

# CANDOUR

News and Views for Ministers

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## Coming to faith

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*The Rite Stuff: Ritual in Contemporary Christian Worship and Mission*. Ed. Pete Ward. The Bible Reading Fellowship 2004

*Reviewed by Fyfe Blair*

“Ritual” can be a rather pejorative word. Indeed, in relation to church it spells everything that is dull, bland and boring. However, Pete Ward opens this little book of essays by acknowledging from his own faith journey that ritual is alive and well in daily life and that the ancient traditions are offering refreshing ritual practices for us today.

Ritual is considered from various facets in a series of small essays. What made this book so interesting to me was that most of the writers (well, those I had heard of) are engaged at the boundary of institutional church and alternative worship forms. Each engages with the significance of ritual for what this means in worship and spirituality in postmodernity for today.

I was especially stimulated by those chapters from Jeremy Fletcher “Text, Authority and Ritual in the Church of England”; Maggi Dawn<sup>1</sup> “The Art of Liturgy”; Pete Ward<sup>2</sup> “Personalised Ritual”; Mike Riddell “Deep currents of the Heart” and Jonny Baker<sup>3</sup> “Ritual as strategic Practice”.

In their own ways, all seem to accord with this statement: “in a time of great creativity and innovation, it is important to realise that postmodern eclecticism comes at a cost. We do a deep dis-service to worship and ritual if we dislocate them from their context”. (p12) In particular, integrity of the rite with tradition and the present context(s) formed a key thread.

This book is part of what is an ongoing discussion and discovery between mission, culture and worship. If you are at all interested and caught up in this then this simple little volume needs reflecting upon.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> More on/from Maggi Dawn at <http://maggidawn.typepad.com/maggidawn/>  
<sup>2</sup> Previously written Liquid Church 2002  
<sup>3</sup> More on/from Jonny Baker at <http://jonnybaker.blogs.com/jonnybaker/>

# Spreading the news

Amanda Wells

What flicked the switch in your head that brought the light? Whether you can pinpoint a moment in time or whether your journey has had lots of twists, coming to faith is an concept with which we all connect.

Is it still happening? How? To whom? What can we do differently or more effectively? In addressing these questions, contributors to this issue of *Candour* courageously tackle the most fundamental challenge we face. I've really enjoyed reading the inspiring and provoking articles submitted. It's exciting to engage with these concepts rather than with the numbers story of decline.

That phrase might sound slightly familiar to you if you've attended one of the CWM-funded media workshops that Jose and I are running around the country till mid June. As well as giving a great opportunity to put faces to many names, we're finding that the workshops lead to interesting discussions about pitching our message. Where's the balance between selling the message and selling out? What price relevance? Is "compromise" a dirty word?

We're all sensitive to words. When I mention that I work for the Church, people often ask me if I'm "religious". To me, that word has no positive connotations; it creates a barrier and a binary opposition. One of my (Christian) friends dislikes the word "non-Christian". It creates a false division, she says: it implies that God is at work in our lives but not in theirs; that we're members of two disparate categories instead of being equally well-loved by God.

While eating lunch, I often flick through the various Christian publications we receive. Recently in the *Promise Keepers* newspaper, former All Black Bull Allen was quoted as describing his life after becoming a Christian: "before, I swam in the 'grey sea of compromise'; now there's black and white, right and wrong. Life makes sense."

I appreciate his point of view but it jars with my experience. While the master narrative of life may make sense, the chapters and individual pages often lack any logic. "Everything's fine now that you believe" may be good news but it's not our Good News. Our Good News allows the possibility of suffering and pain without them being deal-breakers. Misery never makes sense and we're not immune to it.

But if the Good News doesn't translate positively for your life, it's really hard to communicate. As Geoff New observes, setting strictures on behaviour or inducing guilt will be taken as bad news by most people. We're in such a tangle about what comes first: the news of God's saving grace or the way in which we fail to live up to it. Neither stands effectively alone.

This edition's second article, by Kevin Ward, considers church culture and the signals it sends. Kevin also discusses the idea that conversion is more often a process than a snap moment of decision, which has implications for our consideration of coming to faith. Rather than setting up guilt-inducing expectations of instantaneous conversion, perhaps each encounter is a small drop in an ongoing stream eroding misconceptions. Similar sentiments are echoed by Phil Guyan of the Christian Broadcasting Association. CBA's role involves shifting people from hostility to indifference or neutrality, he suggests, rather than taking them direct to belief.

Other articles in this issue consider our church culture in more detail and outline different approaches taken with different groups. Then Colin Marshall and Stuart Lange examine the question of "conversion" itself, telling some unheard stories. Wayne Matheson's contribution didn't quite make it into the previous issue (Sharing Resources) but his discussion of our wider context makes a fitting end to this month.

Rinny Westra's reflection in the last issue has generated quite a bit of comment, and it's great to see some of this appearing in this month's *Candour*. Please feel encouraged to write letters to the editor if there's anything you'd like to comment on from this month.

You might notice that this issue looks a little longer than normal. The level of advertising and the volume of contributions received have allowed me to run 28 pages instead of the usual 20: it's encouraging that such a fundamental topic has drawn such a positive reaction. Next month's theme is a little more sombre: Leaving Ministry (the recruitment crisis part 1). We hope to cover the looming number of retirements; why/how people choose to leave ministry; having a second job; planning for your retirement; and what ministers within the bounds are doing. Any spontaneous contributions would be gratefully received; the deadline is 30 May.

# Preaching to the non-churched

Geoff New, Papakura East Presbyterian

I went for a haircut the other day. The conversation went like this:

Hairdresser: So, what do you do for a living?

**Me: I'm a minister.**

Hairdresser: A Christian minister?

**Me: Yes.**

(Pause)

Hairdresser: So, are you going away for Easter?

**Me: Ahh, no, that's quite a busy time for ministers. Easter is one of the most important times of the year for the church.**

Hairdresser: Oh. I don't really know anything about it.

**Me: We have extra services over that weekend.**

Hairdresser: Mmmm. I don't suppose many would go to them though.

**Me: Actually, quite a few do attend.**

Hairdresser: Oh.

Not exactly a conversation that will result in me receiving a nomination for Evangelist of the Year any time soon. And then there's the thought: what if that person had attended one of the Easter services I conducted? Would the Easter message have connected? Would my preaching about Jesus and what He endured and accomplished have made any sense or difference to her?

Over the past year, I have had occasion to revisit the content of my sermons. Actually, "occasion to revisit" is code for "I had a crisis in my preaching". Yet, the oft-quoted example of the Chinese character for crisis being made up of the characters for threat and opportunity held true. I found myself under profound threat and presented with a wonderful opportunity all at once. This article is a sliver of my pondering and reflection as a result of that time insofar as it relates to the topic at hand – preaching to those who are not acquainted with things "church".<sup>1</sup>

One more point by way of introduction; it's only fair to warn you that I'm writing from the basis that I am passionate about the ministry of preaching. Allow me to work from that basis without using up my wordcount on definitions or a defence of the place of preaching today.

There is a very disturbing book for preachers to read. It is called *All is Forgiven* by Marsha Witten. The book is her PhD thesis. She wrote to Southern Baptist pastors and

ministers of the Presbyterian Church of the United States inviting them to send her their best sermon on the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). She then analysed the language and message of those sermons. It is a disturbing read. The sermons enshrined American secular culture and values rather than Biblical and theological insights.

She begins her book with the following story:

One Good Friday she was sitting listening to a radio station playing Bach's "St Matthew Passion"<sup>2</sup>. She heard something being put into her mailbox and it was a flyer from a local church.

It read:

*"Hi neighbour!*

*At last! A new church for those who have given up on church services! Let's face it. Many people aren't active in church these days.*

*WHY?*

*Too often:*

- *The sermons are boring and don't relate to daily living*
- *Many churches seem more interested in your wallet than in you*
- *Members are unfriendly to visitors*
- *You wonder about the quality of the nursery care for your little ones*

*Do you think attending church should be enjoyable?*

*WELL, WE'VE GOT GOOD NEWS FOR YOU!*

*Valley Church is a new church designed to meet your needs in the 1990s. At Valley Church you*

- *Meet new friends and get to know your neighbours*
- *Enjoy exciting music with a contemporary flavour*
- *Hear positive practical messages which uplift you each week:*

*- How to feel good about yourself*

*- How to overcome depression*

*- How to have a full and successful life*

*- Learning to handle money without it handling you*

*- The secrets of successful family living*

*- How to overcome stress*

- *Trust your children to the care of dedicated nursery workers.*

*WHY NOT GET A LIFT INSTEAD OF A LETDOWN THIS SUNDAY?"*

Witten comments on the impact of this jarring experience for her:

*On the one hand a radio station dramatises the meaning of Good Friday by airing Bach's intensely spiritual rendition of the suffering and fallen Jesus, drawn in the stark words of Matthew's Gospel. On the other [a church sends a slick direct mail-out that] contains a cheerful, practical list of the pleasures one might receive from affiliation within its church – with no mention whatsoever of faith or God, let alone of suffering or spiritual striving.*

I cringed reading that story because I know I'm not above trying to appeal to people in that kind of way.

Witten includes the following quote, which sums up the problem powerfully: "Secularisation presents Christianity with a nasty choice between being relevant but undistinctive, or distinctive but irrelevant." (David Lyon, *The Steeple's Shadow*)

## What do you want first? The good news or the bad news?

One thing that has arrested me recently is whether the Gospel is preached as its name suggests – as good news.

Often the "good news" is preached in a fashion whereby it isn't good news at all. At best, it can sound like bad news, and at worse, it can be plainly combative: "I'm right and you're wrong!" I'm not suggesting that the Gospel does not call for huge adjustments and life decisions. The message of Christ orientates our lives to God and that involves repentance and reconciliation with Him.

It involves lives that are transformed and re-created in Christ. However, the way that healing message is conveyed can be with an argumentative and arrogant

tone: "I'm right and you're wrong and I'm going to tell you what's wrong with you and life as you know it."

What's so good about that kind of news?

In one book about evangelistic preaching, the author wrote, "the problem with evangelistic sermons is that they sound like evangelistic sermons". Is there another way? Here are some things I am challenged to embrace as I preach each week:

## Distinctiveness

The other week I attended a course entitled "Biblical Theology: Tracing Major Themes through Scripture". The visiting speaker (an overseas biblical scholar) led the class through scripture, tracing major themes such as creation, humanity, alienation and redemption. It was heavy going at times as he carefully engaged with scripture and exegeted it, yet at the same time he created an expectancy that had me eager to put it into practice in my sermons.

At the same venue, there was another course run for church leaders. During a break in the course I was attending, I overheard some of the content of the other course. Basically, it was very much like the content of the flyer Marsha Witten described. The course participants were being exhorted to run worship services that were "rapid" because the effect of the TV revolution is irrevocable and people are used to fast-paced and varied images. They cannot handle slow services. Other counsel was given that, to my ear, would have the church becoming something that Christ has never called her to be: supposedly relevant but lacking any distinctiveness. I guess, in a word, compromised.

I sat there listening to the emphasis on pragmatism that seemed devoid of theology and heart, and asking myself "why is such a large part of the New Zealand church seduced by these slick and flash strategies, and such courses are well attended, while a course that seeks to impart the Biblical story of God is considered second class (if attendance is any measure)"?<sup>3</sup>

Some might consider it a cheap shot but the consumer mindset is driving a lot of churches' mission and bringing

## The consumer mindset is driving a lot of churches' mission and bringing a lot of church leaders to their knees

a lot of church leaders to their knees. And I don't mean in prayer. The expectation from so many is "what's in it for me?"

At the heart of our preaching and mission, there must be distinctiveness. That distinctiveness is Christ. I know, I know – an obvious point. However, I found that "distinctiveness" is increasingly buried under fads and trends that seek to make the church relevant and appealing to the world. And, yes, I know we need to contextualise the message, but surely not at the cost of compromising the message.

Take a moment to read the following from one of the great preachers of the past century:



*But what does it mean - to "preach Christ"? The phrase calls for definition. I suggest that you should go, for the true touchstone in this matter, to the preaching of the early Church. When Henry Ward Beecher began his ministry, he was baffled by a disappointing absence of results and an almost total lack of response. The chariot wheels dragged; there were no signs of an awakening; the indifferent remained sunk in their indifference. But one day the thought gripped him: "There was a reason why, when the apostles preached, they succeeded, and I will find it out if it is to be found out." That was sound strategy, and it had an immediate reward. It would be well for us if a similar experience should drive us back to the New Testament, to search for the secret of the first generation of preachers of the Word. What was this message which consumed these men like a flame, and through them kindled the world?*

*It is worth noticing, to begin with, what it was not. It was not a theory or an idea. It was not something they had arrived at by the processes of their own thought and research. It was neither an argument with paganism, nor a panegyric on brotherhood [sic]; neither ethical exhortation, nor religious edification; neither mystical experience, nor spiritual uplift. It was not even a reproduction of the Sermon on the Mount; nor was it an account of the subjective reaction to the teaching and example of their Lord.*

*In its essence, it was none of these things. Doubtless it included some of them, but it was quite basically quite different. It was the announcement of certain concrete facts of history, the heralding of real, objective events.*

*What were these historic events this heralded far and wide? There were two events, which in reality were not two but one. "Christ died for our sins." That was fundamental. At the very heart of the apostles' message stood the divine redemptive deed on Calvary. But this literally crucial event was never in their preaching isolated from the other that crowned and completed it, forming as it were the keystone of the arch. In the terse language of the Book of Acts, they preached "Jesus and the Resurrection". The Resurrection, so far from being dragged in or tacked on to*

*the Gospel of the Cross, was implicit in every word the preachers spoke.*

*But now let me raise a question. What is the most characteristic word of the Christian religion? Suppose you were asked to single out one word to carry and convey the cardinal truth of the Gospel, what word would you choose? I suggest it would have to be the word "Resurrection". That is what Christianity essentially is - a religion of Resurrection.<sup>4</sup>*

Not so long ago, I had the privilege of spending time with a non-church family, one of whom was dying. After one or two visits, it struck me that I was approaching my time

with them more as a social worker than as a minister of the Gospel. So I decided at my next visit to speak of the hope in Christ. I read the great resurrection chapter of 1

Corinthians 15 where Paul uses the analogy of a seed. Once I finished reading I asked what they thought. One family member, with tears in her eyes, said "wow! That's good news!" In that moment, it too struck me anew - yes, it is good news!

If we preach to the "non-churched" the distinctive message of Jesus dying and rising again - and preach it as people for whom this event has gripped our hearts; has taken our breath away; has given us hope that is vibrant and robust; has given us revelation and insight into the nature of God and His vision for a new heavens and earth; of amazing redemption - then we will preach with distinctiveness.

If I had one piece of advice for preachers today, it would be to loiter on the Road to Emmaus and engage with the discussion Jesus had with the two disciples there.<sup>5</sup> If you had been one of those two disciples that day, what difference would it make to your sermons today? How would it affect the content of your sermons?

I'm not promising that this message will be welcomed and embraced by all who hear it. In speaking about preaching and the temptation to succumb to the "consumer mindset", Paul Windsor (principal of Carey Baptist College) succinctly sums up the challenge: "...yes, but the Gospel is still foolishness and the Cross an offence."

There is one promise I can make though. If you preach the distinctive Christian message, which has at its heart

the Cross and Resurrection, then your preaching will possess two other qualities in addition to distinctiveness. Two qualities that are relatively rare but extremely valued – integrity and authenticity.

To preach with distinctiveness (as outlined above) means that whatever else people might be able to say about your preaching, they will not be able to accuse you of deception or superficiality. They will not feel like they have been sold a line or feel like they have been to a sales pitch for a time-share resort.

Integrity and authenticity can further be summed up in one word – “trust”. Is that a missing link in much of our preaching? People being able to invest their trust in what is being preached? Maybe.

Ok, now for those of you who are demented by my pontificating and just want some answers to the question “How do I preach to the non-churches?”, here’s a brief hint to finish with, on an issue I would love to write more about.

On a preaching course I attended last year, Paul Windsor encouraged preachers to look to three things in order to get a handle on what makes people tick and how to connect with them in this day and age:

- i) movies
- ii) music
- iii) advertising

A lot of work has already been done by the advertising profession in terms of delving into human nature and the consumer mindset. Be a parasite and study their work.

To that end, over the past six months I have taken note of some of Kevin Roberts’<sup>6</sup> work. Roberts maintains that there are three keys to the heart of the consumer<sup>7</sup>:

- i) Mystery<sup>8</sup>: Great stories; past, present and future; taps into dreams; myths and icons; inspiration.
- ii) Sensuality: Sound, sight, smell, touch, taste.
- iii) Intimacy: Commitment; empathy; passion.

Baptise this insight with the Christian Gospel. On Easter Sunday I preached about Mary Magdalene standing at the empty tomb weeping.<sup>9</sup> I used Roberts’ thesis of what appeals to people and laid that template over that story. All three characteristics are wonderfully present:

- *Mystery* – Now in the Resurrection you have the mystery of God’s plan in Christ revealed.
- *Sensuality* – You have the beginning of a new way of the

early disciples relating to Christ. “Do not hold onto Me, for I have not yet returned to the Father” (John 20:17) Jesus tells Mary. He returns to the Father and the Spirit is sent and, now because of the work of Christ, we smile in agreement with Irenaeus’ assertion that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” A wonderful Resurrection message that appeals to the whole person being wholly alive.

- *Intimacy* – The first Easter message, as given to Mary, was to go and declare that Jesus says “I am returning to My Father, and your Father, to My God, your God”. Wonderful intimacy and relationship with our Creator.

Do the work of exegeting the scripture you’re preaching on, and then consider Roberts’ trinity of mystery, sensuality and intimacy as you call people to a life at home with the Trinity. To people who are church and non-church – it matters not. Appeal to their heart’s desire for mystery, sensuality and intimacy.

And do so with distinctiveness, integrity and authenticity.

It will be Good News.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Actually, this article could be termed as my first foray into “blogging” so to speak. It is probably best to read this article as if it is a diary entry.

<sup>2</sup> Witten, Marsha, *All is Forgiven: the secular message in American Protestantism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> I readily concede that I heard only 15 minutes of what was a two-day course, and that I may be out of line with my criticism. However, a lot was conveyed in that 15 minutes by way of what to do in a church and what not to do. I find it hard to imagine that the rest of the course would have then contradicted what I heard.

<sup>4</sup> James S. Stewart, *Preaching* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1955), 54-56, 77.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 24:13-35

<sup>6</sup> CEO worldwide Saatchi & Saatchi

<sup>7</sup> A powerful example of the effectiveness of Roberts’ insight is seen in the Telecom advertisement “Father and

Son.” Saachi & Saachi encouraged Telecom to connect with NZ emotionally and so they created the advertisement whereby a series of movies and still shots showed a father and son ageing with the family back in the background. The music in the ad was Cat Stevens’ song “Father and Son.” Within a month of the advertisement’s launch “Cat Stevens’ Greatest Hits” went to the top 10 on the NZ music charts.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin Roberts, *Lovemarks: The Future Beyond Brands* (New York: Powerhouse, year unknown), 77.

<sup>9</sup> John 20:10-18

# Creating a welcoming culture

Kevin Ward, School of Ministry

I am writing this as I come to the end of four months study leave in Hartford, Connecticut, USA. It has been a very stimulating and productive time for me, particularly as I have written on church and religion in New Zealand while being in quite a different context. We always understand ourselves best in the light of that which is different, and the culture of New Zealand and the place of the church in New Zealand society are certainly very different from the USA.

My reflection has also been helped by discussion with the Dean of the Seminary (who invited me over) and who moved here from England four years ago. What is different from England and New Zealand to the US? It has further convinced me we are much closer in our situation to Britain than the US, even if the trends and challenges that churches there face are becoming increasingly similar.

I can support that observation by referring to a couple of pieces of writing. One is by Donald Miller, whose book *Reinventing American Protestantism*, on the growth of churches like Vineyard and Calvary Chapel, was very helpful in framing my own research. He said that American culture was so resonant with Christian images and themes that when individuals came to points of rethinking and reorienting their lives, they naturally turned to the church for help. On the other hand, Callum Brown in his very significant book, *The Death of Christian Britain*, highlighting not just the decline of churches but the loss of Christianity from the wider culture of Britain since the 1960s, argues that “missions of the new millennium

will fail amongst the young because of their unfamiliarity with discursive Christianity due to its disappearance from the family and youth media and the young’s absence from Sunday School”. They do not naturally turn to the church as it is not part of their way of seeing things. Brown’s analysis, while overstated, is also significantly true of New Zealand.

What all this means is that the culture of our churches, shaped by over 1000 years of existence in a Christian society and therefore connecting to people who had been socialised in a culture also shaped by Christianity, today needs to be significantly different. That culture, which previously sent signals of welcome and homecoming to people, now sends signals of exclusion and foreignness, to those under 40 at least.

It means also that patterns of church life and culture that connect with people in the US, still significantly enculturated in Christian rhetoric, do not do so in New Zealand or Britain.

One of the culture changes we also face is that in the West, after the Reformation and enlightenment, reason was exalted as a way of knowing above all other ways – indeed at the height of the latter it came to be valued as the “only” valid way of knowing. Therefore reasoned explanations of faith or wordy confessions of belief became all-important. Hence the lack of images, icons, rich symbols, and experience in our church cultures. Nowhere is this more evident than in the reformed tradition. However, the shift in culture since the 1960s has seen other ways of knowing, such as experience, become equally, or in some cases more, valued.



Another shift is that in that culture there was a clear sense of right and wrong provided from the Christian moral code. If people broke that, they felt a sense of wrongdoing or guilt. In the church since Luther and Calvin, justification, or the need for forgiveness for our wrongdoing, has been the main way we have presented people's need of God. However, people today don't feel much sense of guilt, as there is no accepted moral code they have broken. Therefore to continue to present Christianity in this way simply drives people away. Christians are generally perceived to be moralising and judgemental in the wider culture. Philip Yancey tells this story, which I have always found incredibly challenging:

*A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy*

*food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter – two years old! – to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her story... I had no idea what to say to this women.*

*At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure naïve shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse. (Phillip Yancey, What's so Amazing About Grace, p.11)*

So if we don't present this perspective, do we throw away the Gospel? No. Justification and forgiveness is only one of many metaphors for the Gospel, even in Paul, and not many would argue it is now the primary one that is used. Certainly equally prominent is Paul's use of the metaphor of reconciliation, which speaks of the healing of broken relationships. Kevin Ford in *Jesus for a New Generation* comments that Gen Xers have three major concerns - relationships, relationships and relationships. And perhaps not just this age group, as people of all ages today have a sense of alienation (broken relationships) in every area of life. The human quest for community runs very deep and the loss of many dimensions of that in our fragmented lives means it has become a dominant quest for many. I ran the Boston marathon while over here, along with 23,000 others and in front of half a million spectators,

and became aware over the five days of the "festival" that a big part of what the "pilgrims" who had come to this were seeking was the kind of close community created by a deeply shared, common experience.

Related to this is the quest for identity. In a previous era, one's identity was a given depending on the community one belonged to by birth. It was very difficult to change your identity. Our world has said that we can have any identity we want; we can construct our own identity.

This leads to an incredible number of people not having a clue who they are and where they belong. So in mid-life, many people are still trying to find this, and leaving families, work and friends in the process. Again I am

aware that the pursuit of challenging activities such as marathon running is part of this quest for many. But we cannot find identity in our own self. It is too small a place, despite the endeavours of 80s- and 90s-style self-discovery therapies. Our identity comes out of the group to which we belong. And so part of the quest for community is part of the quest for identity.

Australian sociologist Hugh MacKay says that a culture shift is taking place and "we are coming to the end of the era of individualism and moving toward an era of a new communitarianism". This is indicated by the café phenomenon and the re-emergence of the term "village". It relates to the desire to reconnect and find a village, a social grouping, that values me and in which I feel I belong and therefore find my identity. I believe this new quest for community is the great mission opportunity for the Gospel in our culture. But the creation of churches with this kind of community is the critical mission challenge for the church.

So what are some characteristics of the culture of churches that might be attractive to people looking for a community to which they can belong and hence find an identity? What should we value?

## 1. Relationships

Authentic Christian community is critical for people to see and experience the Gospel. When family and community have broken down, loving, caring and open Christian communities are powerfully attractive. Often younger people don't care about arguments over truth, who is right and wrong, because in the past they have

seen that destroy relationships, especially their parents'. It is sad that the word "intimacy" is rarely associated with the Church. Yet this is a generation that is searching for intimacy, with God and with each other. I suspect that if we were to ask any group of young adults what they most wanted, they would all answer "to be loved". They know what it is to be judged, and some to be hated. More than we might think have never known what it is to be loved at all. It is an indictment on the church if they leave because they are not loved and perhaps it is a reflection of the love of God among us if they stay because they are loved.

The thirst for relationships and acceptance means that often people will come into a functioning community and want to be part of it long before they have made any Christian commitment. They need to belong before they believe if they are to feel this. So the question of attitude is imperative. If tolerance is the highest virtue in our culture, then an approach that declares we alone are right and everyone else is wrong will never gain a hearing and people will not even come near us, let alone want to find out what we might be about. We must learn to speak what we believe to be true with conviction, while at the same time showing tolerance and acceptance that others have different points of view about both belief and behaviour. A postmodern generation wants to know that God will bring about reconciliation, that he will heal their hurts and that he will accept them unconditionally. Do they find this in our churches?

An increasing body of research in a number of countries indicates that most people who have become Christians in recent years said they belonged before they believed. This is a reversal of the normal pattern of recent centuries in which people came to belief before they belonged. If this is so, then we need to seriously think through what kind of changes need to take place in our forms of church community if people are going to feel they belong, feel that they are included, before they commit to the faith we profess.

## 2. Experience

The rejection both of absolutes and the notion of objective truth in contemporary culture means we will need to start at a point other than "truth claims" in our presentation of the Gospel. We must first show that Christianity meets the deepest needs of people and create situations in which they can experience it. Kevin Ford writes, "the

question my generation asks is not 'can Christians prove what they believe?' but 'can Christians live what they believe?'" And Andrew Walker writes, "ultimately if we cannot demonstrate the proof of our story by living it, we will never convince people of its truth by talking about it". Very few people are argued into the kingdom today by reasoned explanations or slick presentations of infallible proofs. Experience of genuine community is one thing but others are also important.

One of the interesting phenomena in our society is the huge growth of the movie industry in the 90s, after thinking in the late 80s it was going to die out and be replaced by home videos. More go to the movies than go to sports now in New Zealand. People a long time ago also used to go to buildings with high ceilings and face the front to watch, listen to and experience a story being portrayed. They were called churches and cathedrals, not movie theatres. There is a great human hunger for this kind of experience but the problem for much of the church is that

## In the modern period we changed the Gospel from a story to be told and entered into to a set of propositions to be believed

in the modern period we changed the Gospel from a story to be told and entered into to a set of propositions to be believed. Films are such a powerful medium as they

combine story and image and so create an experience, something the small television screen does not. People experience transcendence and mystery, and I would add, through experiencing it with others, community. The desire for this is also the reason for the burgeoning interest in Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Celtic spirituality and alternative spiritualities. So the ability to tell stories, to use visual arts and share experiences, and so allow people to experience transcendence and mystery as well as community are critical for the future of churches. Are they experiencing this in our presence today?

## 3. Journey

Talking about movies, most of them are about a journey that an individual or a community is on. A journey full of challenge and self-discovery. Every person and group is on this, hence the great attraction. We have tended to use the Damascus Road model of people coming to faith; a sudden moment of decision and commitment, but we find the disciples coming to faith by a process in the Gospels; going on a long journey. They belonged to the community of Jesus for three years before they believed. A number of recent scholarly works argue that process is the dominant way by which people come to faith in the New Testament and a dramatic moment of decision is secondary.

Do we create safe and sacred spaces in our church communities and relationships so people can journey on with God at their own pace and so in their own time make the commitments that God in Christ is calling them to? Or do we impose our own agenda on their journey? Four essential qualities if we are going to create this kind of space and connect with people in ways that will help them in this journey are:

- *Authenticity* - which can only be demonstrated over time.
- *Caring* - which is lived out and proved over time
- *Trust* - which can only be earned over time
- *Transparency* - which is most effective when practiced in long-term relationships.

The critical point is that we need to create a culture that connects with people's journeys, and to do that we need to respect the journey they are on and to listen as much as speak so we can be with them in the process. This requires listening before speaking, living before acting, and empathising before guiding.

One of the great marks of the time we live in is a huge interest in and awareness of spirituality by so many people outside the church. Critical for us is how we respond to this. Is it helpful for us or a hindrance because it is deluded at best, evil at worst. What do we do with the great interest in the Da Vinci Code for example? In an excellent article, a British Baptist minister writes:

*One response to this phenomenon is that we must surely be ready to believe that God is already there in the experience of those with whom we wish to share our faith... The assumptions must be that God communicates with everybody... and that religious/spiritual awareness is natural to human beings.*

Postmodern spirituality also demands a different style of evangelism to the confrontational. The first step must be to listen. Conversation rather than challenging and questioning is the way. We must try to pick up what it is that God may be saying to these people. We can build the bridges, but must leave the crossings to the Holy Spirit.

These then are some critical dimensions I believe we need to build into the culture of our churches if we are going to appear as communities that will welcome those who do come near us and will connect with those who are genuinely seeking for something more on which to ground their lives.

## Have your say!

This is a General Assembly year, and input from the wider church is being invited on a number of different matters before the proposals are presented in their final forms to GA06.

Already, comment has been invited on a **review of the Assembly Assessment framework**, and on drafts of the **Focal Identity Statement** and **Book of Order**.

Information about the **stipend review**, **review of the School of Ministry** and **review of the General Assembly meeting** will be sent out to the wider church during May.

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# Reaching out over the airwaves

Amanda Wells

*What follows is a summarised transcript of an interview conducted with Phil Guyan, the manager/producer of the Christian Broadcasting Association. CBA's programmes include Scrubcutters (90-second episodes broadcast daily on NewstalkZB excluding Auckland/Wellington), Real Life with John Cowan (Sunday nights on NewstalkZB), and Rob Harley on Viva (Sunday lunch-times in the mid to upper North Island).*

**Amanda: How can we use the broadcasting media to reach out to people who don't go to church and are not connected with the Christian message in any way?**

**Phil:** For the large majority of people in New Zealand, it doesn't occur to them to go to church. They're just not turning up. If we're going to go to them, there are various ways of doing it. The mass media is one.

The mission statement of radio network TRN, on display in its lift, refers to a goal to help shape public opinion - they're not pretending to be impartial. We need to be amongst that and have our voices heard. We know from our own surveys that 86 per cent of the NewstalkZB audience do not regard spirituality as a primary interest in their life. We are certainly reaching people outside of the Christian faith.

**But are they listening to this, or filtering it out because they're already not interested?**

They're listening as least as much as to the other stuff. We try to make an impact and cut through everything else. We're trying to sound like the station on one hand but trying to cut through their messages at the same time.

We have done some surveys (because our 90-second daily spots are too short to be picked up in the official audit surveys). The overwhelming majority say it makes them think about God and the bigger questions of life. It's about relationship building. Often in the daily and weekly programmes, there is no mention of God, which is intentional. It needs to be interesting and unpredictable.

The most important thing for us is that the programme rates with the audience. If not, then there's no audience, then we're dropped. On Sundays, we've been No.1 for the last three surveys in a row. As soon as we're not rating No.1, we'll be replaced.

**What would you say to people who accuse you of watering down the Gospel and diluting its message by placing more emphasis on reaching people than on delivering Bible-based content?**

I would say that some people are so far out of touch with reality that they are going to be completely ineffective; at best they might reach a tiny part of the population. And they're unbiblical in their thinking: Jesus wasn't talking about God all the time, he wasn't a pious holy man. He must have been likeable, the kind of person you'd want to have at a party. Otherwise they wouldn't have wanted to be with him. And Paul was the same; he knew all about local philosophers and poets. Like them, we've got to build relationships.

An emphasis on Biblically based teaching will only reach the small part of the population who are receptive to that kind of thing. They will never reach the majority; it's just not most people's cup of tea. What goes on in a Pentecostal church couldn't go into a mainstream radio programme. Whether it's effective or not has no relevance, because if we broadcast that content once, we wouldn't have a programme any more. Even if we wanted to, it's not an option. But I'm always open to criticism!

**Do you get much criticism from your radio stations in terms of your message?**

We don't really get any criticisms from our radio stations. We've built up a level of trust and confidence with the station. We very seldom get pulled on anything. We have regular air checks, which involve sitting down with management and critiquing the programme. But this is from a production point of view. We also critique it ourselves on a different level: how can we communicate Christ more through this.

**Do you get any actual feedback from the listeners?**

We get some feedback through calls to the programme. On Good Friday, between 15 and 20 people called to say how much they were liking the programme, though they didn't want to go on air. There is some feedback through people writing to the station.

Part of our goal is to rate. But this doesn't tell us if we're actually communicating. We know that we're not going to



have people calling and saying “I heard your programme and gave my heart to Jesus”. We’re working at the -10 to -8 end of Engel’s Scale [which represents progression to faith between -8 (awareness of supreme being but no knowledge of Gospel) to 0 (conversion) and beyond]. We know we’re part of a much much bigger plan. We aren’t in the harvesting ministry; we’re in the seed-sowing ministry. So we’re unlikely to get a lot of feedback.

We have a prayer taskforce of about 880 people who pray for CBA (we send them a prayer letter six times a year). We don’t mix this with asking for money, and many more people are doing this than are giving financial contributions.

We don’t tag our programmes, don’t say this is brought to you by the CBA. To do that creates a “sell” impression; it turns people off who might have otherwise gone away with a positive impression. We intentionally decided not to do that. We don’t need the credit.

### **But is there any way people can find out more if they’re interested?**

We’re thinking about setting up a website where people can download Scrubcutter episodes for their iPod, and this would include a link to finding out more about the CBA. We’re also developing a website about Jesus in consultation with an Australian ministry; it’ll be something that’s not in your face.

We’re wanting to move people towards rather than away from Jesus. We’re in the business of making people that are well away go a little bit closer. Other people are always involved in this process.

### **What are the financial foundations of your work?**

We have some New Zealand On Air funding, about 15 percent. The rest is from donations. If we had another \$100,000 a year, we would be able to do an awful lot more. But we have a very stable base. Because we rely on a lot of people giving us a small amount. It’s a big fundraising game. We have two staff: one full-time on fundraising. I spend about ¾ of my time on fundraising.

We have one daily programme, which is sponsored by NZOA. Of the two weekly programmes, one of these is paid for by the station. One is not paid for but the air time is given to us. We also have seasonal programmes, which are 50 percent sponsored by NZOA. We are developing a new programme and looking for commercial sponsorship for this. This throws up some issues: we’re not evan-

gelistic enough for the religious sponsors but we’re too evangelistic for nonreligious organisations.

We’re very cost effective. To create a stadium crusade costs hundreds of thousands of dollars and consumes an enormous amount of resources, and only attracts a certain kind of person: mostly convinced Christians, with a small number of friends dragged along.

Last Good Friday, we had an audience of over 300,000 people, with 86 per cent of these not Christian. It only cost us \$20,000 to broadcast for 12 hours. And people are listening to this message at home in a more reflective context. I’m not saying that other things shouldn’t exist. But there should be some rationalisation of resources, of where we put our outreach spending.

### **Anything else you’d like to add?**

We’re holding a media prayer day on 30 July, which involves praying for the communication of faith through the mass media. It’s held every two years. We try to get churches to set aside time to pray for the spread of the Gospel through the mass media; for Christian media, for Christians working in the media, and for the decision-makers who select what’s news. More information is available at [www.mediaprayerday.org.nz](http://www.mediaprayerday.org.nz).

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# Church for the unchurched

*Keith Hooker, St Peter's in the City, Tauranga*

**B**ill Hybels has said that “leading a church today is the most difficult task in the world”. I’m not inclined to disagree with him, although I’m sure there are many others who feel that way about their jobs too.

After more than 24 years in church leadership, I am certainly not in any sort of position to write a definitive paper on the subject. I have learned many things that don’t work and some others that work reasonably well. I am also aware that what worked 10 and 20 years ago isn’t necessarily how the emerging generation want to celebrate their faith now.

The way we worship is an expression of our worship cultural preference. The most relevant worship for our unchurched neighbours will be that which won’t make them feel like strangers in a foreign land. Yet many of us still enjoy the traditions of our youth and, whatever they may be, most churches have a problem with clashes of styles, which they have to solve if they want to grow. We currently run three services (traditional, contemporary and youth) that appeal to three different groups and have recently closed a fourth after a two-year trial. Generally, the more options you can sustain the more people you will attract.

A congregation’s weekly worship service is the shop window by which newcomers judge the relevance of the church for them. If we want to attract the unchurched, we have to evaluate everything we do and say from a seeker’s perspective. Gordon Miller describes this as giving our worship services a “mission wash”. Our use of words, choice of songs, sermon content and the way the service opens and closes all have to be carefully considered in the light of our goal.

Frankie Schaefer writes that many of our churches are “addicted to mediocrity”, a phrase that should haunt us even more now than when he wrote it, in a world where people are used to professionalism in everything. I believe in the priesthood of all believers but I also believe that whatever we offer God through leading others in worship should be our very best. Bill Hybels tells the story of the man from his family church, at which he worshipped while on holiday, who would habitually begin every service by banging the microphone. Even a small irritation like that will create a poor impression.

We may not have the resources to offer a sophisticated multimedia presentation but we can ensure that we avoid the language of Zion, sing singable songs, relate the scriptures to life issues and avoid long, drawn-out services. Obviously we have to avoid compromising the message in the process. My own preaching style has evolved considerably over the past 25 years. Perhaps I would best describe it now as “pastoral preaching” that employs a more dialogical approach. In other words, dealing with relevant life issues as they happen while looking to the Scriptures for an appropriate response.

Postmoderns enjoy a variety of worship experiences with opportunity for involvement. People love to see their own children up the front even for just a short time. When we have the children in the service, we give them the opportunity to wave brightly coloured flags up the front. Children may not be able to sing all of the songs but they can participate in other ways. It is sometimes messy but the children and parents love it.

We have found that the most effective way of connecting with people is through their children. Parents are devoted to their kids and so the more ways of connecting with your community through children’s programmes, the more opportunities you will obviously have.

## Three suggestions:

1. The Ministry of Education makes it easier than ever to establish childcare centres by offering to fund most of the capital cost. This method of sowing good seed into the lives of receptive children is very effective. It also introduces parents to the range of services offered by our Family Centre.
2. Boys’ Brigade has developed an “icon adventure” programme that is very popular and attracts over 50 boys every week. We also attract a similar number of girls to the Girls’ Brigade.
3. Mainly Music, a pre-school activity involving mothers and small children, is another effective way of creating connections.

The Church has not done a good job in the past of adapting to a changing world but now has a most empowering motivation — we will either change or die. We still have the greatest message; the Church is still the hope of the world and the Spirit of God is still changing lives.

# Making our culture attractive

Fyfe Blair, Highgate Presbyterian, Dunedin

The headline above may already have your mind racing with various assumptions and/or creativity, for this is surely a vital matter for the church/us. It challenges us as Christians because it has raised some hard issues about our old certitudes, the attractiveness of our worship, our life together, indeed our relevance as a Gospel-shaped people.

In addressing this, I am not offering yet another method/technique or how-to that advocates relevance or cultural attractiveness through the proliferation of activities that aim to control by offering the right tools and skills to achieve the ends we desire. Rather, I want to suggest that we must approach the matter of “creating a culture attractive to non-church people” more cautiously to avoid a mere simulated, superficial experience.<sup>1</sup> I want to suggest that some very fundamental elements demand more of us, in ways that should continually remind us of our proper place in the mission of God (*missio Dei*).

I begin with “culture”. Webster’s dictionary says it concerns: “the act or process of tilling and preparing the earth for crops; cultivation of soil”. This offers a very different metaphor and basis from which to work, as it suggests to me that our role is not so much the creating of a culture, as it is learning to cultivate the habits and disciplines of Biblical faith that mark the Church as a particular people with a distinctive identity in communion with the Trinitarian God. This, I believe, is our starting point for regarding the congregation as hermeneutic of the Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

While serving on the “Church Without Walls” commission in the Church of Scotland, a key sociologist suggested to us that the deep issue the churches face is not how “relevance” will be attractive and create belief; instead it is one of the “plausibility” of belief/faith. From my own experience, this is a vital issue for ministry and for what it means to be missionary congregations.

Eugene Peterson asks this provocative question: “why do pastors so often treat congregations with the impatience and violence of developers building a shopping mall instead of the patient devotion of a farmer cultivating a field?”<sup>3</sup> He goes on to speak of treating the “congregation as topsoil”. Such cultivation for me has meant “making do” with the materials/people around. This refers to the work involved patiently spending time with people – over coffee, or at some table or other, while being in-

tentional together about “cultivating” one another in faith and preparing both the soil of the congregation and our wider cultural context. This sort of work meant and still means:

*It’s not about getting stuff from outside to make worship life more interesting. It’s about getting the rubber to hit the road. About letting what we find out from the Bible rub-up against our work life, our home life, our passions, our hobbies, our desires from the future, the last thoughts we have before we go to sleep. While they remain separate, how can we be sanctified? It’s about context – where you live, who you know, your passions, your pains, your yearning for justice, your problems and those of people around you. If you bring these into your worship space, then you may make connections you have never before been able to make, and so take God and his ways with you back into your everyday existence. **It’s not about asking: “What works? What’s new? What will make us relevant?” It’s about asking: “what is my context? Who are the people around me? What are the needs here? Where is God in all this?”** (p143)<sup>4</sup>*

Reading such things can tend to gloss over the actual sweat involved, both personally and communally. Yet it was/is a privilege to see people come to faith, or be rejuvenated in faith, discovering radical friendships in Christ and learning to live out faith daily. It means that our congregations are places of perceived weakness; that they are always in some ways incomplete, in need of some “weeding” and soil tending, but that the hard yards of patient devotion and faithful obedience give a confidence in what it means to share in God’s mission purposes.

The plausibility of faith and the seeing people come to faith are thus bound together in the cultivation of habits of faith in the congregation. Newbigin lists the following distinctive characteristics: praise, truth, a body that doesn’t live for itself as “those called out”, to be a priesthood of believers (those called to stand before God on behalf of others and before the world on behalf of God), mutual responsibility (which is not the promotion of programmes for social change, but is a foretaste of a new social ordering) and, finally, hope,<sup>5</sup> as key elements that cultivate the soil and prepare the ground for coming to faith.

Finally, for those of us charged with positions of leadership, the challenge of this way of living asks questions about the sort of things we focus upon in ministry and get involved with; that we run with. For me, it has evolved into shaping my ministry for mission by using the missionary vision we have at Highgate<sup>6</sup> — “To enable people to meet Jesus we will: live worshipfully, help others, have the habits of faith” — to live by a Rule,<sup>7</sup> which forms something of the basis for the everyday practice of faith/ministry lived with others. Reverence is perhaps a word that speaks of the sort of care we need to exercise. It suggests handling with care in ways that don’t crush, impose, manipulate. It may mean allowing for things not to work, being prepared to stand back and wait, however difficult that may be. It means standing aside at times and allowing the other to be themselves. It is a delicate balance to not stifle nor over-protect.

In addition, I believe such posture in ministry asks whether we are content to bricoler (to potter, do odd jobs). The bricoleur is the handy person who makes use of various tools and materials that are to hand and makes do with these, but is not interested in constructing their own edifice. Secondly, we need to give fresh understanding and expression to what it is to be martyrs – those whose life conforms to the likeness of Christ and so witness and suffer (taking up their cross), so as to put others in the position of coming to know the truth in Christ. None of this is particularly new, nor does it fit with our notions of attraction, but I believe that it is significant for the ways we minister and how we go about mission (mission Dei) today.

Jeremiah the prophet lived through the structural and organisational reforms of Josiah, but saw that surface reform was not enough. The time was coming when God would work a reformation that would be deeper and more durable, but more costly. That reform is captured in the vivid imagery of land-clearance and replanting, or demolition and rebuilding: See I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant (Jeremiah 1:10)<sup>8</sup>.

Will we then like Jeremiah cultivate the field in our Anathoth, “as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society”? (Newbigin, p233)

## References

<sup>1</sup> We must bring to bear some serious questioning to this that time and space here do not permit; eg. who does the creating? What are we seeking to create? What do we

mean by culture and whose? What IS attractive? Why do we use “non-church” as a reference term? etc. Indeed I have sought to offer an alternative phrase to better express my perspective.

<sup>2</sup> Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*. Chapter 18. The questions we must ask of this are no less serious, but I would suggest are more fruitfully demanding.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*. (Eerdmans 1992) especially Chapter 3; also p134/5

<sup>4</sup> Cathy Kirkpatrick in Steve Taylor, *The Out of Bounds Church* (emphasis mine) The task isn’t actually to figure out the cultural context and how to relate or apply Christian beliefs and practices to it. Rather it was to identify, name and critique the ways in which the social realities form and make – cultivate – the people in that particular place.

<sup>5</sup> I highlight these points from Newbigin, whose phrase “congregation as hermeneutic” is much in vogue, but perhaps needs to be considered beyond being a nice summary term and explored in its practical implications.

<sup>6</sup> Visit [www.highgatemission.info](http://www.highgatemission.info)

<sup>7</sup> In the sense of disciplines placed as “bridles” (Calvin) to devote ourselves to life conforming to Christ’s likeness and obedient service.

<sup>8</sup> “A Church Without Walls” Report to General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 2001, 36/13

## Bush Telegraph

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# A 'faith journey' towards Confirmation

Stan Stewart, Minister Emeritus, Auckland

In recent years, parish-based confirmation classes have been few and far between. Certainly, my experience of them has been rather discouraging. I had no desire to face up to a group of teenagers with any of the confirmation curriculums I have been able to find. And as for DIY, my memory of bored, clock-watching teens has disabled my creativity in regard to these classes.

Last year, my interest was stirred by a programme designed by David Clark and Em Colgan of St Luke's at

Remuera. What they put together was interactive both in its content and its outcome. From reading the comments of the young participants, it had clearly been a meaningful faith milestone

In current youth literature, both secular and religious, there is much talk about "journey" as a concept to which young people relate. The journey motif and what had happened at St Luke's set me thinking. This led to me design a "Going Places and Meeting People" programme. Although I did not mention it in the title, the basic objective was the same as the old-style confirmation class.

My idea was to take the young people on a journey to meet interesting people whose faith was clearly making a difference. I also felt that as we journeyed together, we would have some theological conversations. This turned out to be correct.

For the interesting people, I chose six couples, all of whose faith was leading to interesting, but very different outcomes. Their theology varied across the spectrum from conservative to liberal. However, all of them were involved in the life of their local church and all of them were our friends.

The journey involved travelling around Auckland and two country trips, which in both cases meant an overnight stay. The Auckland trips took place on Sunday afternoons from 4pm to 8pm and each of them included a fast food meal for which the teens paid.

When we met the couples, I asked them to show us what they were doing and then to talk briefly about why they were doing it.

At a later stage in the visit, the young people interviewed them. As it turned out, "the interview" was a key component to the effectiveness of the whole programme. This consisted of seven questions. These same questions were put to both husband and wife. We had a cake-timer and only one minute was allowed for each answer. There was no time given for reflection. Once the question was stated

then the minute began. When the timer dinged that was the finish of that answer. The teens took turns is putting the ques-

tions and handling the timer, and wrote a summary of the answers as they were given.

This worked brilliantly. Every time there was rapt attention and no one was bored. No eyes glazed over. The short answers spoke volumes about of the variety of ways the life of faith can be nurtured and lived out.

Here are the questions:

- What difference does being a Christian make to the way you live?
- How and when do you read the Bible?
- How and when do you pray?
- What is your relationship to Jesus?
- What does belonging to your local church mean to you?
- How do you decide how much money you give to your local church?
- What is your gift or talent and how do you use it?

As well as these journeys, we did look at the content of the traditional confirmation service. In the end, the young people produced their own confession of faith and designed their confirmation service. At this service a number of them spoke movingly about what the journey had meant to them.

Twelve young people signed up to take the journey. This was a kind of contract that made it clear that this was not primarily a fun junket, but a serious exploration of what faith can mean. At the end of the journey, nine chose to take the further step of confirmation. All of the 12 are still in our church. I now sense that they want more and maybe this could take the form of a mission trip.

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## There was rapt attention...

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# Wairau youth ministry: Our story

Ken Williams, Wairau Presbyterian, Blenheim

My wife says I'm not cool, sometimes boring, 42 years old and uncoordinated. So why are these kids here? It's obviously not because I have created a culture that is attractive to them.

We simply set out to be ourselves and to make a place that was both fun and about God. The result has been that over the past six years we have seen a steady stream of kids committing their lives to following Jesus and growing with him.

It can be a helpful exercise to sit back and look at the rea-

sons why this occurs, so recently I sat down with our youth leadership and other key leaders from within the church and asked for their thoughts.

About four years ago, we held a leadership retreat and set out three key focus areas for the life of the church. One of these was youth ministry; we have continued to make youth ministry a priority in terms of leadership, resourcing and prayer. In the life of any church there is always a wide array of new options and programmes to become involved in. There is the temptation to pick up something new, possibly at the expense of something else. I believe that we are now really beginning to see fruit for holding fast to this focus. Youth ministry is not a short-term project.

In Wairau Presbyterian, we have been blessed with some quality leadership. This has mainly been home grown. We have had young people who have grown up within the church and are now holding key leadership roles within our youth ministry. We have found value in inter-generational leadership – having people as leaders who are at differing stages of life. So we have leaders from senior high school students to people in their 50s. People at different stages of life relate to kids in differing ways and bring their gifts and perspectives. I believe this is hugely important. As a leadership we are fairly close knit and have a lot of fun together. We are indebted to the church community as a whole for their encouragement, prayer and general support. Particularly some of our older people go out of their way to build relationships; this is invaluable. I think of Ruth in her 80s and John in his 70s – the kids love these people. It is important to acknowledge the support we have had through Presbyterian Youth Ministry

(PYM), particularly the support and encouragement that came through Mo Mansill. Thanks Mo! Connect, PYM's national youth conference, has been a valuable training aid to us and we look forward to continued involvement.

While I am excited about our leadership, that is not to say we have not had our issues to deal with along the way. It is perceived to be important to maintain high standards of behaviour and discipline and not compromise ourselves.

In a society that has a tendency to be somewhat loose and free in its standards, word soon trickles

down to the kids as to what is acceptable and what is not. They appreciate these boundaries.

We have made a point of being upfront about God. The young people we work with soon realise that our prime reason for existing is that we are passionate about Jesus and long for people to come into a relationship with him. We have not hidden or watered down Jesus and through Biblical teaching and relating this to real life issues, we have witnessed ongoing positive response from the kids. Through teaching and discussion, we regularly challenge the kids about where they are in relationship to God, themselves and others, essentially, what are they here for and what difference are they going to make with their lives? They want to be challenged; they want to have something to commit their lives to. We should not be afraid to challenge kids to make a radical commitment to Jesus.

Several different programming components have been found to be particularly valuable. We have worked with the Youth Alpha programme several times and experienced a very positive response. A significant part of our programming is a weekly worship component, when we meet on a Wednesday evening. This is totally youth led and organised, with a passionate and lively youth band. It is combined with games, teaching and small group discussion.

In discussion with our leaders, they commented on the value of having a group that was consistently open to new people. New kids mainly come along with friends and the ministry has a culture of warmly accepting new people. Aiding this dimension is a culture of "camping" within the group. In any given year, kids have the oppor-

tunity to go on up to five different camps. We begin the year with a weekend walk around Lake Rotoiti in Nelson Lakes National Park – a great way of building relationship with kids who have just reached high school age. We have an annual church family camp, which helps to create relationship with the wider church family. Come Easter, anywhere from a dozen to 20 kids head over to the Wellington Presbytery's Easter camp, which is great for helping kids to see a bit beyond the confines of Blenheim and is very helpful for building longer term relationships and networks. If we do a Youth Alpha programme, we go away for a weekend to focus on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and each Labour Weekend we are involved in the Nelson-Marlborough Presbytery's Youth camp. No one young person goes on all the camps, but most go on one or more, and they have been instrumental in our growth and development over the years.

In essence, this is our story; it will be different to yours and it might not work in your place. But I would encourage you to keep Jesus as the focus, be yourself and have fun.

## Plimmerton Presbyterian Church Porirua, Wellington

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Email: [office@ppp.org.nz](mailto:office@ppp.org.nz)



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or address your application to:

Jennifer Thomson, Human Resources Manager, St Cuthbert's College,  
P O Box 26 020, Epsom, Auckland 1030.

**Closing Date: Friday 16 June, 2006**

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# Conversion: The joy of the harvest

Colin Marshall, *St John's Presbyterian, Mt Roskill*

In Acts 15 when Paul and Barnabas came up to Jerusalem, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles. It was, we are told, a matter of great rejoicing for all the believers. However, the whole language of “conversion” does not seem to be politically correct in today’s pluralistic environment.

Yet it is a vital element of mission imperative given to the church in Matthew 28:18-20. In making disciples (learners), baptising them and teaching them obedience to the way of God, people are indeed being “converted”. The Greek word used in Acts 15:3 speaks not only of turning but turning specifically towards something or someone. In Christian parlance it is a turning from the life of sin to the new way; a turning towards Jesus and the Father from the life of evil. Or, in Barthian terms, it is to change from a life lacking in response to God to giving the Father the appropriate worship, service and glory He is due from our lives. True “conversion” is a change of heart, a change of lifestyle and a deliberate, purposeful, commitment to God. It is a spiritual, emotional and physical change of life.

There is also a subtlety in the use of the term that we must recognise. The term “conversion”, in its various forms, was well known in the Biblical world (see Matt 23:15, Acts 13:43, 1 Tim 3:6). In one sense the apostle Paul was not “converted” — he had always served the God of Israel, albeit misguidedly. Yet his Damascus Road “conversion” (Acts 9) was a complete change of direction, resulting in his baptism and being filled with the Holy Spirit. From being a persecutor of the followers of the way, he became a leading proponent as he grew in his personal knowledge of, and relationship with, Jesus. Just because he had been a member of the religious establishment didn’t mean he actually had true faith. This only came after his personal encounter with Jesus.

So the question is asked — what of “conversion” today? Over the past three years, I have been blessed to be able to go on various speaking visits and mission trips overseas with indigenous churches and as part of the Hebron Christian College outreaches working with local churches. It has been a great joy to see what is going on in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Korea, Tanzania, and Dubai and to be a small part of their work. In Asia and Africa particularly, there is a great thirst for spiritual truth. The Spirit is moving in those parts of the world in amazing

ways. Are people being “converted”? Yes. And in the best possible ways. What do I mean by that? Well, years ago I did a degree in Anthropology. One of my focus areas was the impact of missionary world on indigenous cultures. Historically the impact was appalling, resulting in the loss of languages, culture and social structures, often to abusive church regimes. But today most mission work is indigenous, with “mission” activity coming alongside and supporting, enhancing, encouraging what is happening locally.

For example, in Tanzania, we took a small group of young men into a local pub: rough as you can imagine with the local brew drunk out of buckets — literally. A few years of it was enough to make you blind. Sharing with some of the locals and encouraging them to come to the evening outreach we saw them come to faith and be “converted”. Whereas in the past too much evangelical focus went on the “conversion” experience, now “conversion” is far more holistic involving not just a profession of commitment but incorporation into the Christian community. I was delighted recently to hear that the “conversion” of some of the men from the pub has resulted in whole families coming back together and previously non-contributing members of society becoming wonderful assets in the life of the church and community. Instead of being without hope, they are now bringing the light of Jesus to others. This is going on wholesale in many countries right now.

Is “conversion” happening in New Zealand? Yes, it is. Over the past few years, we have had a number of adult baptisms at St John’s and recently we had 15 adult baptisms from a number of Indian families. Like the early church, our joy was enormous. I personally was overjoyed to have a young man and his father, with whom I have had many conversations over the past couple of years, coming to real faith. Instantaneous changes happen but they, in my experience, are rare. More often the point of “conversion”, what I call a conscious recognition and response to the Lord, comes after the loving outreach of a community over a prolonged period of time. From a very different religious background, these men are now committed and active Christians. God is working in our nation and the church’s joy of “conversion” is undiminished. I pray every church is experiencing such joy. The church’s mission is far from completed. And the joy of the harvest is great. Praise the Lord!



# Does Christian conversion still occur?

Stuart Lange\*, Massey Presbyterian, Auckland

Not nearly as much as I might like it to. Not always as tidily as I might prefer. But it still happens. How can it not happen, if the Holy Spirit is still at work in the world, and if Christ is still the power of God, reclaiming and transforming?

I think back over some examples I have observed in the local church in recent years. Perhaps the most striking of these was Rangi (I have changed all the names). Rangi had a wretched background: 20 bitter years of rejection, drugs, gangs, prostitution and fractured relationships. Rangi came into our lives as a neighbour, then a friend, at a point when he was re-assessing his life. There appeared to be a spiritual openness. He was lonely, and most days wanted to talk. Over the weeks, the Word was gently seeded into his life. He was lent a New Testament, and he began to devour it. The Spirit prompted some to pray for him. One night, on his own, Rangi prayed to become a Christian.

The next day he asked “Does God somehow speak into our thoughts? Today I was sitting in the car at the lights and I was about to yell and curse at a woman – but suddenly I felt like God was telling me not to. Does that happen?”

“What did you do?”

“I said ‘sorry’ to God. Is that the right thing to do?” Rangi then interrupted himself, and asked: “these flowers in this garden, how long have they been there?”

“The whole time you have lived here.”

“No, I have never seen them before. They’re beautiful.”

For the next few days, as he drove around on his Harley, Rangi saw the beauty of the world like he had not seen it for a long time. A few days later, Rangi unilaterally decided to come to church. He was too shy to come in. A young man spotted him hanging around outside, and coaxed him in. Many in the congregation enfolded Rangi in their love, and the church became his whanau. A few months on, Rangi very movingly gave account of faith in Christ. I had neglected to brief him on the appropriate responses to the baptismal vows: to the three questions he answered “for sure”, “sweet as”, “no sweat”. Later, Rangi’s past caught up with him, and he went to prison. The congregation prayed for him, visited him weekly, and eventually welcomed him back. In prison, he grew in Christ. The key to his growth — then and now — is his own study of the scriptures, which he deeply loves.

Other folk: Pat, a divorcee, is befriended by several members of the congregation, feels accepted for the first time in her life, starts coming to church, and comes to faith like a dimmer light turning on. She goes through Alpha course and joins a Bible study group. Joan, into the New Age, feels led by the Spirit to come to church, is impressed by the atmosphere and captivated by the message she hears. She cannot wait to be baptised. Mike, a lapsed Catholic, is invited to church by his neighbours. His faith is re-awakened, and he becomes a firm believer. A number of his family follow. John, whose wife is a believer, always introduces himself by insisting “I’m a bloody atheist”. He comes to Alpha, and church, and keeps saying that. A few years on, he tells me he wishes to declare his faith and be confirmed.

These are just some I have observed. I wish there were many more. I reflect that there are several common denominators. These include the mysterious sovereign work of God’s Holy Spirit, drawing whom He will. Another dynamic is the love and warmth that these people felt when they come to church, expressed in nothing more exotic than ready friendship and relaxed conversation (maybe we failed many of those who did not come back): the fellowship after the service is crucial, and leads on to many other things. It is a friendship that often transcends cultural barriers. Another dynamic is the sense of worship in the church: nothing flash or unusual, nothing contrived or forced, nothing too in-your-face, nothing stuffy or too “churchy”, but just a sense that God is very important, and that God needs to be taken seriously. Another dynamic at work is the prayerful sense of expectation, the confidence that God still speaks today, through his Word and his Holy Spirit: that through down-to-earth biblical exposition, Christ still speaks into our hearts, minds, and spirits with life-changing power.

None of this is peculiar to this parish: the key elements can be found in many settings. None of this addresses how Christ can be brought to those thousands who never come anywhere near the church. But it does describe what God has been quietly doing in and around the church, bringing a steady stream of people to new life in Christ.

*\*Stuart Lange lectures at BCNZ and leads the ministry staff team in the Massey church.*

# A few things I have learnt (since the days when I knew everything...)

*Wayne Matheson, St Andrew's, Whangarei*

There are some words that you may have heard: “you in your small corner, and I in mine”. I need to confess that I have sung those words. I also need to confess that I have sung them and not meant them. Why does it have to be that way? Is it not possible to do somethings together? Is it not possible to work with other churches – even those that have a different label on the noticeboard out front? How is it that we allowed ourselves to think, let alone believe that our competition is the Baptists down the road; the Anglicans around the corner; the Pentecostals down the block or any other church for that matter? Is not the competition everything else that a person can do with their one and only life rather than live as a fully devoted follower of Christ?

If that might be so, other churches are seen differently... they are on our side, and we on theirs! We can play and work together to achieve things.

I have the enormous privilege of working with others in ministry. When I lived in Balclutha, I had the honour of working in a neighbouring parish to the Rev Lionel Brown. As a new boy on the block, in my first parish as an ordained minister, his wisdom, experience and counsel was something I deeply appreciated. Through a series of events – a need for someone to run and lead the youth group based at St Andrews and a ministry opportunity to lead a new evening service based at Balmoral, we came up with an idea... I would cross the bridge that separated the town and lead the combined youth group at St Andrews and he would also cross the bridge and led the combined evening service at Balmoral.

In addition, I shared in a wonderful ministers' association. We met weekly for prayer; monthly for business and about eight times a year we held combined services. We joined for Good Friday, Bible Sunday, Anzac Day, Pentecost, and on other occasions. Those occasions are some of my strongest memories from that time. I have kept friendships from those days – across the denominations.

Here in Whangarei, we have the ongoing privilege of working across the churches and partnering to achieve more together than we could on our own.

As early users of the Alpha Course – and having made more mistakes than others – we offered to help other churches as they began the journey of using Alpha in their setting. We have helped train their teams, welcomed them to sit-in on a course; helped at their weekend away and shared our story.

We have worked with other churches in promoting and underwriting Positive Parenting – now Parents Inc – events in Whangarei. In promoting, working together, and sharing responsibilities, we are showing that we want to help people be upskilled in how they raise their children. We have also worked with other organisations to promote this as well – Youth for Christ, Rotary, and the local council. We have helped sponsor people to attend. Some of those events have sold out.

As leaders in churches we have wanted our actions and our words to be as one. The Baptists invite me to preach there and we invite the Baptist pastor to preach at St Andrews, for example. We have worked with others in similar ways.

At a personal level, I have deeply valued gathering with leaders of regional missional Presbyterian Churches. Their willingness to share, encouragement, wisdom and care have played a huge role. Their “mentorship” at those gatherings has been a gift to me. I would move a whole lot of stuff in my diary to join them when they meet. It is good for my soul.

Later this year we are hosting Rob Harley. Last year Rob visited and we ran a breakfast for men, attracting about 130 men to listen to Rob. This year we are hiring another venue, inviting people from St Andrews plus folk from the Baptist, Brethren and Salvation Army to come along as well. It is a mission opportunity and an opportunity to work together. We are limited by space – so the first 300, or maybe 350 – only! (we will share the cooking responsibilities and seek to build community as we eat and work together).

The more I pause to think, the more things that come to mind. Prayer gatherings; food banks; sharing seminars; combined services; offering appropriate care and support

for other churches. Even today, at a ministers' gathering, we discussed working together to provide emergency housing in Whangarei. One church said it would buy a property, lease it to a trust for 10 cents a year, for use as an emergency house. That would double the emergency housing available in the city! The ministry of working together to meet needs was more important than who the property belonged to. I left feeling encouraged. None of us could do all that by ourselves. Together, with the leading and direction of God... all things are possible!

We run a medical centre and are nearing the completion of a major expansion of this as I write. (We have three GPs; and space for other services to run from this expanded facility). It provides low-cost GP care to those who would not otherwise access a GP or would end up at A and E. Many of the people who come have more than general health issues. Attached to this building is our children's ministry space – also being upgraded at the same time.

What new possibilities exist in terms of ministry to folk who might come for life skills; relationship skills; parenting skills; budgeting skills or a host of other services that might run from the medical centre – while their children are cared for in the children's ministry space... who might we partner with? What mission and ministry opportunities exist on our doorstep?

I don't know the answers to those questions. I do know that if we adopt the "you in your small corner and I in mine" thinking, we will miss out on so much.

## Ministry opportunity

Ngaio Union Church, a co-operating venture of 35 years standing, is seeking a minister when the position becomes vacant in July 2006. Initially a three-quarters position is being offered, as the preferred option, but we are prepared to consider other possibilities.

Ngaio is a delightful community nestled in the northern hills 10 minutes from downtown Wellington. Ngaio Union Church sees itself as being "at the heart of our community" with many activities being centred in our buildings. For example, a Korean Methodist church congregation meets in our church each Sunday afternoon. We also value sharing events with neighbouring churches.

We are looking for your priorities to be on proactive pastoral care and stimulating worship, and for you to join us in reaching out to families and the community. If you would like to share the good news of the Christian message with the people of Ngaio, please write to the address below for the parish and ministerial profiles, or contact Colin Moore on phone (04) 479 1997; email:- [bhmoore@paradise.net.nz](mailto:bhmoore@paradise.net.nz).

We would like to hear from you by June 15.

The Secretary, Ngaio Union Church,  
PO Box 29 057, Ngaio, Wellington

## Connect 2006

Connect 2006 is only two months away! Connect is a national gathering of Presbyterian youth leaders and youth workers, and is happening from 30 June-2 July at Forest Lakes camp near Otaki. We'll be exploring the theme of "Making Jesus Christ Known – Incarnational Evangelism".

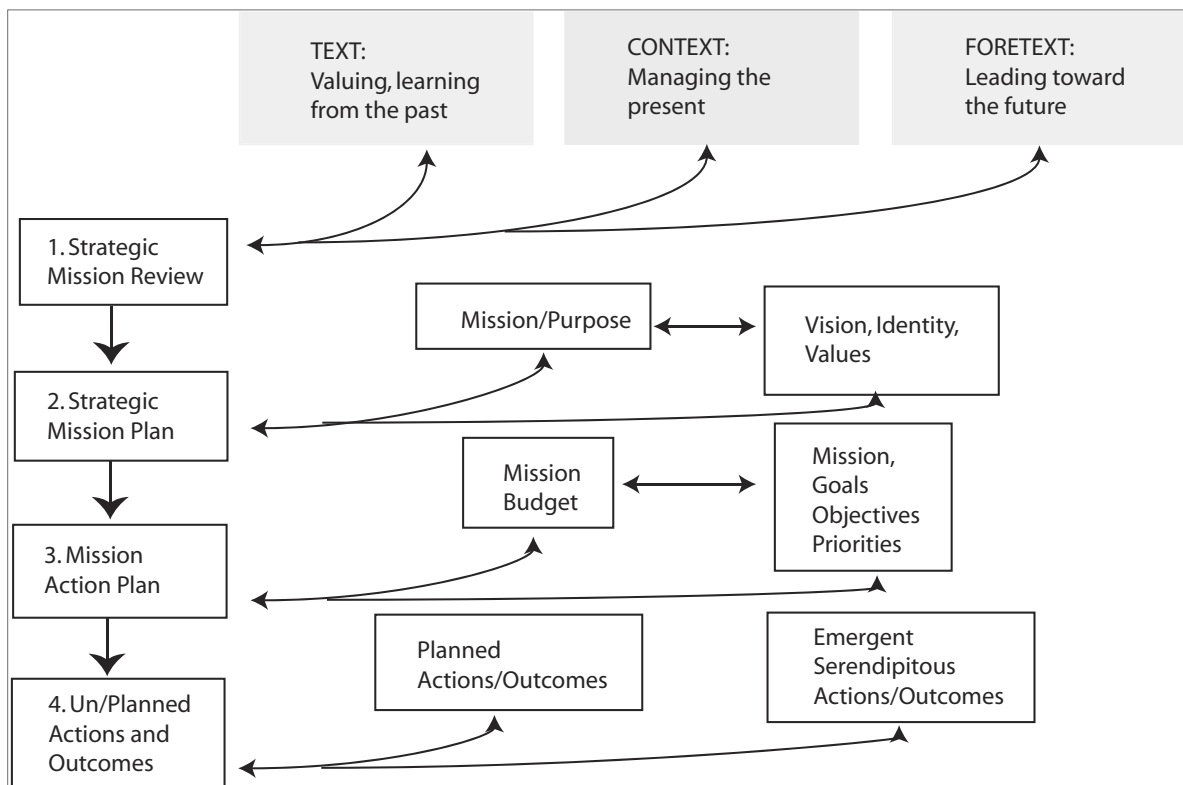
**Encourage the youth leaders in your church to come to Connect to be CONNECTED with other youth leaders around the country, to be REFRESHED, refuelled, encouraged and inspired through worship, new and challenging ideas, speakers, fun, great people, and to be APPRECIATED for all the fantastic ministry they do with young people.**

It's a fantastic weekend – make sure the youth leaders in your church don't miss out! Subsidies are available for 20 south islanders. Brochures will be mailed to youth leaders soon – for more info email [youth@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:youth@presbyterian.org.nz).

# MISSION POSSIBLE

Created in consultation with national mission enabler John Daniel

## The mission-mapping process



**Each step in this mission-mapping process engenders key questions, such as:**

**Strategic Questions:** Who are we ? Where do we fit? Where have we come from? What are our stories/history? – Identity. What is important to us? What do we value, hold dear? What from the past and present must we take with us into the future? – Values. Why are we here? What are our gifts? What are we called to do and be? Key Purpose – Mission. Who are our neighbours? What is important for them, their needs/issues (relevance, language, culture)? – Context. Where are we going? What would we want to look like if we started from scratch? What do we want others to say about us in 5, 10, 20, 30 years (future history)? – Vision

**Operational Questions:** What will we do to achieve our vision (Goals/Objectives)? Which will we do and when (Priority and Timing)? Who will do it and who does the buck stop with (Responsibility and Accountability)? How will we do this (Strategy)? How much will we do it (Scope)? What do we need in order to do it (Structure, Resources)?

**Review Questions:** Where are we at? How are we doing? What is/isn't working? What can we learn from this? What changes are required? What improvements do we need to make?

Good quality, honest questions invariably lead to productive, transforming discussions, and to decisive, focused action. These are very good questions and form the basis of a strategic review.

However, there are some more fundamental questions: Why bother with all this? Perhaps people might also ask, "What's in it for me?" Or, How does it help our communities experience the Good News of God's love for us?



# MISSION POSSIBLE

Created in consultation with national mission enabler John Daniel

## Pentecost, Parousia and Paradigms vs Krisis, Kairos and Kirk

*"We accept the verdict of the past until the need for change cries out loudly enough to force upon us a choice between the comforts of further inertia and the irksomeness of action."*

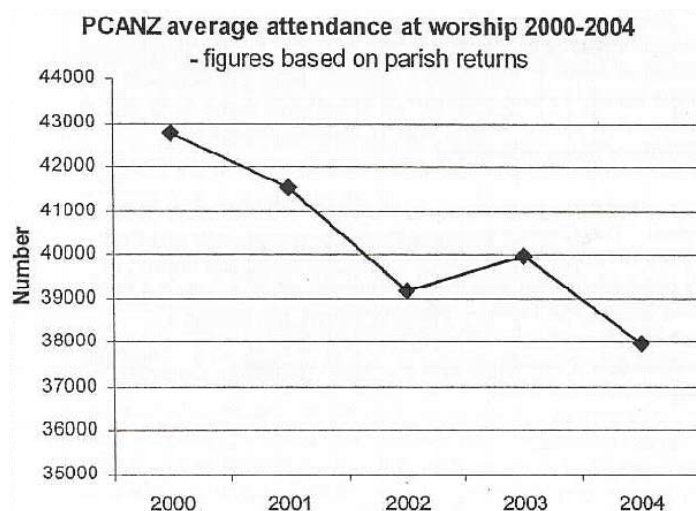
*- Learned Hand, 20th century American jurist*

There are many national and global issues that have precipitated the crises we see that "cry out for change" in our context. The West is undergoing a cultural transition of major proportions. Words that include "post-", "multi-", and "-isms", seek to describe this phenomenon. Sociologists and many Christian commentators have begun to seriously analyse and explain and address them. This paper "takes it from there", and suggests crisis as a motif for this context.

Crisis, as it has in the past, offers challenge and opportunity. It invites action. Action with "imagination, creativity, innovation, and daring". It is not thoughtless reaction or undirected activity. As Albert Einstein once observed, "thinking that will solve the world's problems will be of a different order to the kind of thinking that created those problems in the first place".

Consider Paul and his hearers at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17: 16ff), and Peter with Cornelius (Acts 10). They experience a paradigm shift that enables them to re-perceive apparently negative contextual factors in a different light, enabling them to articulate the Good News in their situation.

The graph below is an example from our context. Extrapolating the trends and outward signs indicates death at some future point. And...in the light of our global village, and electronic communication, consider how many people come in contact with each of these professing Christians in their daily walk. Perhaps there are more people "coming to church" than we think! The question is how are we to respond to this opportunity?



Crisis pervades the Church at many levels. It provides us with both challenge and opportunity. This may be a God-given Kairos moment – "an opportunity and incentive to move in a heretofore unseen direction"; an invitation for rigorous reflection on ourselves, our context, and what God may be calling us to do and be. As with Peter and the disciples in Acts, as with our Presbyterian founding mothers and fathers, so for us, this will involve a paradigm shift – in our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of God's call to us the Church – a call to contemporary mission.

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*If you would like to be sent the previous pages in the Mission Possible series, please email [candour@presbyterian.org.nz](mailto:candour@presbyterian.org.nz).*

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I read with some interest Rinny Westra's article on "Death and resurrection in the church" in the April issue of *Candour*. I feel moved to respond on two points.

Firstly, as the penultimate minister of the parish Rinny first served in, the description of the decision to close the doors of the church as "courageous" and a "liberating decision that freed them to throw their support and commitment elsewhere" is, from my experience in the parish, at the very least charitable, and may be more properly described as an exercise in public relations, full of the spin such an exercise usually entails.

Secondly, Rinny's emphasis on historical Presbyterian theological education as a search for truth is probably accurate, but a return to those "good old days" is, I think, unwarranted and misguided. Every Tom, Dick and Reverend is convinced they have found the truth we

are all supposedly searching for, so that the search itself becomes an exercise in bashing each other with our dogmatic positions. A search for truth sounds very noble but by what criteria is truth determined? In any case, in the modern church truth seems to be determined more by accountants rather than theologians.

A far better emphasis, in my opinion, is to look at a *philosophia perennis*, which does not limit itself to one religious tradition but encompasses all. Perhaps then we may see that Rinny's search for truth, contained as it is within the Presbyterian Religion, is undermined by that Religion so emphatically parting company with the Christian tradition.

*Keith F Fuller (Rev)*

*Minister within the bounds, Christchurch*

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## More on death and resurrection and the church

*A dialogue submitted by Rinny Westra*

*There have been a number of responses to my article, published in the April edition of Candour, on "Death and Resurrection and the Church", including this one from the Rev Dr John Roxborough, Acting Principal at the School of Ministry in Dunedin. This contribution is his email, followed by my reply to it. I think it is a helpful and informative exchange.*

**John Roxborough writes:**

I enjoyed your recollections of the Theological Hall in the April *Candour* and wondered if you might be interested in a copy of the current School of Ministry handbook as an indication of how we are seeking to fulfil our role at the moment. Juan Kinnear (Registrar of the School of Ministry) will drop you a copy in the mail.

Your point is well made that our church has become internally more diverse than it was and the relationship between its identity and our Reformed heritage is both problematic and critical. Some of the issues you raised are partly due to the shift in contemporary culture from modern to post-modern and from valuing truth to valuing experience.

Our tradition has historically been more successful in relating to Enlightenment values and the quest for truth than to either primal or to post-modern worlds (though there are important exceptions), but we are trying to hold these

together. These worlds are also embodied in different generations and ethnic groups in the church. I am one of those who happen to believe that some of the values that have survived other cultural shifts and historical events have enduring importance, but they are not the only values that need to be taken seriously and accommodated in the total life of the church and our training for leadership at the present time.

I find it interesting to observe that both Liberals and Evangelicals in the classic groupings from the post-World War II era, even at their best, struggled with the values and world-view changes of late last century. It is a moot point whether the contribution of decisions of the church and the Theological Hall/School of Ministry to our decline in numbers was the failure to maintain the integrity of the classic academic values of an earlier generation, or whether it was a failure to more adequately navigate the cultural changes that were taking place with a loss of nerve in adjusting sufficiently to the new situation.

In mission terms, we were faced with a new culture that presented new challenges for critical contextualisation. Of course there was a failure and weakness in the Church's response, but both the Church at large and its theological education did seek to respond, and did seek to build on and retain the values of an earlier era as it did so.

There still exist, just, congregations who did well in the 1960s and who have changed very little in their worship and their expectations of ministry. They maintained a success of a kind, but they now face sudden radical change or a very bleak future if they have one at all.

The congregations I particularly admire are those whose sense of faithfulness to what Christianity is about required them to adjust and who were willing to make some mistakes in the process. I think our theological education programme is in this category. The changes of 1996/1997 that came upon us were due to decisions of the University of Otago and the Catholic Bishops, each of whom had good reasons for what they did, but they were not our decisions. The effects were indeed to place three years of training in the hands of other providers, but two years of training remained under the direction of the reconstituted School of Ministry. I don't think it is fair to talk in terms of the "demise of the Theological Hall". I would like to think the core values you recall are still with us among the staff, and the students have as much connection with them as they ever had. The other providers of training have I think served us well and in an era of frustrated and almost forgotten ecumenism, the exposure to other traditions they provide is a benefit. That there remains a challenge to our identity is also true enough, and it is added to by the number of candidates for ministry who have little background in a Presbyterian church of any kind.

In terms of the theoretical basis of our programme in the School of Ministry, we do our best to keep knowing and doing in connection. We have a strong course on theological method. I teach the course on Presbyterian Studies and a similar course is available by distance through the Ecumenical Institute in Christchurch, which we are using for Local Ordained Ministers (LOMs) and for ministers transferring into the Presbyterian Church from other countries and from other denominations. A 400-level university paper on Themes in Reformed Studies is also available through the University of Otago. Students studying at the University of Otago for a BTheol get quite strong Reformed theology from the papers on Christology and other topics from Ivor Davidson and Murray Rae. The ethos of the Bible College of New Zealand (in Henderson) since the early 1990s and the quality of its teaching in areas such as theology, mission studies, and world religions also serves us well. It would be fair to say I think that its Evangelicalism connects well to a particular stream of Reformed theology.

As an engineer by training and inclination I cannot agree with the idea that pragmatism is intrinsically an intellec-

tual failing; the trick is to connect the real practical world with a good theoretical base. Our church needs both at the moment. Some problems can in my view be traced to a lack of pragmatism by groups whose theological capacity was not in question.

I suspect that the actual values of our tradition have come through even in the trauma of some of our debates and may have strengthened the church as well as challenged it, whatever we think of the other outcomes.

I trust you and the parish are going well. I would be happy to chat further!

### **Rinny replies:**

*I am greatly encouraged by your response and I look forward to receiving a copy of the current School of Ministry handbook. It is good to know that some solid Presbyterian stuff is in fact part of the current programme.*

*I would be the first to acknowledge that my article is a kind of nostalgia trip, and that there are ongoing social and cultural shifts that put us in a very different situation from when I was a theological student. The post-modern paradigm is clearly a helpful description of that situation, but it is as I see it a description and not a prescription. And while the numerical decline can be accounted for because of that changed situation and the church's failure in dealing with it, I still see a strong connection between the loss of a distinct Presbyterian identity and the closure of the Theological Hall as a place for theological education.*

*I wrote about "the search for truth" in the article because that fitted in with the title of the festschrift for Frank Nichol. Perhaps I should have spoken of the "search for understanding", as in Anselm's "Faith Seeking Understanding", which would fit in better with the post-modern situation.*

*I have no problems with being pragmatic—I won't preach on a text if I can find no practical sense in it! But the absolutisation of the pragmatic is a problem as far as I am concerned, and I predict (but I'm not a Nostradamus!) that pragmatism in the sense that "if it works it's fine regardless of other considerations to do with values and theology" will pall and lead to just as much rejection of the Church and Christian faith when its full implications, including its barrenness and emptiness, become obvious to people.*

*Thanks again for your response. I am happy to continue this discussion.*

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

**Applications close 7 June 2006.**

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If you are interested in receiving more details, please contact:-

Nominator  
The Rev Don Hall  
11 Maxwellton Drive  
Mairangi Bay  
North Shore City

Phone/fax 09-476 3031  
Email: [donjanethall@xtra.co.nz](mailto:donjanethall@xtra.co.nz)