (and private) prayer is the text

– the ideas have to come from somewhere- and that our first response is to engage in the discipline of contemplative prayer, borrowing the texts from wherever, unhitching them from their historical mooring, apply the bias of the Gospel, work up the new, Gospel-biased response, and see if we can come somewhere near a new earth '... as it is in heaven.'

Sunday morning public worship is a good place to practise our discipline.



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Applications are invited for the positions of a Dunedin-based **Lecturer** and an Auckland-based **Coordinator of Ministry Formation and Leadership Development**.

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Job Descriptions, including a list of the seven key subject areas for the Lecturer's position, may be obtained from the Registrar by emailing registrar@ministryknox.ac.nz

Applications should be sent to the Director at Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, Knox College, Arden St., Dunedin, or principal@ministryknox.ac.nz

Applications close on the 20th of April 2008

The sound of silence

David Clark, *The Community of Saint Luke, Remuera-Newmarket*

Sunday, around 9:55am. The service has begun with Organ voluntary, gathering prayers, hymn, welcome and notices. Some time has been spent with the children, who have now left for Sunday school. The prayer of the day has been prayed together, the readings for the day have been read. Then the more than 110 worshippers slip into a deep, palpable five-minute silence.

This happens every Sunday during Lent, and periodically on other Sundays during the year, in the main service at St Luke's, Remuera. We have been having a "long" silence after the readings for at least 10 years. "Long" is a relative term, of course. For people who are unaccustomed to silence, five or six minutes can seem like half an eternity. For those of us used to longer periods of contemplative prayer (or meditation – the terms are interchangeable), five minutes is tantalisingly brief.

5:30pm, Sunday. A number of mainly Gen Xers and Yers have gathered in the chancel. A CD plays reflective music, which slowly fades away into a "recorded" 25-minute silence. Everyone is breathing quietly but deeply as silence envelops them. Twenty-five minutes later, the "recorded silence" is gently broken by the sound of slowly growing louder music. There is a soft stirring as all come back to the present time and the present place.

Presbyterians usually don't cope well with silence in worship. In fact, in most Christian worship, a silence is something to be covered with words or music or, these days, a power-point presentation. Anything longer than a minute or perhaps two standing in remembrance of someone or something has worshippers becoming restless. Intentional silence, on the other hand, with a hundred or more people keeping five minutes silence during a normal Sunday service, can be a powerful experience. Those who have experienced the long – 10-20 minute – silences during worship in the Taizé community in France, for instance, with thousands of predominantly young people keeping silence, know how spiritually powerful, enriching and illuminating such a practice can be.

Wednesday, around 1:10pm. At the regular mid-week communion service, the mainly elderly group have finished their latest assault on theological orthodoxy through study and discussion. Now it is time for "what we do each week" – we pray for others. People name and say something about those persons or situations they wish US to

hold in God's love, and then we pray. This is no verbal "Dear God, we just ..." chattering and battering on the gates of heaven. Rather, it is a simple naming of names and situations, prayerful focussing of the mind and the heart, and a profound silence of loving expectation that our praying will make a difference.

Silences are a normal part of communal worship and personal spirituality at St Luke's. Visitors are often disconcerted to find that the Sunday main service begins with silence not organ "musack". Worshippers are encouraged to do their chatting and greeting in the foyer before entering the church. There is no organ music to cover people's movement. From time to time, an invitation appears on top of the first page of the printed order of service:

Gathering time

We use this time to make the transition between "getting here" and "being here".

The opening organ voluntary is an integral part of the service, and before it begins today's worship, we gather in silence. You are invited to take these minutes of quiet time before the organ voluntary to get in touch with the calm places, the still, deep places within you. Relax your body; quieten the inner dialogue of your mind. Focus on feeling, on being.

Be receptive to your centre – your reservoir of inner peace, strength, and love. Be aware of being with others. Feel the spirit of community. Feel the spirit of God.

On those occasions when there is a longer silence during the Sunday worship, a simple guide for making use of silence is often included in the Sunday bulletin. This is especially to help those who may not be accustomed to silence in church.

On making use of silence

The service today will include a five minute silence. Normally, when we have "silence for reflection" in our services, it is not that long. Many people are unaccustomed to longer periods of silence and apparent inactivity, so the following are some suggestions on how to make the period of silence useful.

The primary aim is to still the mind, the heart, the soul – to be, not having to "do" anything, and to allow the silence to speak to us knowing that no two of us will "hear" the same thing (or even anything!).

Some people find it helpful to have a focus. It might be a word, sentence or phrase from one of the Bible readings or the order of service. Dwell on that word, sentence or phrase. Just let it “be” with you. Or let it suggest a new insight for you. If your mind wanders, that’s okay. Smile to yourself, and bring the focus back again.

Posture is important. Try sitting upright with both feet on the floor, your back against the seat back. Crossed legs or slumping inevitably produce pressure which needs to be eased at some point. Hands in the lap can be a comfortable position. Deliberately breathing more slowly and deeply at the outset helps one to settle and to relax into the silence.

Some people like to sit with their eyes closed. Others find this is likely to send them to sleep! (Sleep is okay - but snoring can be distracting...) Others prefer to fix their eyes on something – an icon, an image in one of the windows, a candle flame, a point on the floor – something that is not distracting and sets the mind wandering.

There are sure to be distracting noises – someone coughing, a child, a passing motorbike or siren. Consciously acknowledge the distraction to yourself, then ignore it. You find you have dozens of thoughts buzzing around in your head? That’s not uncommon. Choose one and focus on it. Your mind wanders away? That’s okay, focus back.

This time of silence is a gift. “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Silences have become a normal part of our worship life at St Lukes. Usually there are two or three minutes for silence after the sermon. I’m not a fan of having discussions on the sermon as part of worship, and I am Protestant enough to believe that preaching can be (it isn’t always!) a “means of grace” – and so it offers more than mere debating points. Discussion is quite welcome but later, over tea and coffee.

We find that Gen X and Gen Y people are generally more able to adapt to and make good use of silence, despite coming from generations comfortable with more everyday noise and distractions than we who are older. Our Sunday evening 6pm programme, which is primarily for those in their early 40s down to late teens, includes many opportunities for silent reflection in addition to the more

formal 5:30pm meditation time.

During one of our alternative worship gatherings, or another called “soundgarden”, it is nothing to find a 20- or 30-something laying along a pew, or on the carpet, or nestled on cushions in the chancel, eyes closed, and in silence (and I know the difference between that, and sleep!). We have had meals *à la* medieval monasteries, where eating is done in silence while something is read. Try it, reading whole narratives from Genesis, for instance – the sagas of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. It can be profoundly moving. And how often do we hear a whole story read anyway?

One of the characters in E M Forster’s *A Passage to India* speaks of “poor little talkative Christianity”. Often Christian worship can feel just like that – a words, words, and more words. And when we tire of praying and preaching them, we sing them. Hymns, choruses, worship songs – more words, more sounds, more to block God getting a word in edgeways.

Many baby boom and younger New Zealanders have had experience of eastern religion, Buddhism in particular, and have learned how to value silence as a

Liturgical and spiritual silences are full and profound and often almost able to be felt and heard

spiritual discipline and experience through some form of meditation. Like many others in the Western world, they have sought to escape the noise and bustle of everyday life from time to time. Often this is part of their spiritual quest, and they have been put off by Christian worship’s “talkativeness”. Such searchers can be agreeably surprised to find a Christian community that uses silence in its worship, and that has a number of opportunities for communal contemplative prayer (*aka* meditation) as part of its weekly life. We have a weekly Sunday 8:30am half-hour contemplative prayer service, which caters for primarily older people, most of whom then come on the 9:30 service, as well as one at 5:30pm for primarily Gen X and Y (who “don’t do early”). Silences form part of our youth group’s worship, and the Sunday school children also learn how to be still and “wait upon God”.

*A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*¹ talks about silence in worship at Taizé, for instance, as “active and dynamic”. Liturgical or contemplative silence is not just the absence of sound or activity – although sound and activity usually are absent. Liturgical and spiritual silences are full and profound and often almost able to be felt and heard.

One woman told me recently she felt a kind communal electrical surge during the silence in Sunday worship “(Silences),” says the *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, “constitute a genuine ‘waiting upon God’ in corporate prayer.” The article points out, “spiritual life and growth flourish when silence becomes part of human life. ... Without silence we become so many ‘tinkling gongs and clanging cymbals’”.

Each year as part of our community programme at St Lukes, we offer a variety of courses and opportunities for

growth and experience in spirituality. But weekly corporate worship remains the heart of our life as a Christian church. And within this heart there is usually a still place where we may be attentive for the “the sound of sheer silence”² that is God.

References

¹ Ed Gordon S Wakefield, SCM Press, 1983, pp354-355

² 1 Kings 19: 12, NRSV

Experiencing an Ignatian retreat

Geoff New, Papakura East Presbyterian, South Auckland

It was a session meeting like any other. We had various issues to consider, including my study-leave proposal to attend a 30-day silent retreat. When it came time to decide on my study leave, I left the room so the elders could discuss my proposal. Soon after an elder entered the office where I was waiting. He was grinning.

“You’ve forgotten, haven’t you!” he said.

“Forgotten what?” I asked.

“The Rugby World Cup! It’s on the same time you are on this retreat! And we’ve agreed you can go!”

I went back into the room the elders were meeting. Smiles all around. I’ve always wondered about the *real* reason they approved my leave.

And so in November 2003, I entered St Francis Friary (Mt Roskill, Auckland) for a 30-day directed, silent retreat. I began the retreat with great anticipation and some bemusement; a Presbyterian minister attending a Franciscan Friary to take a Jesuit retreat under the spiritual direction of a Christian of no particular denomination from a local Christian community, who in turn was under the supervision of a Catholic lay spiritual director. Now that’s church!!

And so it began. No speaking. No TV. No newspapers. No Rugby World Cup. And 30 days later I finished the retreat with no regrets. Not one! (Especially given the All Blacks were knocked out in the semi-final at that World Cup. I hadn’t missed anything.)

Background of Ignatian Spiritual Exercises.

The *Spiritual Exercises* was developed by Ignatius Loyola (1491/95 – 1556) founder of the Society of Jesus – more commonly known as the Jesuits. They are passionate about mission and one of their founding scriptures was “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). Action, with a deep spirituality, was important to the Jesuits. Ignatius said “work as if everything depended upon you, but pray as if everything depended upon God.”

A critical part of Jesuit training was following a 30-day guided retreat as laid down in a manual written by Ignatius called the *Spiritual Exercises*. The *Spiritual Exercises* lead the retreatant on a journey of meditating on the life of Christ from just prior to the Incarnation through to His Ascension.

The *Exercises* are divided into four weeks or “seasons of the soul.” A week can be as little as four days and as long as two weeks. The length of a “week” depends on what is happening in the life of the retreatant. The spiritual director paces the retreat accordingly. The four weeks (and the length of time I took to navigate each are):

Week 1 – Days of preparation: 7 days

Week 2 – Life and ministry of Jesus: 13 days

Week 3 – The Passion: 4 days

Week 4 – The Resurrection: 5 days

A typical day would include the following spiritual disciplines:

Stillness

This discipline involved not saying or asking anything of God but simply being attentive to his presence. The day begins and ends with this discipline.

Spiritual Direction

Each day I would meet for an hour with my spiritual director to review the previous day and receive the work for the coming day.

Biblical contemplation

The main type of prayer employed is a method of meditation developed by Ignatius. Through prayerful preparation - asking for grace, reading repeatedly a scriptural account of an incident in the life of Christ – you contemplate the Gospel event as if you were actually present. Through dependence upon God you endeavour to enter the story and imagine what your five senses would have experienced had you been there. You might “cast” yourself as an observer, or one of the main characters, or maybe simply enter the event as yourself. This type of meditation requires very good spiritual direction as there is potential for great insight and great deception. At the end of each meditation, you then speak with Christ about what you have seen, heard and experienced. Two of these meditations are taken each day and they can take an hour or more to complete.

The contemplations are complemented by a series of writings by Ignatius which tease out issues about the Christian life. These include topics such as making decisions under the direction of God, living in humility, distinguishing the spirits, and living in the world with “indifference” or balance. According to Ignatius, to live in the world with “indifference” involves seeing all things as gifts from God and our responding to them so as to deepen God’s life in your life. That might mean choosing poverty over wealth, sickness over health or failure over success. Or vice versa. All are gifts from God.

Examination of the consciousness

This involves taking an inventory of the day and looking for God’s presence through it all

Colloquy

This is an evening prayer that intentionally addresses and converses with each member of the Trinity

My Experience of the Spiritual Exercises

The best way I can describe my experience of the *Exercises* is to use the incident on the Road to Emmaus as an analogy. In Luke 24, two disillusioned disciples are joined on the road by the post-Resurrection Christ. He asks them what they are talking about as they walk. They describe the events and life of Christ as they knew it. And by all accounts it wasn’t a bad attempt. But after hearing their version, Jesus basically says “OK. Now’s it my turn. Let me tell you the story.”

I arrived at St Francis Friary able to recite the story of Jesus and its impact on my life. The *Exercises* was Jesus telling me the story. And he knows it so much better!

Each day I would have two meditations on the life of Christ. The meditations follow the life of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. The contemplations truly transported me. As I progressed through the life of Christ, I discovered that despite myself I could not get ahead of the story – even

though I knew how it ended and continues today. For instance, during the contemplations on the crucifixion, all I “knew” was that this Jesus who I had come to know in

a deeper and new way over the previous three weeks was now dead. The Resurrection had no impact on me at that point because I had not yet come to that part of Christ’s life. All I “knew” was that Christ had died and it had an effect on me in and out of my time of contemplation. But when I came to contemplate the Resurrection. . .!! The wonder and experience of meeting the Risen Christ after all the events of His sufferings and death was pure joy.

The *Exercises* enabled me to encounter the Gospel story in deeply profound ways. It transformed me in ways I could never have imagined. However, it was not all joy and light. There were days that were very dark and one day which was especially bad. The spiritual oppression was so acute I could only pray a two word prayer. Yet that was enough. God was present. On that day there was a group of Pacific Island Presbyterian ministers meeting in the Friary. I was in my room agonising and wrestling with deep darkness and this group from our Church started to sing “He Touched Me.” They did not know I was there; they did not know what I was battling; but that song interceded for me and they prayed what I could not. There were regular such moments of grace.

Through dependence upon God you endeavour to enter the story and imagine what your five senses would have experienced had you been there

Throughout it all though, good spiritual direction is essential and the staff at St Francis Friary demonstrated deep wisdom, accurate discernment and facilitated the work of the Spirit in my life with compassion, dignity and power.

On more than one occasion, having described my experience of the previous day's meditation to my spiritual director, he would direct me to redo the meditation but would suggest a slight change. Without fail I would discover when revisiting those meditations God would speak dramatically the second time around.

Impressions

I found the Spiritual Exercises *very* Trinitarian. I have not prayed so consistently and so intentionally to the Trinity. This retreat was a powerful means and focus on the Trinity.

I have been on silent retreats before – but never for 30 days. This experience demonstrated the value of quietness. Over time, a new awareness and attentiveness to God came into sharp focus.

Pre-retreat reading mentions that during the retreat there is a possibility of experiencing a phenomenon referred to as a person's "Name of Grace". Some retreatants can experience coming to a place of being aware of their "Name of Grace"; a name which deeply describes their identity and make-up as a disciple of Christ. It draws on the biblical tradition of being "called by name" and leads to a deep

sense of personal vocation. Interestingly, George MacDonald, the 19th Century Scottish author and preacher, wrote a sermon entitled "The New Name" based on Rev 2:17. His sermon has some cross over with this potential experience of the *Exercises*.

As mentioned earlier, Ignatius was concerned with training contemplatives in action. He contended that the "the scrub-woman can hear God as well as the mystic who has prayed for years". In fact, originally the *Exercises* were intended to be conducted during the routine of ordinary of life. Withdrawing to a retreat centre was a later development. This retreat has at its heart conversion, transformation and mission.

Four Years Later...

The *Exercises* have become a way of life for me. They have gifted me a new awareness of God and self. I am currently doing post-graduate study and find their value having an impact there too.

At the end of last year, four years since taking the *Exercises*, I took a month's leave. Again it was during the Rugby World Cup but this time it was annual leave. This time I could watch it all and this time it was going to be different. No work for a month just a month watching rugby and the All Blacks. Life was good! By the end of my annual leave - I have to say – I have discovered one area of life the *Exercises* appears not to have any impact on.

Examining secondary disciplines

Clare Lind, Miramar Uniting, Wellington

There is a Jewish story about two men who lived in the same village. One was a rabbi who was famous for his prayers. He would spend hours composing them and the end product was exquisitely crafted. "Ah!" said the people of his synagogue, "our Rabbi is such a man of prayer!"

There was another man in the village, who was also known for his prayers. He was the village simpleton. When he prayed he would rattle off whatever letters of the alphabet came into his head. His fellow villagers would laugh at his efforts. "Call that prayer?" they would snigger. "Why, you are only reciting the alphabet and then not even in any order. You are a disgrace to your old teachers."

The simpleton would shrug and smile. "It's the best I can do," he said. "I am no good with words, so I figure if I give God the letters God will be able to make the right words out of them." The story goes on to say that when the two men died it was the simpleton, not the rabbi, who found favour with God.

In the light of that caution, the first thing I want to say is that I'm not an expert on prayer, simply another practitioner. In fact it is a fair call to be suspicious about the spirituality of anyone who claims to be an expert on prayer. To make such a claim seems to shift the focus from God to the claimant. It is a shift that endangers the integrity of prayer. It may reduce it to a misguided at-

tempt to manipulate God into action in our service (this is the formula; if you follow it God will do what you ask) or it may twist prayer into a tool for massaging the ego by having others think highly of us, in the same way that it did with the rabbi in the story.

Prayer is of course a spiritual discipline, (something that helps our relationship with God) but there are disciplines within disciplines (secondary disciplines). The secondary disciplines or habitual patterns within a spiritual discipline are what facilitate the exercise of that primary spiritual discipline. Bible reading, for instance, is a spiritual discipline. A person who uses daily Bible-reading notes is engaging in a secondary discipline to facilitate their exercise of the primary spiritual discipline of reading the Bible. It is the secondary disciplines within the spiritual discipline of prayer that I want to reflect on in the remainder of this article.

Just as patterns and behaviours change over a lifetime as our circumstances, capabilities and self awareness change, so too may our patterns of prayer.

If people have a very firm idea of what constitutes prayer and what definitely doesn't, they may experience a lot of angst when they find that a

particular way of praying no longer works for them. Their first reaction may be to try to do the same thing harder. When that doesn't work they may feel guilty - perhaps they have done something wrong and God is displeased with them. There may be such a strong identification of their way of praying with their sense of God that they fear they are losing their faith.

A person in that situation is going to need support and understanding. It may be useful to help him/her recognise this distinction between the primary spiritual discipline and the secondary facilitating disciplines. If that distinction can be grasped then the person will have a tool that will help him/her separate the way in which prayer is done, from the relationship that has been nurtured by that long established way of doing prayer. That then raises the possibility that prayer can be practiced in other ways without jeopardising his/her relationship with God.

This is a move into uncharted territory for most. It may take some time before the dissatisfaction and disconnection are viewed more positively as God's invitation to move into something new; as God asking for a person's

trust in other ways. Trust is the nub of it. As pastors we can have honest conversations and be supportive, patient listeners, even when the views expressed challenge our own, but ultimately it is not what we do, but what God does within a person that helps her/him move forward.

When trust in the goodness and kindness of God outweighs the fear of what a change might bring, then deep, life changing spiritual growth is possible. That shift in balance may occur because trust in God's love grows or because the person's fear diminishes - they feel there is very little left to lose and so there is little point holding on to the tatters of what was. Either way it is a movement of grace.

When secondary disciplines that have lost their usefulness are put aside, prayer will suffer eventually if new disciplines aren't picked up to take their place. These new secondary disciplines could be all manner of things - whatever facilitates prayer for a person (time spent in stillness, silence, associating God time with a regular

household activity or a special place, journaling, spiritual direction, gardening, praying with scripture...).

At the moment my most noticeable sec-

ondary discipline is a regular walk. I might start out pre-occupied with the concerns of the parish, family, friends, rehearsing all sorts of conversations and scenarios that probably won't happen, but usually at some point in the walk I am able to let these things go. For many years I would have thought walking was too full of distractions to help me focus on prayer. Now I find the distractions redemptive and restorative.

I have been saved so many times by the silhouette of the hills against the evening light, the antics of a tui, the feel of the wind, the sight of the sea. These things get under my pressing concerns and self preoccupation and somewhere in the delight of suddenly noticing they are there I have dropped all my hats. I find myself in God's presence simply as one of God's children and that seems to put everything else in perspective.

Prayer is as broad as life and just as full of adventure.

It is not what we do, but what God does within a person that helps her/him move forward

For heaven's sake, stop praying!

Graham Millar*

The Heavenly prayer sites are all jammed after another thousand planets in our galaxy developed life-forms to the praying level. Also many Earthlings have taken to internet praying. Fortunately three million other galaxies now have their own Prayerweb franchise. So please reduce your prayers to one per month for the next thousand years while this temporary glitch is sorted out.

Seriously, WHY do we bother God with praying?

Is it because all our “parent” voices tell us we should, for example, the way we interpret the Bible, what our parents and teachers said, what the Church says, what our ministry training enforced?

Or is it because it has become a comforting habit and we find it helpful? Or . . .

I'm not going to try to define what prayer really is, as we can pray with all sorts of concepts of God, the universe and everything. But after many years of listening to people from a dozen denominations, I am sure that the common issues are very practical.

It's worth asking two questions about our prayer habits:
What does praying do FOR me?
What does praying do TO me?

Possible answers to the first question might be: *I feel good, less guilty, more guilty, relaxed, stressed . . .*

And to the second: *I'm easier to live with, more passionate about justice, more rigid, more in touch with reality, less confident, softer, harder, . . .*

Then comes the question: What sort of prayer has positive benefit for me and for the people close to me?

You could ask someone close to you, such as your spouse, partner, spiritual director, prayer partner, best friend, child, what difference they see in you when you pray regularly and when you don't. Or you could do a pre-test, post-test around your prayer time to see what feelings you are aware of. There is a feeling wheel which has six feelings in the centre, and derivations of these radiating out. The six central feelings are: sad, mad, bad, peaceful, powerful, joyful. Which of these are you aware of at the beginning of your prayertime? Which of these are you

aware of after you have finished?

Also consider whether there are any changes in your levels of motivation, creativity, productivity and compassion. On the contrary, do you notice greater tiredness, irritability, boredom, depression, and so on. These may be caused by work stress and burnout as much as praying.

There are so many variables in the practice of “spiritual disciplines” that you may need to check this out over a period of time to see what works best for you and others whom you affect. On the whole, what works best is doing what comes naturally.

If you usually make lists, then make prayer lists.

If you find devotional reading focuses your mind, then read.

If music is your solace, listen to it – or perform it.

Candles work for some, and incense may also. Which of the senses do you engage? How does your body engage in prayer? Does it like to stand, sit, kneel, lie, walk, run, be still, be active, relax?

What does your mind respond to? Centring prayer, imaginative entry into a scripture passage, passionate intercession, analytical theologizing, dreamy drift, practical praying through a list?

Unique and common

Books on personality and prayer, especially those using Myers-Briggs or the Enneagram, encourage people to pray how they can. So how can you pray?

Another factor differentiating pray-ers is our age, experience and stage of faith development. How did you pray when you were seven years old? When you were 27, 37...77..97? Were your concepts of God and of praying always the same?

It is true that everyone is unique at this particular point on their spiritual journey. It is also true that there are many common features between people of similar types, at similar stages, in similar cultures and faith communities. So it's OK to learn from other people, from the wisdom of the tradition, and from your own self-reflection. How many books on prayer and the spiritual life are on your bookshelf?

Bankrupt and solvent

If you're my age, you'll remember John Robinson's "Honest to God", and the stir it created. He mentions that most ministers have a shelf of books on prayer that they've tried, and calls it "bankrupt corner". Spiritually, bankruptcy may be an important stage to experience - perhaps several times. And like all good paradoxes, you may have to be bankrupt to become solvent.

In particular, when you feel that you have a good system of prayer going that suits you because you've tried praying as you can, then it may be time to pray as you can't.

Following Jungian thought, many spiritual guides suggest that we get closer to God when we are more vulnerable. Maybe Jesus gave a hint of that too.

Therefore if you are an extraverted intuitive, enjoying imaginative prayer and surfing the future possibilities with passion, it is worth trying to sit quietly, without free thought, and focus on the present moment.

Again, if you love to explore the meanings of scripture and philosophy, and take great chunks of theologising into your prayertime, then try getting out of your head and into your feelings. Or practical helpers might want to let go of their prayer lists for others and contemplate a rose, or a cross. If it hurts, or it's hard, then, like all good medicine, it must be good!(not)

Gaol and journey

Religious addiction and spiritual abuse can both lead to a sense of imprisonment in our spiritual life. Whether the compulsions we feel come from our own addictions or from oppression by others, we can find prayer restricting. Who has no addictive tendencies in their life? The Alcoholics Anonymous concept of a Higher Power indicates that we usually look for powerful influences to make decisions for us. When these powerful influences cause addictions to alcohol, drugs, exercise, pornography, violence, work, food, computer games, gambling, stock market, sex, romantic novels, or anything else that controls us, then we need to be honest, repent, change, and depend on God (or another Higher Power).

Life is a journey, and much of our adult life is spent working through the inadequacies of our childhood experiences of love, to the point where we take responsibility

for who and what we have become. Our spiritual journey may take us through times in prison, as well as imperfect freedom, with twists and turns of remarkable insight. The aspects of prayer that improve our relationship with God, increase our awareness of our self, deepen our compassion for others, and expand our reverence for all life are miraculous.

Listening to the stories of praying people over the last 30 years, I have become aware that addictions and burnout are common. Because we don't talk about them except in confidential relationships, it is easy to think that we are worse than others, not fit to be in these roles, unworthy of God's calling. And when we are struggling it is easy to let go the relationships and spiritual practices that help. The prayers hit the ceiling, no one cares!

If I pray as a whole person, does that include my guilty and shameful parts, my bossy and violent parts?

Perhaps, as one person said, you can only feel close to God when walking your dog in the park. Whatever happens,

your journey needs to lead towards a loving God, not a controlling parent.

Bits and bytes

It seems that we all have many different parts. Don Cupitt wrote, "I am not a single self. I am a tangle of tales." Some schools of psychology mention free and adapted child, reasoned and impassioned adult, nurturing and controlling parent. Then there's id, ego and superego, or persona, ego and self, plus many archetypes. What was once called multiple personality disorder is now known as dissociative identity disorder. Are there then many bits of me? When does this become problematic?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an insightful poem in his last days entitled "Who am I?" We may wonder that too. Which of the many roles, personas, archetypes, interior bits of us are friendly and which ones bite? Which of them prays? If I pray as a whole person, does that include my guilty and shameful parts, my bossy and violent parts? Or do I only let God into the best rooms in the house?

Perhaps next time I find myself caught in a dark place I should look for God in that darkness.

Desert and delight

In 1983 I experienced my first directed retreat, with several days of silence. Anticipation was fearful, but the experience was a delight. At other times the experience

of focused silence has been boring, or distressing, or comforting. As an extrovert I prefer my retreats to be in company with others on their journey, even if we don't speak most days. Aotearoa New Zealand now has an Association of Christian Spiritual Directors, largely because a small group in Gisborne just started doing it. The Presbyterian Church gave great support for many years to Spiritual Growth Ministries, and this organization still provides quality resources. If you receive their brochure, don't forget to inform others, and to see if there is anything in it that will enrich your own journey.

Contemplative prayer was a welcome and natural progression for me, and a step towards living prayerfully. Although there is a strong tradition of this in Christianity, the south Asian religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, are the specialists in deep meditation. It's only 100 years ago that western science discovered the unconscious mind. That's about 3000 after the Hindus. God is present to all people in some way, and to some in all sorts of ways.

Solitude and community

In this post-modern, capitalist, individualized world, where religion is mainly privatised, we tend to try a strange mix of monastic and eremitic spiritual exercises. Monks often prayed seven times a day *COMMUNALLY*. Is it more appropriate for us to be like the monks or like

the hermits? Some of us enjoy a set liturgy, others a creative spontaneity. Both are helpful.

Endings and beginnings

If you decide not to heed the heavenly prayer warning, then how about trying this progression:

Pray as you can

Pray as you can't

Stop praying.

If you find the right spiritual companion, spiritual director or whatever, with whom you can be honest, then use them well.

Here is a thought from *The five cent psychiatrist*:

You have reached the ultimate when you feel that you are part of the life force of the universe and you have learned to love the one, the many, and yourself.

Or if you can't stop praying because you have reached that point, may you get to the place that my father reached in his nineties. After a lifetime of ministry with others, he would often say quietly, "thank you, Jesus."

**Graham has been a spiritual director for 20 years, and recently retired from ministry at Ngaio Union Church. He now concentrates on grandparenting, gardening and guiding.*

When you pray, things happen

Neil Churcher, minister emeritus, Dunedin

Funny that! The trouble is that you're not always sure what has happened, and if God is having one of God's "silent" days, maybe you'll be left in your uncertainty. That can be frustrating. If the uncertainty continues, it can also be disillusioning. When you need answers and they don't come, the temptation to stop praying is apt to grow.

Time to seek out someone to talk with, someone who will listen to you, someone who will help you listen for the Spirit's movement in your life; a spiritual companion, or, to use the traditional name, a spiritual director.

Not that a spiritual director will fix your problem; that's not what they're there for. Alan Jones comments that a "...debilitating effect of the drive and greed of a consumer

society on the life of the spirit is the assumption that everything is, in principle, fixable. True spiritual direction is about the great unfixables in human life. It's about the mystery of moving through time. It's about mortality. It's about love. It's about things that can't be fixed."

So why bother? Where's the benefit? For me, over the last 25 years, it's been the encouragement to keep praying, to keep on opening myself and being available to the movement of the Spirit of God in my life and in the world around me. And along the way, my spiritual director at the time has listened to me, listened with me, asked questions, challenged me, sometimes suggested a possible way forward, and, just occasionally, told me off. "Neil Churcher, you know very well.....!"

Above all, when I go to be with my spiritual director I know that the concentration will be entirely on me. Whatever I say will be listened to carefully, respected, and held in absolute confidence. I know that I can share my weaknesses and failures in a way that I would not do in other company. I can share my dreams, my longings, my fears, my hurts, my hopes and my plans. It is a safe place; and yet, it is also a place where the will and presence of the Spirit of God may well break in upon me, As Walter Bruggemann wrote about Moses on the mountain, "Moses is at risk here for he is in the presence of God."

The discipline of spiritual direction is part of the discipline of the spiritual life. It sits alongside, but is different from the discipline of supervision. I believe both are essential for ministry, especially in the present atmosphere. "There was a time when the culture of this country seemed to anticipate the values and leadership embodied in the pastor and professional religious worker. That has all been changed and the current Christian worker is more like an alien in a foreign land or at least like a missionary in a mission station without adequate support." In such an environment, the prospect of disillusionment, disappointment and depression is very great; the need to maintain an intentional spiritual life of devotion and support is very great indeed.

"Ministers have to be more radical than anyone in living a contemplative life – which means living a life in which we trust that the love we need will be given to us by God. That is essential to the prayer life." (Henri Nouwen.)

I am troubled when I hear people say, "I don't have time to pray. The days starts the moment I wake and the business doesn't end until I go to bed exhausted." I know about that because I've tried to live like that and be a minister of the Gospel like that. And I know that it doesn't work; it cannot work. I survived for some years: God and parishioners were loving and tolerant. Then the crash came and I realised that I needed to be intentional about developing the kind of spiritual life that would sustain me as a person and as a minister. I do not pretend to be perfect; far from it. But I know my need.

I remember once saying to my spiritual director that I was so stressed by the mountain of things I had to try to accomplish that I couldn't even pray. He said, "When you can't pray, be assured that I will pray for you." On

another occasion I poured out my soul to my companion while he sat on the floor with tears running down his face as he listened to my pain. I came away with no answers but with a deep blessing.

The life of prayer isn't about powering along in the presence of God, nor being armed all the time with some invincible force that can withstand everything life throws against it. It's about being yourself; a human being with a call to ministry and a need to expose yourself continually to the presence of the Spirit of God. In his excellent

book, *Spiritual Life: The Foundation For Preaching and Teaching*, John Westerhoff writes that when ministers take the radical step necessary to make their spiritual lives the focus of their attention, "...they discover that their preaching and teaching take on a character they have never known before. They once again feel refreshed and have something about which to preach and teach."

For many years I have lived with a prayer of Thomas Merton's.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your way does not mean I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.¹

My diary tells me that I have an appointment with my spiritual director next Monday. Great! Even "retired" ministers need support.

(A list of Spiritual Directors in Aotearoa New Zealand can be obtained from the secretary, Association of Christian Spiritual Directors, the Rev Shirley Fergusson, 495 Puketaha Rd, RD 1, Hamilton 3118, email ferg@wave.co.nz)

Blokes: Ride easy, stranger!

Scott Thomson, minister emeritus, Wairarapa

Congratulations, Chris Purdie: filling the thinnest *Candour* yet and putting some flesh on the bloke-ghost that haunts our mission statements.

Purdie's "Lance" and I don't sit close on the male continuum from effeminate to rambo. My personal interests lie pretty well on the male side of the divide, but blokemanship has passed me by. I don't like the way a lot of men – including clergy-men – behave. I have been blessed with close women friends. If I want a companion for anything from a crusade to a coffee I tend to look for a female one. (That some in other circumstances might conceivably have been "partners" in the gender sense is wholly delightful.) My great male friendships seem based on mutual interest or complimentary skills.

Church and Lance will remain apart unless his interest is aroused and/or his skills engaged.

Is Lance quintessentially male or peculiarly colonial? Once a freeman's dignity was bound to his ability – his trade. Hence much later the demarcation disputes of British trade-unionism. Lance with his formidable abilities and tool kit is a one-man trade union confederation. Lance doesn't need a saviour because (in colonial context) he is one. Lance IS civilization – and of course a potential one man eco-disaster. My grandmother used to speak of "homeys" – fresh from the old country and unable to cut it in the colonial environment. Lance most assuredly can cut it.

Expertise

For the moment, Lance will hardly perceive the church as having anything he lacks.

Lance has loads of expertise. Who would he respect for their expertise – the top-dressing pilot, the skilled mechanic or metal worker? A good man in the bush or the boat? Maybe the accountant and the lawyer? He would not respect the fast talking sales type who tries to beat him with words before Lance has got his head round the issue.

Church is long on words and does not check out well on expertise. *Candour's* review of David Murrow adroitly reminds us that "what a woman often sees as heartfelt and homespun, her husband will often see as corny and half-baked". And the church doesn't rate well with tech-

nology. We can't afford it, or even afford the time to prepare and present it properly. Charismatics – a la Crystal Cathedral – tend to go big on technology but that usually fails to cover lack of depth. They have no monopoly on crap music and poorly constructed sermons that lack theological perception and contemporary relevance.

Lecture style is not Lance's thing. However, I can remember sitting with some Lances all attention because the subject was how to fly a plane. We all knew our survival was at stake. So don't knock lectures totally, because with Lance, relevance probably rates ahead of style.

Health

Lance values his strength. A recent *Sunday Star-Times* feature suggests that he finds even a visit to the doctor threatening. I think we owe it to him not to go for his soft underbelly, even though this may be projecting temptingly inside a couple of decades – given his diet. Lance right now is a ball of health, of energy and can-do. Moving in on Lance from the poor worm, sin and inadequacy side of the field does him less than justice. "Nothing in my hand I bring" doesn't fit our man. He obviously has his hands full.

As an NZ Army chaplain, Chris Purdie rates the "got it all sorted" Kiwi bloke as psychologically problematical. That is indeed the longtime experience of the armed services. Captain Sir David Tibbits, RN, writing life at sea in WW2 remarks: "The 'Big and the Bold' curled up remarkably fast. The men who took it all in their stride... were the quiet men who had worked in a factory, on a farm or with a milk round. They had always gotten on with their jobs whatever happened and they just went on doing them."

Estrangement

I think that Lance's problems are not just with the church. Kiwi society seems to have moved, relegating blokes to a sub-culture. Off the sports field, his physical prowess is less and less in demand. A nerd could dig ditches with his kit, the modern army only just has a niche for him, and women increasingly run the country. Anything new he wants to attempt is likely to be bugged up with regulations and red tape. If National wins the next election, I suspect it's not that Clark isn't a very good leader, but that the electorate is getting sick of her being nanny to the nation.

Lance's estrangement is nothing to the alienation of some males – many Maori or Islander. Lance has skills, he has a job, he has a valuable kit. Too often they have none of these. A growing phenomenon in Washington and Wellington is the intelligent and skilled single black/brown woman professional. These women have made it. The men, more often, have not and the women have no special need for them. Surplus males used to be sent to the front line or the priesthood or pushed off in a canoe to rape and pillage elsewhere. There have to be better options for what not so long ago was somebody's little boy.

Staying with Lance, does the "feminine" aspect of the church relate with women who somehow relate to Lance? Amanda's editorial suggests that younger women can also be alienated from church-as-is. Bluntly, the whole gay/married leadership debate debacle signals that Presbyterian Church is talking from the ghetto when it comes to how people date, relate mate and recreate. It wasn't so once. We had quite a store of wisdom and common sense.

Saints and heroes

We could be in a fad of PC right now, or maybe we are moving out of a dark macho age. Riane Eisler calls it "unfinished transformation" in her interesting *The Chalice and the Blade*. Whichever, I think we need to reach back and take the stories of our heroic saints into the evolving future. We need to claim them in all their historical ambiguity in a tough, unsentimental, understated way. (The film *Amazing Grace* did so magnificently.) I am not happy with Bible readings that discreetly edit out all the nasty bits. That way lies humbug, like my dear people who ban war toys and send the children off in full kit to one of the pirate parties that are now fashionable.

I do not want my grandchildren to have to be soldiers, but it was a great relief last Sunday when we were allowed

to sing verse three of "For All the Saints..." In a world where there are soldiers, let them be "faithful, true and bold."

Chris Purdie wants to bestow a blessing on Lance - perhaps an absolution, an affirmation, even an archetype. Heroes come in different shapes: warriors, and wanderers and wizards. In Carol Pearson's continuum (*The Hero Within*), the Innocent and the Orphan are close together. Right now, the Church seems stuck on the innocent. Maybe we are not so far from Lance? I sense more of the orphan in Lance than he (or we) can readily admit. How will Lance feel – Purdie seems to ask – in what's been called "the loneliness of the battlefield"?

I am awed by Lance. We are strangers. He's perpetual motion. He is quite magnificent. He's self sufficient – a surely a lonely state if ever one stops. How close is he to anger if/when his energy is thwarted? He strikes me as a bit of a cowboy. Purdie didn't mention a white horse. If he's not into friendship, maybe that's what a bloke needs for salvation.

Lance draws me to JK Baxter's poem;

Alone we are born
And die alone;
Yet see the red-gold cirrus
Over snow-mountain shine.

Upon the upland road
Ride easy, stranger:
Surrender to the sky
Your heart of anger.

Identity in an ecumenical context

Peter MacKenzie, other recognised member, Wellington*

I was reading the last issue of *Candour* ("What does it mean to be Presbyterian?") at the same time as I was reflecting on Waitangi Day and asking what it means to be me in Aotearoa New Zealand. For the latter, I have come to accept that I am a partner to the Treaty - through my ancestors who arrived here as early as 1842, and by right of my birth. I identify myself as a New Zealander

who shares in the commitment of the Treaty, which I see as an agreement to journey together as one people, while accepting our own identities.

I also acknowledge that we (both Pakeha and Maori) have failed to keep the spirit of the Treaty in any number of ways: ignoring the culture and ethos of one partner;

using a domination of numbers and wealth to exert undue influence; forgetting that memory and tradition are strong emotive factors; deriding the language and culture of the other partner; setting aside the treasures and art of one partner in favour of their own.

The image seems to lead on to my Uniting Congregations experience. I am asking myself what it means to be Presbyterian in this ecumenical environment; something that was not addressed in this issue of *Candour*. It seems to me that we too are in a treaty relationship: in the Act of Commitment and through individual parish agreements, the Presbyterian Church has entered into agreements with four other denominations (Christian Churches, Anglican, Congregational and Methodist). That treaty relationship should affirm our own identity while also allowing room for others to grow.

So to be Presbyterian in New Zealand today is also to be a partner in Uniting Congregations. There are around 124

Presbyterian parishes that share a faith journey with at least one other denomination. They are bound by a treaty of faith and struggle to identify with one denominational label. For them the branding efforts of denominationalism are hurtful and alarming. These parishes are committed to a shared faith journey that, at times, it seems their national Church wishes to deny.

The people within the Uniting Congregations are no longer crying out for organic unity of the partner churches, but they do want the treaty-type partnership to be valued and respected. I hear them proudly say, "We are Uniting Presbyterians" and declare their hope that the vision of unity in faith will continue to burn brightly in the eyes of all denominations.

**Peter MacKenzie has recently become the executive officer of the Uniting Congregations of Aotearoa New Zealand*

Wahine Day: A personal reflection

Barry Doig, minister emeritus, Nelson

I was ordained to the ministry and inducted into the parish of Fortrose, (now Toitōis) Southland on 15th February 1968. I was single, and my parents came down from Hastings to help me settle into the manse. My father was a carpenter and helped me put together the odd piece of furniture, and my mother gave me helpful advice on the domestic side. I was pleased to be through all my training and was keen and ready to take on practical ministry. My parents thoroughly enjoyed their time in the parish and made good friends with many in the congregation

After about six weeks they left on a bus tour of the South Island, arriving in Christchurch early in April to stay with family. They caught the inter-island ferry from Lyttelton on 9th April. Early next morning I woke to the news that the ferry had gone aground on Barrett's reef in Wellington harbour. A quick call to Christchurch confirmed they were on board.

I was not unduly concerned, after all, they got the Wanganella off the reef in 1947. I was not to know that weather conditions were so vastly different. I carried on my pastoral visiting, listening to news reports. Then in the

afternoon I learned that she had foundered in the harbour. I had no way of knowing exactly what was going on.

I had previously been invited to spend the evening with friends, so it was good to have company as I sought to contact police, civil defence and anyone who could give me information. Of course, I had no idea of the total chaos that was going on in Wellington. I finally reached the emergency police control room. At first they could give me no information so I had to depend on the 7pm television news and just wait. I contacted my sisters and brothers in Hastings who had all gathered at my sister's home to wait.

I eventually got through to the Wellington Emergency control room again and I can still hear the rustle of papers and the muffled voices until the constable came to the phone to inform me as gently as he could that my father had lost his life. They had no news of my mother.

It's very hard to describe how I felt at the time. Shock, denial, maybe they made a mistake, all sorts of emotions. I rang my family who had also been informed.

Responses

I then tried to find my mother. I rang Don Elley, minister at Khandallah parish and told him what I knew. He was a wonderful help. I still don't know how he found her, but late in the evening he rang to say that she was alive and in the Hutt hospital. My friends insisted I stay the night with them.

News travels fast in a tragedy. Presbytery soon heard of events and gave me wonderful support. People in the parish surrounded me with love and support. I must say the local telephone exchange operator was wonderful. It was a manual crank-handle exchange and Kathy McKenzie went out of her way to keep lines clear for me and worked well after closing time. A national tragedy is a community tragedy. Even the airline NAC were very supportive.

Next day I flew to Wellington. It was beautiful day, calm and clear. An absolute contrast to the previous day.

Two of my brothers had previously come down to face the galling task of identifying my father. We gathered at the home of family friends in Stokes Valley, and I was able to visit my mother. She had sustained internal injuries such that she could not attend the funeral which was held in Hastings the following Friday. But the church was there for her as Alan Quigley sat with her, held her hand and read the funeral service.

I returned to parish life and felt well supported by many folk in church and community.

The next few weeks were very difficult. I have a tendency to internalise anxiety and I begin to feel very guilty about small things. Floating guilt, distraction and anxiety, all the symptoms of clinical depression, a path I knew well. I needed and sought help. Presbytery had a good support structure, and I sought medical advice. But nothing could relieve my anxiety. Finally after a very long week, I sat in a chair and simply yielded to the forgiveness and love of God.

The result was remarkable. I was bathed in sheer unconditional love of God. It was as if I was lying on a beach and wave upon wave of pure grace crashed over me. My guilt was relieved, my anxiety disappeared and I felt free. I moved rapidly from fear to faith. The following Sunday I preached with a conviction I had not felt before. As time went by I spent much time reflecting on what had

happened and how to relate this to my ministry. I didn't have to wait long. A prominent elder collapsed and died on his tractor. Then a phone call from home to say that my sister's husband had collapsed and died at breakfast. That meant another flight home and another family funeral. But I felt sustained and could support my family suffering another blow.

In the months and years since that time I have had much cause to reflect on the place of tragedy in Christian experience and the pastoral implications of such events. I still live in the background radiation of that experience of grace. It has sustained me many times, and now 40 years on it continues. It is wonderful to know that in spite of our frailties, mistakes, and even plain foolishness, we are loved as no one else can love.

Pastorally I have felt much more able to minister in situations of grief and loss. I have felt an empathy with such sufferers and this has been an important part of my ministry. But above all I have sought to live and minister the grace of God.

This was not intended as a personal testimony but rather

some reflections on a traumatic event in the story of our nation. But one cannot help a personal reference when one is involved. I would draw some conclusions

The church was there when I and my family needed support.

Personal tragedy can do one of two things. It can sour us and make us bitter and angry, or it can be a means of growth. The choice is ours. As pastors we must help people to make the right decision. This requires sensitivity, skill and experience. I hope I have been able to do that.

We minister from our own experience of the grace of God. We daren't minister from anywhere else.

I recently visited the Wahine Memorial display at the Museum of Wellington and the Sea. As I viewed the film clips it all came back. I wept. But I was also strengthened by that same existential hope that touched me 40 years ago. I still want to minister that hope.

In spite of our frailties, mistakes, and even plain foolishness, we are loved as no one else can love

Change and decay?

A couple of years ago I conducted the funeral for a man who died from a heart attack at far too young an age. Over the months after the event, I came to know the man's brother quite well. We would meet for coffee from time to time, and we invited him and his wife to dinner. The brother started occasionally attending our more contemporary church service and even more occasionally came with his wife. She asked me after a service questions about why we no longer sung the hymns that she had remembered from her own church-going - which had ended many years before, when she left home to attend university.

The arguments of being contemporary, contextual and inclusive seemed to offer a poor response to her association with hymns providing a sense of tradition, authenticity, dependability and a kind of authority. Discussions like this, which I have had more than a few times with those older baby boomers, have left me wondering what those tens of thousands who left the church in the 60s and 70s may be looking for from a church in the 2000s. Is it possible that the order, routine and tradition so shunned by the rebellious teenage rock'n'rollers, hippies and punk rockers may hold some attraction as we (Madonna and I are the same age) begin to see some of our contemporaries number among the first casualties of age-related diseases and infirmity? The greying-head crowds that flock to see reconstituted versions of Sting and the Police (all 50 or so), the Stones, (Mick well into his 60s), Deep Purple and the rest are not looking to be part of some new revolution, but want to reaffirm what Neil Young (63) and Crazy Horse said those years ago: "hey hey, my my, rock and roll can never die".

Ministers need courage and discernment. It's the old prayer about being able to tell the difference between the things that need to change and things that don't.

There is that intriguing story in the book of Numbers where the Prophet Balaam keeps feeling the need to provide oracles telling of how God is to bless Israel - despite the fact that Balak is desperate for Balaam to do the opposite, and offer curses instead. Balak offers Balaam the promise of great wealth if only he will curse the people. Balaam says "God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?" (Numbers 23:19)

On one hand, our faith affirms that there are some things of ultimate and unchanging significance. And yet on the other, we each seek to communicate our faith in ways

meaningful to a community and culture whose one constant is change.

My friend Jill Caldwell runs a social research company called Windshift. Each month she writes a brief reflection on issue affecting the lives of New Zealanders. In her latest letter, she asks her readers to think about their lives five years ago. February 2003. Now, she asks them, to think about what has changed since then.

"Half of you will have moved house - no, maybe less than half. I imagine most of you are home owners rather than renters, so you're a bit more fixed. But 57 percent of New Zealanders moved between 2001 and 2006, according to the Census. And most will have changed jobs - annual turnover is around 17 percent according to Statistics New Zealand. Unless it's the same 17 percent going from job to job to job. . . Doubt it.

"If you're at the cutting edge of your profession, more than half the knowledge you had in 2003 is now likely to be obsolete. And if you have young children, they're probably now in a completely different world from the one they inhabited in 2003. No doubt, they've dragged you with them. "

I am not sure how many of you will agree with Jill's perspective - especially the bit about how quickly our knowledge becomes obsolete. But even if this is not the reality for you or me, maybe it is for some in our congregation - and our potential congregations.

There is a challenge here to look at things differently. In communicating the Gospel, the challenge we face may not be one so much of relevancy but of movement. So much of what we do and how we organise ourselves depends on people staying around for a while. But the group of faithful people who have been there supporting our congregations for a long time, as vital as they are, may not actually be representative of our wider communities and their experiences of mobility and transition.

A community of people called to "take up your cross and follow me" should know something of what it is like to move from here to there. Proclaiming the Gospel to our modern nomadic communities; maybe if we figured out how best to do that, many other things would fall into place.

I pray for God's blessings on your ministry.

