

Candour



Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

ISSUE 5 // NOVEMBER 2012

Turn around churches:
stories and reflections from churches that
turned around death and decline



www.presbyterian.org.nz

Contents

Candour 2012

Candour is a bi-monthly publication. The editor of Candour is minister emeritus the Rev Dr Bob Eyles.

Please note that the password log in for the Candour archive on the Church website has been removed and everyone is welcome to access current and past editions of Candour at: www.presbyterian.org.nz/publications/candour/candour-archive

ISSN 1171-1027 (Print)

ISSN 1179-402X (Online)

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

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One-quarter page: \$80 plus gst

One-third page: \$95 plus gst

Half page: \$130 plus gst

Any artwork must be supplied electronically and in a high-resolution format. Measurements are indicative only and subject to layout requirements.

The next deadline is 28 February 2013.

The next edition is published in March 2013. This edition will have the theme: 'General Assembly 2012 - reflections on its processes'. Contributions on this topic are welcome, and can be sent to the editor loisandbob@xtra.co.nz.

Cover image © istockphoto.com

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Turn-around churches: are we asking the right questions?

Kevin Ward, Southern Presbytery

In 1978 I began as the minister in my first church, having just graduated from theological college and been ordained by the Baptist Church. It was a relatively small church, something less than 100 in attendance, which had been in decline. There were more older people than younger, only a small number of families and five young people. The last minister, though, had developed a good spirit in the church, and building on this I could be seen to have had a turn-around ministry. The pattern of decline was reversed, attendance lifted to over 300 and perhaps 100 young people were involved in the life of the church in some way.

How did it happen? First I focused on making sure I delivered good quality and relevant biblical preaching. It was the heyday of charismatic renewal and the worship of the church was renewed, aided by the arrival of a good number of excellent musicians. We developed a solid small group structure, focused on growing good youth and children's ministries and developed good leaders in a variety of areas, eventually employing three fulltime pastoral staff. Again the development of these leaders was assisted by the arrival of some very able people from elsewhere.

Doing these things was the means by which the minister of the church I attended during my university years, had turned that church around a decade earlier. But that was the 1970s and 80s and back then if you did those core traditional elements of ministry well and made them relevant to the cultural context, churches could be turned around.

My PhD research done from 1998 to 2003 looked at that. One thing it did show is that much of the growth (turn-around) of those churches came from people who were leaving established churches that were not doing those things well. But what I came to realise through my research is "that was then" and "this is now".

What I am becoming increasingly aware of is that the whole notion of turning around churches, from decline to growth, is increasingly an unhelpful concept and does not lead us to ask the questions we need to be asking, which are much more basic and foundational. One article I read on the subject defined a turnaround church as one that "has recognised that, due to consistent decline, within a generation it will be out of business. The church has courageously decided to face the truth and make a series of extremely difficult and painful decisions to reverse that trend". I do not want to knock the concept out of court completely, as there are still some situations where it is a worthwhile concept and focus. However, I do want to raise some questions about it.

The basic issue I want to present is that the whole concept of "turn-around" assumes that the model of church that exists is good, but in this particular situation it is not being done very well, and if only it could be done better (usually by a new minister with fresh energy and some new ideas) then the decline would stop and growth would begin again. Now that was a scenario that has quite some use in the Christendom era of widespread buy into Christianity, at least culturally, if not in as much participation as might have been wished for.

Much of the material on turn-around churches, as well as the concept itself, comes from North America, where it is commonly accepted that the Christendom concept has continued on for a much longer time than it has in other western societies, such as our own. However, North America is very rapidly catching up. Anthony Robinson, a very helpful writer on the church who does come from that context, provides a helpful framework in suggesting that there are three major factors to which we need to adjust our thinking:

- The waning of modernity (the cultural and social changes that have developed since the 1960s)
- The end of Christendom
- The life cycle of congregations

The first two of these have impacted together. Modernity itself undermined Christendom by helping to remove religion from its authoritative place in society and culture. Truth was now found elsewhere and the Church was no longer at the centre of society. As this happened, the culture no

longer supported church going as an important part of being a good member of society. So simply doing church well – which would lead to more people attending – because church performed a valued social and cultural role, began to be less effective. This notion eroded very rapidly from 1960 on, and had almost gone completely by the 1990s.

Some of these cultural and social changes have most strongly been felt in the rural communities. Massive changes in farming practices have led to a significant decline both in the numbers of people living in rural communities and in many cases, also the kinds of people who live there. Economies of scale made possible by rapid transport developments have also had an impact. These changes have had more impact on the Presbyterian Church in New Zealand than any other, as in 1970 it was the most rural church in the country.

One community in rural Taranaki I have worked with is a town of about 3,000 people with seven churches and another, a town of about 2,500 people with six churches. The churches wanted help to turn-around. But “do the maths” I would say. If you take about 10 percent of people in church on a Sunday and divide it by the number of churches, it comes to about 40 each. And they all want to turn-around? Who are going to be the losers?

Rather than trying to turn churches around, we need to ask the question about how we make

“The whole notion of turning around churches, from decline to growth, is increasingly an unhelpful concept”

connections with the 90 percent of people who don’t come into our churches regularly the way they are. (And tinkering around the edges will not attract them in either.) As we ask this question, we should also consider how we can reform ourselves as the people of God in ways that will continue to build relationships with people who don’t come to church.

Clearly the model of church that previously functioned to do these things is not workable or sustainable, so it is a pointless exercise trying to turn them around. So, the kind of initiative being undertaken by the Taranaki Presbytery of developing a house church network, is a much more helpful concept than trying to turn the existing churches around. A better question for the churches in those small towns would be for those churches to start meeting and praying together to discern what does it mean for them to be the people of God in their communities? And to consider who will be able to make some real connections with the others who live there?

One of the writers who has been very helpful for me in thinking about these issues over twenty years is an English church consultant Martin Robinson, (partly because the British situation is much more like ours than the North American). I found when I was in the US and Canada recently that his name came up in many conversations as he was frequently invited to work there. One person commented that last time Robinson was over, he said, “Whenever I come over here you Americans are always talking about the church. We don’t talk about the church in the UK because there is not enough of it left to talk about. We talk about the culture and how do we make connections with it”.

This is what it means to be a missional church. The missional church recognises that God is a missional God, and God is active in the world through the Spirit seeking to reconcile the world to God in Christ. The task of the church, which has been sent into the world by Christ and empowered by the Spirit, is to find out where God is working to do this, and work with God in it. Martin Robinson in one of his many books, *Invading Secular Space* writes:

“The challenge for the church now is to stop thinking *merely* about methods to reverse decline but to reconsider the basic purpose and call of the church. To return to mission as the *raison d’être* of the church will inevitably mean that the shape of the church will change. Our very failure may well assist us to return to that innovative stage in the life of the church when the church ceases to do church but to do mission. What flows from mission will still be the church but a very different kind of church.”

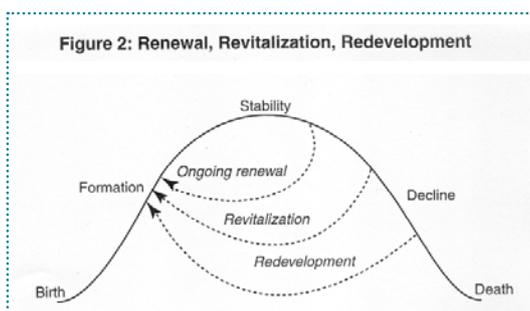
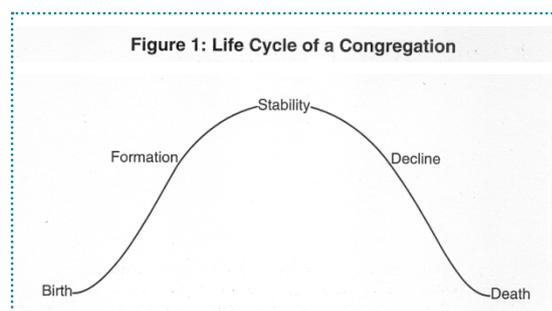
“The missional church recognises that God is a missional God, and God is active in the world through the Spirit seeking to reconcile the world to God in Christ.”

The other major factor Martin Robinson raises is the life cycle of congregations. This concept, which is helpfully applied in a lot of contexts, is that congregations, as with other organisations, go through a typical life cycle from birth to death.

This cycle is often related to the chronological age of a group and with 66 percent of Presbyterian attenders in 2007 being over 60 years of age, it is clearly an issue. Only 12 percent are aged between 15 and 40, usually the most significant age group in indicating a church’s future. I often preach in churches where I am about the youngest person present (and I am now in that 66 percent) and find myself asking what is the future of this church? Could it be turned around?

Another helpful framework in thinking about this is provided by Alice Mann in her book *Can Our Church Live?* She uses the life cycle to suggest the following considerations in looking at that question. Depending on where they are on the life cycle different possibilities might exist.

1. Ongoing renewal by looking again at fundamental questions of faith and practice. In the evangelical tradition periodic revivals served this purpose to some extent. In the church growth or health movements, it is done through strategic planning.
2. Revitalisation. In the early stages of decline a church might be able to look hard at the facts, avoid blaming and engage in new learning that leads to some different ways of doing ministry. Revitalisation implies there is still substantial vitality present that can be refreshed and refocused. A dangerous assumption that can exist at this stage though is that a new minister will accomplish this work automatically. If the minister has the skills and understanding to raise the critical questions needing to be answered with the church, a new era of vitality might occur, but more often the forces driving decline continue to be ignored. In that case the new minister will experience (or often collude with) the church’s two most destructive illusions: the fantasy that growth can occur without change and that change can occur without conflict.
3. Redevelopment. The further you slip down the decline side of the curve the more capital it takes – spiritually, financially and politically – to create the possibility of a turn around.



Many of our churches, we need to acknowledge, are at this point. They simply do not have sufficient human or financial resources. Often also the reality of their context means that there is an insufficient population to draw on to grow or sustain a church in ways that resemble what existed in the past. In these cases what is needed is much deeper and more difficult work. Firstly recognising this reality and allowing what has been to come to end, with thanksgiving for what has been and provided and ongoing pastoral care and support through the grief process this will mean for many, as well as finding ways to sustain them in their faith journey. Then begins the challenging task of asking the questions I suggested needed to be asked earlier in the rural context. What does it mean for us to be the people of God in this community in ways that will engage with what God is doing here, and out of that discover what kind of faith community might emerge?

“ It is an unfortunate mistake, repeated often enough in the story of the church, to assume that what the Spirit will do now is the same as what has been done before.”

The concept of turn-around has inherent in it the idea, like an army in retreat, of turning around and going back to what we were doing before, but doing it better so this time we win. I have endeavoured to suggest that while in some cases, this may be an appropriate response, I suggest that in many of our contexts it is not the right concept. What God might be calling us to do is to let go of what we are doing and seek to discover what new thing God is wanting to do in our midst.

The theme chosen by our new Moderator in this next period is “Reviving the Flame”. The flame, of course, has images of the Spirit coming at Pentecost as the church was birthed. I would want to do all I can to enable the Spirit to work more powerfully in creating the kind of community that we find in the book of Acts. However, the question of revival has inherent in it the idea of going back to do better what we were previously doing, our traditions and practices being enlivened. Perhaps, though, we are in a context where we need to see the Spirit doing what was done at and immediately after Pentecost: giving birth to new kinds of communities as the followers of Jesus were pushed into missional engagement in new and different contexts. It is an unfortunate mistake, repeated often enough in the story of the church, to assume that what the Spirit will do now is the same as what has been done before. It was the mistake the people of Israel often made so that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying:

Do not remember the former things,

or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it. (Isaiah 43. 18-19)

This, I suggest, is our much greater challenge than seeking to turn-around existing churches that are in decline. Yes, there are some contexts in which that is a worthwhile concept. At the same time it is important to recognise it is not a return to what once was, but will also involve the development of some new things in our rapidly changing context. However, we need to get over our preoccupation with rescuing the church, as in many of our situations turn-around is no longer possible, not least because it is not what God is wanting to do. Genuine and lasting turn-around, like conversion, is only possible because of the action of God, not our own better methods; what God is wanting us to do in these contexts is to seek to discover what God is doing among the people in communities, and then to join with God in that, and be led by the Spirit in seeing what form(s) of Christ-centred community (“church” but maybe not as we knew it) emerges.

A Neuer Ending Journey: The story of Waiareka Weston Presbyterian Parish, (now Columba/ Waiareka Weston), Oamaru

Nancy Parker, Southern Presbytery

I am somewhat reluctant to write our story because the topic of this edition of *Candour*: “Turn around churches: stories and reflections from churches in decline and dying that have turned themselves around” is a challenge in itself.

I think back to the Weston of 17 years ago and I have great respect for the many faithful people who are still the backbone of our church – good, solid Christian folk who over the years have given time, energy and finance to ensure that the parish of Waiareka Weston is still viable. The Weston Church centenary last year was a wonderful time of celebrating the past and affirming the foundations that have been laid by many faithful people and ministries. The story of the Waiareka Weston Parish is one of hope, faith and tenacity.

Ron and I came to Oamaru more than 17 years ago. Ron had been asked to do some “supply” for the Waiareka Weston Parish. He spent his childhood in Oamaru and still had many contacts. Our children were ready to fly the nest, so it seemed to be an opportune time.

The elders were concerned that the parish could no longer afford to pay a full-time minister. The elders and managers had supported the church through many difficult days - severe droughts which had caused serious hardship in the farming area, school closures, church closures, huge changes in farming, and decreases in population; the town of Oamaru itself had also suffered decline following the closure of the port in the 1970s.

It all looks a grim picture, but many rural areas have faced the same issues and at Weston there were always signs of life. Good, solid, faithful people, a few children and families with young people, and elders who wanted to see their church overcome difficulties.

Also there were people who operated a prayer line praying for the church and its people and community. Ron’s “supply” ended up being a seven-year ministry, and during this time I enjoyed leading the Sunday School and building relationships with the church, school and community.

We developed a plan for “Super Sundays” to which we invited community families. Sometimes we would have over 70 children taking part in these programmes which ranged from a Robin Hood and his Merry Men day to a Mad Hatters Tea Party. We also taught Bible in Schools at Enfield and Weston and ran several Saturday night programmes for these children each year.

During this time I began studying for my B. Theol as our ministry at Weston had cemented a call within me to ordained ministry. I had a sense that this was my place and I was ordained at Weston in early 2002. Somehow it has been a good fit and a wonderful experience of learning and growing.

We found that it was really important for us to bring change in a number of ways. We worked through a process of establishing a parish council rather than a session and board of managers. We endeavoured to have a prayerful missional approach to every decision that was made. Also, parish council needed to make the financial decisions because it was in touch with what was happening in church life. Our Weston Church building needed to be renovated to make it more welcoming and user friendly – this was a huge step for a country parish but with the help of the Synod of Southland and Otago and our ministry team, this was accomplished and our buildings are debt free.

I believe that for us as a parish there are three aspects that have led to growth, which, may I say, is hard work to maintain. It is also important that we never think we have arrived!

1. The warmth of welcome.

Our church needs to be a warm, welcoming place and this is not always easy as many of us come from different backgrounds and understandings. I remember a time when on Waitangi Day two young boys did a haka for us at Family Time. It was great and people clapped and cheered. Unfortunately not everyone! Afterwards I received letters from one or two who disapproved, "how could we allow a Maori war dance to take place in the church?" We can be continually challenged by our narrow understandings of hospitality and welcome. However, on the sign outside our church is the statement "A place where everyone is welcome" and that is what we constantly work towards. As we grow as a community, and in our love for one another, I believe we are making progress.

At Weston there were always signs of life."

Offering hospitality and welcome to our communities also takes creativity and a willingness to break with tradition and to do things in a different way. For us in the Waiareka Valley there is an added meaning as historically our beautiful valley has been a place of welcome.

Our parish, over the years, has made new ventures in sharing with the community. For example, the historic Totara Estate invited Waiareka-Weston parish to join them for their day of celebrating the harvest. We immediately wondered if it would be the right thing to do to close our morning service at the Weston Church and all go down to the Estate, beginning the day there with a Harvest Thanksgiving service.

"Harvest Home" has been celebrated on the Estate annually and the church has had a role within that celebration; our youth group has also been involved. The young people, dressed in Victorian Costumes, make and sell lamb burgers as part of the day's festivities. Even I dress in a Victorian outfit. It has become a wonderful day of hospitality within the community. The Thanksgiving service is well attended as we celebrate God's abundant care for us all.

We have found that Bible in Schools has been an important connection."

2. Children, Youth and Family Ministry

Our children's and youth ministry has been an important factor in our growth; families feel welcome and their children are welcomed as part of the body of Christ. This has several layers. For pre-schoolers there is a parents and preschoolers group at Weston and music and movement at another worship centre. These are valuable places to connect and belong.

We have found that Bible in Schools has been an important connection. This has been a good way to build relationships with our local schools. The local school appreciates our reinforcement of the values that are taught. Two of us are also trained as school chaplains; I am Chaplain at Weston School. The school values immensely all the support and help we can give – alongside children with needs, helping with grief and anger programmes and even women from the church cooking up a feast in the school staff room thus teaching the children the value of

vegetables from the school garden. One of our men also hears reading on a weekly basis, and we provide the staff with a weekly morning tea.

We have a walking “school bus” to the church kids clubs on Fridays and a garden club on a Thursday. We find the children who attend are in need of the love and care offered, and these groups provide good opportunities to get to know the family unit.

A year 7 and 8 youth group meets at the Columba Church on alternate Fridays. This group is filling a real need and is steadily growing. Very few of these children come from Christian homes but love coming to Columba worship on the days when their leader and I lead worship there; we also include them in the service. It is wonderful to see these young people grow in their understanding of faith.

The community teenage youth group meets at the church every Friday and includes church kids. There is always a God Spot as we live and share our faith together. For our church young people there is a group on Sunday at 5pm for tea, study and training in taking part in worship. It is interesting to see community young people joining this group as relationships are formed.

This is a busy but important part of our mission and we celebrate all our volunteers who have worked hard to establish these ministries. We now also employ a youth pastor for 30 hours a week which stretches our budget, but is essential for us to continue reaching into the community.

We have just had our accreditation as Kids Friendly renewed and are grateful for the way families are welcomed and assimilated into our church life.

There is, of course, a Sunday programme for the children during term time; our family times in church are led by a variety of people and are a lot of fun with drama, puppets, action songs and chocolates for birthdays. Again we endeavour to welcome and involve our children in worship. We want them to have a sense of belonging and being an integral part of the church.

“ It will be an emotional journey for us as we consider how many buildings we really need.”

3. Two Types of Worship on Sunday

I hear of others who are trying to amalgamate their two worship services but for us as a people it is vital that we offer worship styles that appeal to our diverse congregation. 9am is traditional worship and at 10.30am we have family worship. Sunday mornings are very busy for me but I enjoy both forms of worship, and have a great team of people also equipped to lead.

In our parish we desire to value difference and accept one another. We look to the Holy Spirit for guidance and inspiration in worship and enjoy openness to the Spirit’s presence and power. We also regularly worship together at Weston, and at Columba, endeavouring to include both worship styles in the service. We believe this coming together is very important as we are all one in Christ Jesus and we want the faith to be passed down the generations. In both services we encourage participation and particularly at 10.30am, work as a team.

We now have further challenges as we are linked with Columba Church in the town of Oamaru. Our finances and buildings are separate and we will remain that way for the next period of time as we sort out our building issues. We have four Oamaru Stone buildings which will need earthquake strengthening. It will be an emotional journey for us as we consider how many buildings we really need. We have been working on this. We have also begun a kids club at Columba, forged links with the local school and developed the Year 7 and 8 youth group as mentioned.

We strive, with God’s help, to be a caring community church offering friendship, spiritual and practical support through love and encouragement and the valuing of one another’s gifts. We believe the ‘church’ is people, sharing faith and life with each other and the community. We value one another as members of a team, working together to make Jesus Christ known. We see ourselves on a journey, seeking relevance to meet the needs of a new generation.

The Clevedon Story

Mark Chapman, Northern Presbytery

Congregations turn around when they become places of faith, hope and love. The Clevedon story is one of dreaming great dreams, faithfulness, creating trust and allowing our hearts to be broken by the things that break the heart of God.

Congregations turn from death to life when they are allowed to become fertile soil in which love can grow. That may all sound rather corny, but remember there is a lot of food value in corn!

The Clevedon story is one of building on previous generations' faith while at the same time patiently discovering new ways of serving God. To turn a congregation from death to life requires that one fruit of the Spirit – love – in all its different manifestations, especially patience. Thirty-six years into my ministry, new things are still happening. What follows is some of the how and the why of a country congregation that was considered unviable in 1975, and has now become a busy, thriving, God-honouring community that draws its membership from those nearby and some who live more than an hour's drive away.

Our annual turnover is \$1.9m and we have 31 full-time or part-time staff. We have also recently been gifted \$500,000 over four years to establish an off-site family centre and pay a coordinator.

What we have learned:

1) Sacred Ground

A congregation is sacred ground. It contains the hopes, fears, joys, pain, faith, love and the doubts, of those who make it up. It is that place where, as ministers, we need to remove our sandals and tread gently and reverently because we are caring for image bearers of God. We have been invited in hope to aid a people on their spiritual journey and through their rites of passage.

I listen to the stories from the past: stories about the still born; the children who died in infancy; the death of friends and families; marriages and baptisms; the stories of men and women who knew much more about life than me; the stories of men and women who lived through things like the polio epidemic, the depression, and the great wars and whose lives were changed in the process. These were the people who trusted me with their story. This was their sacred ground where God was calling me to walk gently.

“To turn a congregation from death to life requires that one fruit of the Spirit – love – in all its different manifestations, especially patience.”

2) Ask for help

I soon learned that not much was expected of me, as the leadership assumed I would be gone in three or four years – such was the custom in country parishes. All I was to do was maintain the status quo. There was talk of Clevedon joining up with a larger urban church and I was just there to put off the inevitable. However, I had a naïve belief that God didn't call congregations into existence to fail. But how to make the change? I didn't know. Sadly, not much help came from my own denomination. Our consultants at the time asked me what I wanted to do and I hadn't a clue. I had to turn outside. Eventually I came across Robert Schuller Snr, of Orange Grove Community Church in Los Angeles. That was a life saver for me. He provided a model for speaking to people who had become turned-off to the Christian. I turned to motivational speakers, all Christians, who were being brought to New Zealand by the business community.

From Robert Schuller and the rest I learned key principles of how to turn a faith community around from inward-looking to community-looking. My colleagues had written Schuller and motivational speakers off, telling me that they were American and it wouldn't work in New Zealand. My defence at the time was, "Well so is Coca Cola and it seems to work". When you don't know the answers you can either bluff your way through or you can ask. I needed to ask. There was too much at stake to bluff. I was desperate; on the verge of a breakdown and wondering why God had called me anyway. After three years at Clevedon, I was getting invitations to urban parishes at the rate of four a year. Yet, never once did I sense that I should leave this place that God had called me to. I stayed and this is what I learned.

We asked the community. In the 80s we surveyed the community and asked the non-church people what they needed. Nothing they needed was what we were offering and so we developed our mission strategy based solely on the expressed needs of the non-church community. From that simple four-question, questionnaire, all our significant ministries came into being. Pre-school; Get Set for School; Family Ministries, which runs a programme for parents and pre-school children five mornings a week, including Mainly Music, and a Toy Library, and lately the new Family Centre.

“ I learned key principles of how to turn a faith community around from inward looking to community looking.”

3) What they didn't tell me in the Hall

I went into the congregation believing that I was to lead the congregation to God's new future! I was to be the saviour, the chosen one whom people would be inspired by, and follow. Because I was *the man!* Nobody was interested!

Seven years later I was sitting in the office of a retired Presbyterian minister who was on staff at Schuller's Church in LA pouring my heart out to this wonderful gentleman about the fact that nobody loved me and nobody wanted to do anything and follow all my wonderful plans for their future! This gentle man of God, explained to me using First Nations language, that I was not followed, because I was *not* the leader/chief. I was only the medicine man. Oh. He went on to explain that the tribe/congregation don't follow the medicine man, they follow the chiefs. The chiefs are those who hold the tribal knowledge. They know from generations of wisdom when it is time to move from A to B. The chiefs call on the medicine man to bless the journey and do his/her little dance, but the tribe *never* follows the medicine man! Oh. Gingerly I asked, "How do I become a chief?" Answer: You have to learn the tribal history as well as the chiefs and/or you have to outlive them.

I came home and read the session books back to the turn of the century. I talked to the chiefs about their journey and I listened, and I loved, and I was humbled, and I determined to be a servant to these wonderful people, which was all God had asked me to be in the first place! How many times have I heard of young ministers going into parishes, believing they are the leader, only to become discouraged because no one told them that *they have to earn the right to lead!*

4) Good churchmanship

Through motivational speakers such as the image co-ordinator for Disneyland and IBM, I learned that 80 percent of first impressions are visual. The look of the church building; the condition of the furniture; the carpets; the dress of the minister, are all important *to the non-church people I was trying to reach, if and when, they ever came through the door of the church!* Your card-carrying Christian will put up with all kinds of things because they no longer see them. We would sit in freezing rooms huddled around one bar heaters, sitting on old donated furniture. If you are only communicating to the chosen frozen, it's fine. Bring in an outsider and the visual says, "untidy, rundown, decaying, pathetic, poor!"

I discovered Walt Disney and IBM cared more about first time visitors than the average church leadership did. Now, if you believe in, our father who art in Geneva, Calvin be his name, then the elect will turn up and it doesn't matter what the visual is – they will be at home. But if you have a little bit of doubt about his theology, you may want to wash the windows and shake out the welcome mat from time to time.

Standard of worship is important whether the congregation numbers five or 100. Do it well! I refused to have little around the communion table chats, because there might only be five people present. I was watching for the non-church person who was going to come through the door. I determined to always wear a suit to lead worship (I don't do gowns!), as the professionals in the community always wore suits when they were doing business. My suit says non-verbally that I mean business! The standard of music has to be up there. If not, don't have it. Remember, good musicians attract good musicians. Bad music drives them away as well as any musically literate first-time visitor.

“**N**or do I speak of finance on a Sunday morning, rather the inspiring, lifting, transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

5) Communicating to non-church people or, who are you trying to impress?

I had to change my style of preaching from exegetical to topical and avoid Christian cliches which would go over the heads of non-church people. I saved the exegetical for house groups. I stopped dropping quotes or lines such as, “As David said in Psalm 23”. At that point the non-church person is thinking, “David who? And what was he doing in a psalm anyway?” I believe that all my sermons (I call them messages), are biblical, I just don't feel I have to prove it by showing how biblically literate I am. I want the non-church person to hear the message of the Gospel, not my modest brilliance!

6) Not sweating the small stuff

I learned to choose carefully which mountain I was prepared to die on. I am not on such an ego trip that I have to be a control freak. That gives the congregation permission to explore new possibilities and new forms of outreach. I am happy to delegate authority knowing well that I cannot delegate responsibility. The buck stops with me. If it goes to custard I'm responsible. I learned to chill.

Our congregations began to grow mostly through non-church persons becoming believers. We tried to use music that they would be able to identify with; worship that was intelligent, clear, and easy to follow with no hidden secret signs known only by the initiated. For instance imagine you are in a church for the first time back in the seventies – offering plates are passed around and then at some secret sign, people would stand and break into the doxology which you have never heard before, which reminds you that you are on the outer. This really happened at Clevedon in my first year and it led me to change what we did much to the disgruntlement of the card-carriers.

7) Keeping the dirty washing in the laundry

Every Sunday morning I aim to do three things: give hope; lift faith; let people know that they are loved unconditionally by this wonderful God we know in Jesus Christ. I am always aware that on any given Sunday someone may come in and need to know that God loves them or that there is hope for them and experience the transforming power of faith.

What I have never done is spoken on any of the issues that many of us in the national Church seem to believe are the essentials of the Gospel. This gut wrenching stuff that sends so many home from General Assembly as total wrecks. We must, and we do, discuss them in house groups and parish councils – what I call the laundry areas of the church. But never on a Sunday morning. Nor do I speak of finance on a Sunday morning – rather the inspiring, lifting, transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

8) Getting the right team around you

Beginning with no secretarial assistance in 1975, I now have a dedicated team of people around me that make it all work. We choose leaders who first of all love people and secondly, who are learning to love God. I don't have staff, I have co-ministers of the Gospel who work with me not for me. These are men and women I trust to be as concerned about the Gospel as I am. We make it happen for each other. It wasn't always like that. When I began I had to personally purchase what office equipment I wanted like all my typewriters and our first photocopier plus pay for a secretary to come in when I was getting bogged down. I think we have to lead the way in struggling parishes, not in terms of who is in charge, but in terms of personal commitment to making it work.

Today, I couldn't be treated better, nor wish for a better team. It just takes time and patience and a lot of love. With the right team around you, miracles happen. The other great blessing was to have a wife who while never wanting to be a leader in the congregation, led through loving service. Heather has greeted people and ushered people to their seats every Sunday we have been present, for 30 plus years.

9) What matters?

For me, all that matters is faith that works itself out through love. People matter. Not bums on pews. Not money in the bank. Not programmes. Rather, how can I help you to become the you that God has created you to be. People come to where they are helped at their place of need. Money flows to ideas that are life and community-changing. Every Sunday morning you will find me at the door of the church welcoming people; hugging them; high fiving the teenagers and children. The importance of that is that the way I lead worship and speak, may well be conditioned by what I hear at the door. The image is of the shepherd at the gate of the fold: as the sheep comes in, the shepherd checks them for the sake of their health. What wounds do they have? Is something disturbing them? I learn about the congregation at the door. It may be a death, it may be a marriage break-up, it may be an engagement, a new baby. Love tells me it's important to know these things before I stand before God's people and lead them in worship.

Because this attitude has flowed down through the congregation, people come to Clevedon because it is a safe place to be. They come wounded. Some come feeling spiritually abused in their last congregation. Some come because of tensions that have arisen in other places. Some come because they don't seem to fit anywhere else. And ... others leave because of the same reasons or because of some theological position they hold, which I won't buy into. And it's good that they go. There is a place for them somewhere. God fortunately blesses some other congregation with them! And that's OK.

We are not the perfect congregation and we make mistakes and sometimes people are hurt and we live with that. But we take the Gospel seriously, allowing for mystery and ever the Grace of God. It kind of works! And after 36 years I still love it – well 363 days of the year anyway.

“We choose leaders who first of all love people and secondly, who are learning to love God.”

Turning six into one: snapshots from Timaru

Mary-Jane Konings, South Canterbury Presbytery

The story so far: ten years ago, faithful Presbyterians in Timaru started to dream and vision what one church in Timaru might look like. They met and talked and produced a document called “The Blue Book” detailing their ideas. They even took it to their congregations, each of whom found something to dislike, and so the vote was lost.

Time passed

First the minister of one church left, and then another, and finally a third. The fourth sensed a kairos moment and chose to leave also. Transitional ministers came. There were more meetings and more conversations, more dreams of what could be, and another vote happened. Two churches said yes, and two said no, and so the vote was lost.

“**T**he congregations learned to have hard conversations with one another, how to negotiate and compromise, and not have meetings in the car park after meetings.”

Time passed

The churches that said yes got on with it. They called a ministry couple to come and work with them. The churches that said no were hurt and upset. There were yet more meetings and conversations. Small groups were formed and they studied “The Purpose Driven Church”. The Rev John Daniels came to visit, and the Rev Dr Graham Redding came to visit. The congregations learned to have hard conversations with one another, how to negotiate and compromise, and not have meetings in the car park after meetings. One church that said no then called a minister who courageously said yes, but if you call me you will have to change. There was a vote and the churches said yes. Just. And with a few conditions. There was much anxiety over money, and who had control over what, and in the fullness of time a Memorandum of Understanding (version 6) was crafted.

Now things were different. Instead of a minister each, there was a team, and in the fullness of time the team grew. Instead of six worshipping places, there were four and after the earthquakes, there were two. All of the congregations brought treasures with them; rosters and routines, relationships and relatives.

More small groups were formed and talked about “changing the conversation” and “Christianity for the rest of us”. There was prayer and Bible study, and people grew in grace and truth.

There was also muttering and grumbling. “Why can’t others come and worship as we do,” they muttered. “It’s not the same,” they grumbled. Some stayed at home. Others came and after a while discovered that different didn’t mean wrong, it just meant different. They discovered they could change some things they didn’t like, and learnt they didn’t mind so much about others.

Time passed

The church discovered they quite liked the people they were worshipping with, and over time they stopped worrying quite so much about money. They forgot they had a Memorandum of Understanding (version 7) unless they needed to change it for something. They stopped worrying about who represented who, and learned to look for the best people for the job. They developed a mission action plan that helped them to ask questions about new ideas – why are we doing this? Do we have the resources for this? Is this the right time? They became accredited Kids Friendly, and developed new forms of creative worship.

Time is passing

Are we a turn around church? I'm not sure. Our membership is not declining as fast as it was, but it is still declining. Seventy five percent of our membership is over 65. South Canterbury has one of the oldest age profiles in the country, but our church membership is even older than our community.

We have employed a youth worker, and run holiday programs for children. We are seeing numerical growth in children's ministries and youth ministries.

We are in the middle of a process of making hard decisions about historic buildings and strategically placed property. While it could be seen as sensible to retain some sites, there is an opportunity cost that must be taken into account. We have different conversations now and use different language. We're changing where we start conversations, trying to avoid getting lost in the details and defining mission differently than "making community connections".

Not everyone is happy. Some have decided not to worship with us any longer, but would come if we were at "their" site. Others are supporting the ministries of other local churches. There is grief and loss and hurt. One of the challenges of ministry is how much time to spend working with, journeying with and listening to the laggards, and how much to support those who are just getting on, and growing weary in the process.

Yet there are also signs of life and hope. One of those signs is the deepening spiritual life of some of our older members, who have engaged or re-engaged with a journey of faith in a way that is energising, life giving, and challenging. Another is the freedom with which our children invite their friends and friends' families to church, and the journeys of faith that have been nurtured along the way.

We are in a different place to 10 years ago, six years ago, four years ago, even one year ago.

Things we have learned:

1. *Make decisions on principle.* We call a minister after the congregation has heard them preach. We trust the discernment process to a ministry settlement board, and let them sort details. We don't involve the whole congregation in discussions on terms of call or where the new minister is going to live. We don't ask the congregation to choose between two different people either. In the same way, we've learnt not to put choices in front of the congregation. This is fudging the issue and an abdication of responsibility in discerning. From our experience, I think often there is not one right choice. We trust a group to do the work and bring a decision for the whole congregation to affirm. If the decision isn't affirmed, that tells us something. If people are willing, they can make all sorts of things work. People want details and the details matter, but decisions need to be made on principles, and preferably biblical principles. Call them missional, call them gospel, but call them into action.
2. *Resist the temptation to make a decision based on fear.* There is a tension between helping people to see and face the reality we are in, and helping them to make a wise and considered decision. Matters are urgent but let's not panic. Doing nothing is not a good choice, but let's not just do anything for the sake of doing something! Tim Keel had some relevant imagery at General Assembly about the physiological responses to being lost that are helpful.

3. **Watch for the kairos moments.** There have been times in meetings when we have been certain of an outcome, but God had other ideas. There have been times when we have been uncertain, and God has blessed us with unexpected grace. This should be no surprise to people of faith and yet, somehow, the delightful surprise when God moves sovereignly in the hearts and lives of his people is worth sharing again and again.
4. **Context.** There is a context of culture, geography, and history that is important to note. Sometimes when things are difficult, paying attention to the context can help explain what is going on.
5. **Be patient.** It is easy to forget that while the ministers are sick of the discussion, we have the opportunity talk about issues with the team, with parish council and on visits. Most of our members don't have the same opportunities, and it takes time for them to work through changes. Secondly, the vibrant churches often had consistent ministries for eight to ten years, so be patient.
6. **Have fun together.** We haven't done nearly enough of this. At times we've got bogged down in work and meetings. There is some resistance here – another meeting! And we, in general, don't have lots of people who like to kick up their heels and have fun together. We don't have people who have energy to work between the lines and work informally. We have had organised fun, but not many of those informal gatherings that help people to build trust and relationship and feel good about themselves.
7. **Culture change.** We are not there yet! We are working on it, but we are nowhere near close enough to having permanent cultural change. Too often when things turn to custard, we fall back on “what we used to do at (insert name of church here)”. We are still more comfortable with technical solutions than looking to identify the adaptive challenge.

Finally, I am personally grateful to be part of a team working on this and grateful for the conversations with others in the wider church who have journeyed with us in this process. We've drawn on the experience and expertise of many, and will continue to do so.

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“**W**e trust a group to do the work and bring a decision for the whole congregation to affirm.”

St Andrew's Church re-build

Rev Nyalle Paris, Southern Presbytery

Part one of the story: 2007-2010

Back in 2006, St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, situated near Southland Hospital on the southwest side of Invercargill, was literally a church on its knees. Attendance at worship (average in June) consisted of just 70 adults and two children. St Andrew's had become an inward-looking church focused on its own needs and socially isolated from the surrounding community.¹ When I arrived at St Andrew's in 2007, as a half-time lay pastor, I was encouraged to find a prayerful remnant of intercessors in the church, as well as a group of elders who were keen to explore new pathways in mission. The Rev Pamela Tankersley, the then Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, visited St Andrew's bringing the prophetic word of the Lord.

St Andrew's embraced as its own mission statement, the Christ-Centred and Community Facing message from Pamela's term as Moderator and was further encouraged to step out into the community by the visit of Amanda Wells, (the then Communications Manager of the Church), who ran a seminar on: Churches reconnecting with their local communities.

For St Andrew's, it became apparent that our point of re-entry back into the community was via New River Primary School, situated less than five minutes walking distance from the door of the church. In partnership with the principal, the church was able to volunteer trained reading tutors who could work alongside students with their literacy needs.² Volunteer service of this kind proved to be a win/win for both parties as the good word spread round the neighbourhood. A helpful resource in terms of what can be achieved in community-facing ministry is the book by Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson entitled: *The Externally Focussed Church*.³

The remainder of part one of the St Andrew's church rebuild focuses on the community-facing aspect of the mission and involved us becoming a Kids Friendly church.

For St Andrew's Church becoming a Kids' Friendly church was an important aspect of the parish's rebuild, as it helped change the church's attitude towards children. We moved from seeing children as something to be tolerated, and we've begun to value them as persons in their own right, whose contribution in worship is something to be encouraged and celebrated. I know my own five-year-old son, William, does not like missing a Sunday because of our Living Stones Sunday School programme. The results speak for themselves: from just two children in our worship in 2006 to 40 in 2012.

Before moving on to part two of the story, which focuses on the Christ-centred aspect of St Andrew's mission, it is worthwhile considering two frequently asked questions.

Firstly, how did you navigate some of the pressure points that accompany congregational growth and change?

Answer: There are two important areas of change, which if left unattended can fuel conflict and lead to divisions within congregations:

(a) **Worship Wars** – conflict over the musical styles used in worship by today's church are all too common and are often driven by generational likes and dislikes. A helpful resource on this issue is the book by Marva Dawn entitled: *Reaching out without dumbing down: a theology of worship for this urgent time*.⁴

1 The S-W Invercargill Community is made up of 40 per cent Maori/Polynesian and has a decile 2 rating (I'm using the former decile ratings used by the Ministry of Education where 1= poverty and 10= affluence)
 2 Our partnership with New River Primary began with Roger Harrington (Elder) and myself making an appointment to meet with Elaine to discuss the possibility of placing a notice for a holiday art programme in their school newsletter. As our mutual trust grew we were able to broaden our avenues of service with the local primary school.
 3 Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focussed Church*, (Loveland, CO: Group Pub.:2004)
 4 Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching out without dumbing down: a theology of worship for this urgent time*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1995)

Dawn asserts that narcissism is at the root of post-modern worship wars, where the love of self is being placed ahead of the love of God. One way to address the problem is by encouraging the congregation to think more deeply about the meaning of the words they are singing and the appropriateness of the musical styles which accompany them. At St Andrew's we have developed our own worship blend, which incorporates traditional hymns as well a range of contemporary hymns and modern worship songs all tied into the lectionary theme for the day.

We have also developed a multi-congregational model of church, in which Sunday worship consists of three distinct worship services: at 10am all-age worship; at 1:30pm Cook Island Service; and at 4pm a youth service, complete with a Praise Band.

One of the dangers with this model of church is that you can easily develop three separate congregations that do not know or love one another. It is, therefore, imperative to arrange combined bimonthly service, where all three congregations come together in worship and fellowship together.

(b) Interpersonal friction – Apparently this is an issue which is not just confined to St Andrew's Church! At times people may struggle with the opinion, attitude and/or communication style of others in the congregation. The St Andrew's ministry team certainly came to see the need to add to our faith "endurance with godliness".⁵

The second question to consider is, "what pay-back if any, in terms of evangelism and growth, has the church experienced?"

Answer: Plenty, and not just numerical growth, but spiritual growth in the members who are themselves stepping out in mission in their 60s, 70s, and 80s!

Example 1 – In 2008, with the help of Stuart Thompson (national director of the Boys Brigade ICONZ programme), St Andrew's established a successful after-school children's club, which met in the church hall and taught the children (numbering up to 40 in 2009) Christian values, arts and crafts, and activities such as singing and games, in a fun and safe environment. Five years on the programme is still running, but under our own Young Achievers banner. During those five years we have seen a number of the children, and on occasions their families, come to faith and attend other church programmes like our 4pm word and worship youth service.

Example 2 – In 2008 we delivered 400 packets of hot cross buns in the neighbourhood with a simple message: "Easter time is special for us because Jesus died on the cross for you and me. Please accept this gift to you from St Andrew's Church". This outreach saw some 1,200 buns distributed, including to a number of folk from the Elston Lea Council Flats. Some men living in the flats struggled with alcohol, gambling and marriage problems, and were invited to a men's breakfast. Two of these men responded to the Gospel call of Christ and gave their lives to God. Both men have now joined the church and attend prayer and study groups, as well as serving on the Deacon's Court. Their story is testimony to the life changing power of the Gospel of Christ.

Part two of the story: 2011-12

In this part of the rebuild story our focus switches to the need to be a Christ-centred church, one which is built upon the foundations of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.⁶ A Christ-centred church is one which refuses to let modern entertainment replace true worship and the philosophy of self-fulfilment subvert the Gospel of Christ.

Having established the importance and priority of our church being Christ-centred, what does such a church look like on the ground? It is here that Luke is helpful as he records the foundational, apostolic plans for the building of the Church in the Book of Acts:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.⁷

⁵ 2 Peter 1:6b in the NRSV

⁶ Ephesians 2:20 in the NRSV

⁷ Acts 2:42 in the NRSV

Historian and commentator Jaroslav Pelikan elaborates that the continuity with the apostles was preserved in these four areas:

1. **Apostolic “doctrine”.** Central to this “doctrine of the apostles”, was the witness to the resurrection of Christ, together with the confession (Acts 4:20): “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” (Acts 8:37, Cf. Jn 11:27).⁸
2. **Apostolic “fellowship”.** In Chrysostom’s reminder, based on this passage, “the fellowship not only in prayers, nor in doctrine alone, but also in social relations.”⁹
3. **Apostolic “breaking of bread” and the other sacraments.** The Acts of the Apostles does single out baptism (Acts 22:16) and the Eucharist (Acts 20:7), which between them would also define the terms to which other actions had to conform to be identified as “sacraments,” above all dominical institution (whether such an act of instituting by Christ was explicitly cited in the Gospels or authenticated by tradition).¹⁰
4. **Apostolic “prayer” and worship** (Acts 4:24-30) There is a suggestion, already at this early stage, of more or less fixed texts and liturgical forms: the Lord’s Prayer in a special category, although the variations in its texts within the New Testament (Matt.6:9-13) and Luke 11:2-4) must fundamentally qualify any claims that the prayers were unchangeable; the Eucharistic prayer or prayers, as documented in the Didache.¹¹

In 2011, in a move aimed at strengthening our Christ-centred foundations, St Andrew’s introduced a disciple-making focus by alternating the 4pm word and worship youth service with a fortnightly foundations Bible study, using the Omega Discipleship material of Ian Mallens.¹² The results far exceeded our expectations with two Samoan teenagers re-affirming their earlier baptism, and 18 new baptisms including some adults by full-immersion.

In 2012 our focus shifted from small group studies to the active participation of the new members into the life of the regular morning and afternoon worship services. By way of example, one person decided to learn the piano at Verdon College in order to play at church. In just one year this young man mastered Grade 7 and is now considering studying music and theology at the University of Otago in 2014.

The St Andrew’s rebuild has necessitated the church taking up the cross of Christ, while at the same time adopting a new, resurrection mindset. The cross and the resurrection are not in opposition (it is not a case of either/or), rather they are complimentary (they are both/and). For if the church is to be truly Christo-centric it can no more afford to leave the cross behind, (which inevitably results in triumphalism), than it can afford to neglect the power of God, which in the words of Jesus cries out: “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible”.¹³

8 Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts – Brazos Theological Commentary of the Bible*, (Grand rapids:Baker Publishing, 2005), 59

9 *Ibid.*, 59

10 *Ibid.*, 60

11 *Ibid.*, 60

12 For more information on OMEGA DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES contact John Fuller via Email: office@omega-discipleship.org.nz

13 Matt. 19:26 in the NRSV.

“Turn-around churches”. Really? You’ve got to be kidding me!

Graham Redding, Principal, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership

Of all the *Candour* topics that I’ve been asked to write a column for, this is the most difficult. It’s the most difficult because I’m just not sure that I get it. Oh, I get it *organisationally speaking* – churches as organisations reversing a pattern of decline through a range of initiatives and techniques. But *theologically speaking*, can we really say that churches turn themselves around? Where does that leave the Holy Spirit? And what does it say about certain assumptions that we might be making about decline and growth?

Let’s ponder this for a moment.¹ The reasons for membership decline in the church are many and varied, and follow patterns evident throughout the Western world. Some describe it as the collapse of Christendom. The seeds of this collapse were sown hundreds of years ago – in such periods known as the Enlightenment and the Renaissance. Globally, the numerical weight of Christianity is shifting away from the North and West towards the South and East. The Church throughout the Western world neither commands the respect and loyalty, nor exercises the influence, that it did just a few generations ago.

New Zealand society has changed considerably during this time; it is much more pluralistic (ethnically, culturally and religiously). Whilst there is openness to spirituality, there is resistance to organised religion and the church as an institution. This is more than indifference; increasingly, the church encounters hostility and cynicism. Meanwhile, those who are drawn to Christianity and the church often bring with them a consumer mindset. In this post-Christendom setting, denominational labels count for little. Many Christians will stay in one church only for as long as they feel their needs are being met and then they will move on. It’s called church grazing! Many drop out of church altogether.

The ecclesiastical landscape in New Zealand is vastly different to what it was 40 or 50 years ago. The decline of the mainline churches has been partially offset by a proliferation of independent churches, many of which associate themselves with the Pentecostal movement. These churches have not had much of an impact on secular New Zealand. Their membership consists largely of former members (and their offspring) of the mainline churches. Meanwhile the percentage of people describing themselves as Christian in the census continues to fall.

It is difficult to quantify the effect of the 1960s charismatic movement and doctrinal controversies on church membership, but anecdotal evidence suggests that at least part of the decline may be attributed to these phenomena. However, other factors were at work too. For example, with the majority of its churches being in rural and provincial areas, the Presbyterian Church has been hit hard by urbanisation. Our denomination has suffered more than most in this regard.

The complex array of factors noted above should caution us against thinking that if we just do a, b and c, then the institutional decline of recent decades might be reversed. Moreover, we have to contend with the fact that, if all the church benefited under Christendom, there were also many distortions in the Christendom model of being church. Not only is there no going back; it is also highly debatable that we should even try to do so. Indeed, it is entirely possible that church growth, conceived in terms of organisational growth, is not something that God is especially concerned about. After all, a small dose of highly flavoured salt is more effective than a mountain of flavourless salt. Whilst strategic plans have their place, we must be mindful of their limitations. The *Missio Dei* cannot be reduced to a series of organisational values, goals, outcomes and performance measures. Nor can the Kingdom of God be reduced to a preoccupation with congregational growth.

¹ Most of what follows is taken from a paper that I wrote for the Council of Assembly in 2009, and which has been reproduced as an Appendix to the Council of Assembly’s 2012 Strategic Directions document, available from www.presbyterian.org.nz

Looking at the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand today, there are some obvious problems associated with institutional decline and aging membership. These include the burden of maintaining plant and buildings, a loss of ministry, leadership and administrative capacity, financial constraints, and the struggle to engage with surrounding communities in meaningful ways. In many congregations where there is a struggle simply to survive as a church, morale and confidence is low. Many churches are simply tired.

These are largely organisational problems. Some of them require organisational responses, such as the freeing up of resources to support new mission projects, which the Press Go initiative represents. But there is more to it than this. Indeed, it could be said that equally problematic for the Church are the following (less obvious) factors:

- Biblical and theological illiteracy
- Historical amnesia and a loss of institutional memory
- Cultural conformity
- The increasing banality and trivialisation of worship
- A loss of confidence in the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- A muting of the more radical and costly demands of discipleship
- A diminished sense of the priesthood of all believers
- The displacement of biblical models of ministry and leadership by corporate models

Pursuing church growth while ignoring these sorts of deeper concerns can become something of a red herring. A discerning eye is necessary when it comes to talking about congregational growth as a strategic goal. Not all growth is of God. Moreover, there is a need to distinguish between change and reform. The Reformation motto, "Always reformed and being reformed" suggests that the Church does not reform itself or "turn itself around" through a series of innovative changes; rather, it is in the process of being reformed by the Spirit in accordance with Scripture.

Which is the prior question? Is it, "What needs to change in order to grow our church?" (a pragmatic, organisational question). Or is it, "Based on our reading of both scripture and context, what kind of church is God calling into being?" (a theological, missional question).

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul describes the church in terms of a community entrusted by God with a ministry of reconciliation. This ministry is grounded in the activity of One who has already reconciled the world to God, not counting their trespasses against them. In Christ there is reconciliation with God, with the created order and between people. This reconciliation is not to be equated with mere co-existence and the absence of conflict; rather, it involves a deep, reconciling union that is nothing short of a new creation.

What would a church look like, that saw itself not as a religious organisation which exists to meet the spiritual needs of its members, but rather as the first fruits of a new reconciled and reconciling humanity? What would its worship look like? What sort of presence in the community would it lead to? What kinds of commitments and habits of faith would it engender? How would it order its life?

To a certain extent, the answers to these questions will relate to our context. However, there are some biblical norms which we can affirm regardless of context. For example, the shaping of our common life through attention to God's Word and the act of breaking bread together (cf. Luke 24:13-35 & Acts 2:42); and a way of being-in-community that counters the myriad forms of oppression, division and hostility that characterise the world at large (cf. Galatians 3:27-28).

The two-fold tragedy is that: (1) churches are easily distracted from the core tasks of attending to God's Word and breaking bread together; and (2) they often perpetuate rather than counter the myriad forms of oppression, division and hostility that characterise the world at large. The history of church schism and division does not make for edifying reading.

As Christendom fades and our membership declines, we are seeing a reconfiguration of church life. In urban areas some large, multi-staff churches have emerged, and some of these are forming missional hubs out of nearby, struggling churches that might otherwise close down. Examples: East

Taieri in Dunedin, Hornby in Christchurch, Knox in Lower Hutt and St John's in Rotorua. These churches, and others like St Columba in Auckland, St Peter's in Tauranga, St Alban's in Palmerston North, St Andrew's in Mt Maunganui, St John's in Wellington and St Andrew's in Whangarei, are becoming known as churches with a strong regional (not just local) presence.

Many people are drawn to these churches because of their strength, vitality, programmes and resources. But not everyone is, and it would be a mistake to gear ministry recruitment and training strategies entirely around this one model of church. Many people prefer the intimacy of a local community or suburban church where everyone is known and has a part to play. While many of these churches struggle numerically, many are also healthy. Examples: Massey-Riverhead in Auckland, St Heliers in Auckland, St Stephen's in Christchurch, St Margaret's in Christchurch, Somervell in Auckland, Wadestown in Wellington, Kaikorai Valley in Dunedin, and Flagstaff-Wakari in Dunedin. Many of these churches have innovative community ministries, and some are pioneering new ways of engaging their communities in worship. Three Dunedin examples stand out: B@tch (part of Highgate), StudentSoul (linked with Leith Valley) and Blue Lagoon (formerly St David's, North East Valley).

Still other people in urban areas seek out a church that has a distinctive liturgical style, theological emphasis or congregational ethos. Examples: St Luke's in Auckland, St Andrew's on the Terrace in Wellington, and Knox in Dunedin.

“ It is entirely possible that church growth, conceived in terms of organisational growth, is not something that God is especially concerned about”

Ethnic-specific congregations (mostly Pacific Island and Asian) also feature prominently in the urban church landscape, especially in Auckland and Wellington. They play an important role maintaining a sense of identity and belonging for migrant groups. Their challenge going forward is how they minister to, and accommodate their New Zealand-born offspring, many of whom do not identify with the migrant culture of their parents.

Many parishes are becoming more multicultural, reflecting the increasingly multicultural makeup of their communities. The most dramatic example: Balmoral in Auckland, where the Minister, Chong Woo Kim, took on a dwindling European congregation, which is now seeing significant growth as it transforms into a multicultural parish with many nationalities represented.

The majority of churches in the Presbyterian Church are still situated outside the main cities in provincial towns and rural areas. Some are flourishing (e.g., Waipu, Cromwell, St Andrew's in Geraldine, Te Anau, Knox in Waitara, St Andrew's in Waipukurau), but most are struggling. While it is difficult to justify the continued existence of many of these small and struggling churches on economic grounds, the significance of their presence to the fabric of their local communities cannot be overlooked. The Synod of Otago and Southland is taking a lead in exploring new ways of being church in rural areas. On the provincial town front, Timaru is taking a lead in its joining together of Presbyterian churches to form one parish. This could well provide a model for other towns and regions to follow.

About 20 percent of Presbyterian congregations are united churches and cooperative ventures. The vast majority of these were formed during the church union movement of the 1970s, which brought together Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans and Churches of Christ. Forty years on, most of these churches are struggling numerically and many of them feel a lack of identity – they neither constitute a denomination of their own nor identify any longer with any one of their “parent” denominations.

Te Aka Puaho constitutes a unique situation. Whilst it has an urban presence in Auckland and Wellington, its main presence is in rural Bay of Plenty, around Whakatane. It is Tuhoe-based. Te Maungarongo marae in Ohope constitutes a key geographical reference point for the history of bicultural relations in the Presbyterian Church. The ministry needs of Te Aka Puaho parishes are met by Amorangi (non-stipendiary ordained ministers), who are trained at Te Wānanga-a-Rangi. Largely through the vision and efforts of Wayne Te Kaawa, Te Wanaga-a-Rangi is being revitalised, with a significant flow-on effect for Te Aka Puaho. An encouraging advance in bicultural relations was represented recently in the signing of a covenant between Te Wānanga-a-Rangi and the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership.

Noting the above and looking ahead, three things are becoming clear:

1. While the attractional model of church will continue to work to some degree (because of the demand for what many churches offer in terms of their worship and activities/programmes), the post-Christendom context suggests that this will not be enough, and indeed begs the question of an alternative-looking ecclesiology.

Many churches will discover that their future is in the transition from being a “settled church” to a church as a movement – that is, going to where people are, rather than waiting for people to come to them. This could be defined geographically, in terms of planting churches in new subdivisions (eg Bethlehem, Papamoa). It could also be understood in two other ways: firstly, through a rediscovery that the priesthood of all believers is worked out in secular vocations and occupations (not only in serving on church committees and duty rosters); and secondly, in terms of churches establishing and encouraging innovative ministries of hope and reconciliation (these will include, but not be confined to, chaplaincies). Here the emphasis will shift from running congregations to building communities, and from faith as security to faith as risk.

2. The traditional parish church model that presumes the existence of one full-time stipendiary ministry serving the spiritual needs of its members will become the exception rather than the rule. Also on the way out will be the Christendom tendency to drive a wedge between clergy (the paid “professionals”) and laity (the long-suffering “amateurs”). Instead, there will be a recovery of the biblical portrayal of the *kleros* (clergy) as part of (not apart from) the *laos* (whole people of God), with ministry belonging to the latter by virtue of their baptism. Equipping for ministry needs to take this baptismal implication and reality into account.
3. The revitalisation of worship and a recovery of the joys and demands of discipleship and being-in-community will be integral, not incidental, to the revitalisation of the Church’s mission. Thus understood, mission is not only about what we do; more importantly, it’s about who we are (in Christ). The term “missional church” is bandied about a lot, but this is what those who originated the term understood it to be about: a re-imagining of what it means to be the church of Christ in our new missional context, in which engaging in worship, studying scripture, prayer, conversation and hospitality are central elements.

The revitalisation of worship will involve more than making it inter-generational and user-friendly; it will involve a recovery of biblical patterns and principles, and allowing these to shape and inform our contextual practices.

Underpinning the above will be some guiding principles, which could be expressed in the following terms:

1. The triune God is the agent of mission and transformation, not the Church.
2. The future of the Presbyterian Church will rely as much on our willingness to be re-evangelised with the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it will on our appropriation of organisational principles and church growth strategies.
3. Decisions that are informed by the logic of the cross may not be the same as those that are informed by sociological projections and cost-benefit analyses.
4. *The Missio Dei* is as messy and unpredictable as it is expansive. Strategic thinking must be harnessed to prayerful discernment lest we fail to hear what the Spirit is saying to us.
5. Reforming and renewing the Church for mission should not be reduced to an endless diet of change and innovation.

Faithfulness - a parable

Ray Coster, Moderator, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand

If there was one simple recipe for turning churches around in the western world, the person who discovered it would soon be a millionaire. Church life is complex and can be difficult in some contexts, but it is also very rewarding. Having been involved in parish ministry now for almost 36 years I know the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows, the success and failures of trying to turn a church around. It is not easy, but it can, and does happen. Rather than list a number of lessons that I have learnt, or examples that I have experienced in my Press Go work, let me simply share a little story that came across my desk recently. Maybe it will speak to you as it did to me.

“A successful business owner was growing old. He knew it was time to choose a successor to take over his business. Instead of choosing one of his directors or his children, he decided to do something different. He called all the young executives in his company together.

He said, ‘It is time for me to step down and choose the next CEO. I have decided to choose one of you. I am giving each of you a special seed today. I want you to plant the seed, water it, and come back here one year from today with what you have grown from the seed I have given you. I will then judge the plants that you bring, and the one I choose will be the next CEO.’

Jim bought all the necessary ingredients for the seed to grow and planted the seed. Every day, he would water it. After about three weeks, some of the other executives began to talk about their seeds. Their seeds were turning into plants.

Jim kept checking his seed, but nothing ever grew. Six months went by but still nothing in Jim’s pot. Everyone else had trees and tall plants. Jim didn’t say anything to his colleagues. He just kept watering and fertilizing the soil.

A year went by and the young executives of the company brought their plants to the owner for inspection. When Jim arrived, he was amazed at the variety of plants grown by the other executives. Jim put his empty pot on the floor and many of his colleagues laughed.

When the owner arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted his young executives. ‘My, what great plants, trees and flowers you have grown. Today one of you will be appointed the next CEO!’ Then he spotted Jim at the back of the room with his empty pot. Jim was terrified. The owner asked him what had happened to his seed. Jim told him the story.

The owner asked everyone to sit down except Jim. He looked at Jim, and then announced to the young executives, ‘Behold your next Chief Executive Officer! His name is Jim!’ Jim was shocked.

‘How could he be the new CEO?’ the others said. The owner replied, ‘One year ago, I gave everyone in this room a seed. I told you to take the seed, plant it, water it, and bring it back to me today. But I gave you all boiled seeds that were dead. It was not possible for them to grow.

All of you, except Jim, have brought me trees and plants and flowers. When you found that the seed would not grow, you substituted another seed for the one I gave you. Jim was the only one with the courage and honesty to bring me a pot with my seed in it. Therefore, he is the one who will be the new Chief Executive Officer!’ “

Jesus did that too. He didn’t choose his board of directors (disciples) on their skills. He chose them on character. Then he spent more than three years on developing their skills. It sounds old fashioned, but it works. In seeking to turn a church around it’s very tempting to try to impress people with all the latest ideas so that we feel we are being relevant to the community around us. But sometimes it’s all about the simple things like integrity, character, warmth, love... Early in his ministry Jesus faced what we sometimes call “the temptations”. Turn stones into bread, jump off the temple wall, and worship Satan. I see these as temptations to be relevant in drawing people to himself. Feed the hungry! Use your divine power to impress people! Go the way of the world! To all these things he said “No!” It is far better to be faithful in our Christian walk than to be relevant.

Triumphs, jet planes and empty tombs

Martin Baker, Assembly Executive Secretary

It's a strange thing to turn up at the gate at Dunedin airport to board the jet to Wellington and be confronted by a Police officer waiting by the metal detector holstering his 9mm Glock. The woman in front of me surrendered her nail scissors to the security team. Once on-board the plane, there was the message about the correct brace position, the insistence to switch off cell phones and instruction about where to find life jackets and oxygen masks.

I wonder what would someone have to do to get shot, at Gate 3? Would yelling in some foreign (perhaps more guttural?) language while waving a knitting needle overhead be enough? What terrible destruction could be wrought with a pair of nail scissors on board a flight; and would an accidental call on my mobile really bring down flight 450 bound for Wellington? Would the brace position save me? And why does no one seem to worry about these safety and security concerns when you go on a plane with propellers? Do terrorists prefer jets? Doesn't anyone realise that an ATR regional airliner could do some damage? But I keep my thoughts to myself lest my words brand me as some arrestable character.

My most recent bit of excitement on a flight came a few weeks ago when a dark-suited business type refused to switch off his headphones before we landed. He insisted that they posed no risk to aircraft safety and even produced the manual to prove it. He resisted the crew's pleadings and threats. I had always wondered what would happen if someone did that. Sure enough the Police were waiting when we landed and he was arrested and taken off the plane. Fascinating, but also strangely disturbing.

"I am realising that risk assessment has levels to it I had never considered before."

Will there ever come a day when the metal detectors will be removed, and the armed airport police find something better to do? Will they ever stop bothering to tell us that our laptops and mp3 players may interfere with the aircraft's navigation systems? (Just follow the coast up to Wellington, and remember to turn slightly left where there is a break in the land, you can't miss it, would be my advice to a confused navigator.)

This seems to be one of those roads where there is no turning back. What needs to happen for us to allow for the fact that a threat has now past, or a danger is no longer present? When can we allow for a diminishment in our risk assessment or even permit things to become less safe?

I have sky-dived, owned a Triumph thunderbird, (not to be confused with the American muscle car of the same name – though I would not mind having one of those one day); tramped for weeks alone in the Himalayas; hunted with a Lee-Enfield; and come under Katusha rocket attacks as a kibbutz volunteer in the early 80s war zone that was northern Israel. And other things I can't mention here. I, and others of my age, bore those we love by repeating stories, forgetting who we have told about our adventures as bullet proof and immortal young people. And now perhaps I would not want my own children to do any of these things.

With the calls I am getting at the moment, and in the conversations I am having as we run risk management and ethics workshops, I am realising that risk assessment has levels to it I had never considered before.

When people tell me that their unsafe churches have stood the test of time and pose no risk, I wonder if they have considered the opposite possibility: that they in fact have risked many of their congregation's and community's resources in the upkeep of facilities that have long past their use by date as a fitting place to centre the worshipping life and mission of their congregation. That plans to invest more of their congregation's savings in order to fix a building actually represent a huge risk for the congregation's future mission and ministry. How do we engage with the possibility that our attempts to preserve the status quo may be the highest risk option of all?

“How do we engage with the possibility that our attempts to preserve the status quo may be the highest risk option of all?”

Don't be afraid, Mary. Don't be afraid you empty tomb visitors. I guess it is no surprise that the beginnings and ends of the Gospel stories are questions and assurances around the threat of fear. I find that the question of “what are you afraid of?” is a pretty good way into a discussion with that group faced with the need to change.

I imagine that everyone has their favourite bits in the Bible, but I really like it when we are told that love casts out fear. I don't know exactly what that means, but I know that it means a lot.

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Richard Holloway, Leaving Alexandria: A Memoir of Faith and Doubt

Reviewed by Hilary Smith, Nelson/Marlborough Presbytery

(Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2012). ISBN 978 0 085786 073 6; 358pp; \$40.

Richard Holloway's best-selling book is an evocative and searching tale of his religious life. It is heartfelt and, at times, painfully self-critical. It is a melancholy song.

Holloway's beginnings were modest – he was born into a Scottish working class family in Alexandria, north of Glasgow. While visiting his cousin Mary one day, the rector of St Mungo's Episcopal Church came to call. The young Holloway was asked to sing in the church choir. "I was looking for transcendence", he writes, and "a sense of presence, beyond any knowing ... I turned up ... and fell in love ... with a place that suggested elsewhere. It hinted at a distant gate, slightly ajar ... drawing me into the possibility of something else. And the compelling mystery of it all came with proud claims as to its efficacy and meaning" (p. 41, 43).

This is a remarkably honest, if unsettling, book which raises profound questions about the Church as an institution and the theology and praxis of the Christian religion."

Sent to Kelham Hall, Nottinghamshire, a seminary which trained uneducated boys for the priesthood, Holloway learnt that he would have to sacrifice his own will and submit it to the will of God if he wanted to become a priest in the church. He realised that with his "duality of being", he would find that difficult.

After Kelham, he worked as personal assistant to the Bishop of Accra, West Africa. It was a life-changing time. He writes:

"I finally lost the direction I thought my life was supposed to take. It was there I said 'No' to the great demand, there I realised what a disappointment I must be to God ... It's hard when you discover that the person you are is not someone you admire; not the person you want to be; not cut out to be a saint ... The biggest discovery was that there was a world outside religion. I had been so intent on following God that I had paid little attention to the world he was supposed to love."

In the hot soil of Africa, the seeds of his future ministry were sown. Later, ordained to a curacy in Gorbals, one of Glasgow's poorest areas, Holloway found another Jesus, not "the celibate abandoning himself to the loneliness of the night of God", but rather, a prophetic Jesus. With his "unquiet heart", Holloway was troubled by the "morality policing aspect of religion" and many of the rules of the institutional Church. He writes:

"Religions imagine their rules and regulations ... have immutable transcendental authority behind them, a delusion Jesus challenged. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" ... Jesus' saying fixes the status of all institutional rules as useful but never absolute."

Holloway had found his prophetic voice.

Following an appointment at Old St. Paul's, Edinburgh, he became rector of the Church of the Advent, Boston, USA. In the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic swept the world and in a religious climate, he argues, which was mostly cruel and hateful to gay men, Holloway's Anglo-Catholic church was a place of acceptance for those who weren't welcome elsewhere:

"They were never going to qualify for entrance into the members' enclosure of the more respectable religions... They informed the tradition with their own experience of the search for acceptance, which is why the churches they served often became havens for the people who would not have survived in the thinner atmosphere of congregations of the disciplined and the good. In a world that judged and outlawed them, it was a relief to find communities that did not make them feel bad about themselves. That tenderness towards human frailty meant that other outsiders were drawn in. It was gay priests who helped me understand that not everything can be fixed and some things just have to be lived with."

After leaving America for an appointment in Oxford, Holloway eventually returned to Scotland and was elected Bishop of Edinburgh. There he found many churches supporting people with HIV-AIDS in imaginative ways. Reminded of Camus' words, he applied them to the Church, "there are more things to admire in the Church than to despise". Yet it was the "scary voices" of absolute conviction and hard-edged certainty from within the Church that most people heard. Elected Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, Holloway continued to question key aspects of Christian moral tradition in a series of books and lectures which gained both affirmation and criticism from within and outside the Church.

In the last two compelling chapters of the book, Holloway recounts in some detail the events leading to his disillusionment of the Church: the debates of the Lambeth Conferences of 1988 and 1998. The first on the ordination of women to the priesthood; the second, the refusal to legitimise the blessing of same-sex unions or the ordination of homosexuals to the priesthood. The tone of this debate was such that Holloway felt "there was a profound sickness at the heart of so-called biblical morality, if it could lead to such hatred and cruelty". Saddened and disgusted, Holloway symbolically threw his mitre into the Thames and two years later he resigned, preaching his last sermon in Old Saint Pauls, Edinburgh.

In his poetic and poignant Epilogue, he concludes his spiritual journey thus far:

"I don't any longer believe in religion, but I want it around: weakened, bruised and bemused, less sure of itself and purged of everything except the miracle of pity... I no longer want to persuade anyone to believe anything – except that cruelty, especially theological cruelty, has to be opposed, if necessary to the death."

This is a remarkably honest, if unsettling, book which raises profound questions about the Church as an institution and the theology and praxis of the Christian religion. All clergy, whatever their denomination, should read it. The last words of this review I leave to the man himself:

"I am tugged still by the possibility of the transcendent. But only whispers and tugs; ... Religion's insecurity makes it shout not whisper, strike with the fist in the face not tug gently with the fingers on the sleeve. Yet, beneath the shouting and the striking, the whisper can sometimes be heard. And from a great way off the tiny figure of Jesus can be seen on the seashore, kindling a fire."