

Past Moderators address: Very Rev Andrew Norton

E tā te Atua i hangā, tēnei te mihi !

E ngā mana, e ngā reo ! Tēnei te mihi !

No reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa.

It has been a huge honor and privilege to serve the PCANZ as Moderator over the past two years.

I have experienced the wonderful diversity of our Church and the ways God is at work in our communities of faith throughout the country.

I have felt the weight of office; the deep pain of division and our woundedness.

Today I express my thanks . . .

To Sue, I would not have done this if not for her encouragement and support.

To the community of faith at St Columba at Botany Downs, it is your vision, generosity and commitment that has enabled me to do what I have done and for that I say THANK YOU!

While there is no recognition of the role of Moderator as a full time position, it was St Columba who took the initiative to release me full time for this task, they willingly released me and paid the difference to make that happen.

I've had a fantastic support team who have made me look good, Debbie my PA, Margaret for the web page, Liz and my supervision team for listening to my rants and raves and family and friends who have cheered me on. You have all been truly amazing!

To the PCANZ, thank you for your encouragement and confidence in me during the past two years. Thank you to the presbyteries, parishes, Church Schools and Presbyterian Support for your welcome and our exploration of how we could do and be church together.

Thank you to Malcolm, Jill, Lisa, Steve, Mark, Geoff, Kevin, Kyoung, Angela, Jose, Phil, Matt, Gordon, Sharon, Brendon, Katrina, Margaret, Pat, Kos and Wayne we've been a wonderful team.

It has been a privilege to serve the Church in the capacity of Moderator. Thank you for the welcome, hospitality and grace with which you have received me and for the dedication and faithfulness of churches up and down the country I have visited.

I want to draw your attention to my White Paper; *It's a matter of Faith* and the follow-up *Green Papers*. If you haven't already engaged with these, I recommend you do as they contain some of our key conversations going forward as a Church.

In these few moments at the conclusion of my term as Moderator I'd like to share with you a way of being hope.

Gates of hope

By Victoria Safford.

*Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope—
Not the prudent gates of Optimism,
Which are somewhat narrower.
Not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
Nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness,
Which creak on shrill and angry hinges
(People cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through)
Nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of
“Everything is gonna’ be all right.”
But a different, sometimes lonely place,
The place of truth-telling,
About your own soul first of all and its condition.
The place of resistance and defiance,
The piece of ground from which you see the world
Both as it is and as it could be
As it will be;
The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,
But the joy of the struggle.
And we stand there, beckoning and calling,
Telling people what we are seeing
Asking people what they see.*

If only we could see ourselves?

I see . . .

*The prudent gates of Optimism,
The boring gates of Common Sense; (of process, structure and restructure)
The strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges
The cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna’ be all right.”*

I also see . . .

the bitter and cynical gates now bolted fast and wrapped with barbed wire.
The tired gates that have all be but forgotten how to swing and sing.
The broken gates once portals of new life now leading nowhere.

No matter how we try to arrange or rearrange the pews of the PCANZ nothing will change the reality of 50 per cent (11,000) of our members being over 65 years. These are the wonderful saints of the PCANZ who provide our main resource of giving and volunteering yet in 10 years time these people will be in a very different stage of life and many of them will no longer be with us.

We have done no modelling on how this will impact our way of being and doing church yet it takes very little imagination to project forward 10 years and say we will be a vastly different kind of Church than we are today.

So where are the signs and voices of hope?

To find hope **we must let go of our desire for certainty and venture into the land of terra incognito- the unknown land.**

Hope comes from rejecting easy answers and finding ease with our own hopelessness, *it is grounded in reality, resistant and defiant.*

Hope comes from. . . *A place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but the joy of the struggle.*

It is inviting people into a courageous conversation about their own soul first of all and its condition.

This kind of hope will beak your heart open
and we stand there, *beckoning and calling,*
Telling people what you are seeing
And asking them what they see?

When people ask me for the signs of hope I don't think this is what they are wanting to hear.

People are looking for a new program, a mission strategy or a cut and paste template but most of all, they asking for a hope that is cheap and requires only others to do the changing.

In my *Green Papers*, I quoted a line from a song by Carrie Newcommer, "*from the muddy ground there emerged a green volunteer*".

This is where I believe we will find hope
but are you willing to get your hands dirty,
are you ready to have your heart broken open
and live in a place where your vulnerability before God and others
is all you hold in your hands?

This is where we will find HOPE!

Hope is a conversation beyond our debates. There is no life when we take sides, where we assume the lowest motivation of the other and live in fear, suspicion and mistrust.

To the skeptics among us of ever finding a "third" way, I agree there is no middle way of compromise which makes all of us smaller but there is a **higher way**, marked by an ennobled conversation transforming all of us to be our best selves, scared with wounds of Christ and yet healed within redemptive community of grace and truth. This is what hope is; it is not a debate that wins by a majority. It is a spacious and gracious conversation that holds all of us together as one in Christ, it is changing the way we do life together, our talking to one another and eating together.

Hope is a path of vulnerability as is the courage to walk it.

I find hope in Te Aka Puaho, not in their strength but in their weakness and in their willingness to gift us with Te kanga.

I find hope at te Maungarongo where we had a hui on diversity, not because we came up with a pronouncement that will solve our divisions but because we listened deeply to one another.

I find hope in Kids Friendly, Connect and Going further, not because they run great programmes but because they lament their place within the Church.

I find hope in the new seedlings of KCML, not because they have a tried and true formula for turning the church around but because they have a **hunch** God is calling something new into existence.

A hunch; hope is a hunch!

I find hope in congregations and presbyteries where they admit it is no longer working and they need to let go of a lot of stuff before they can take the next step into the unknown.

I find hope when we stop quoting the Book of Order at each other and listen to the wind of the Spirit of God.

I find hope in the muddied ground for there will emerge a green volunteer.

"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." John 12:24

My caution to this General Assembly . . .
Hope cannot be rushed and thereby accept

. . . prudent gates of optimism.

Which are somewhat narrower.

*Not the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense;
Nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness,
Which creak on shrill and angry hinges.
Nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of
"Everything is gonna' be all right.*

No!

Hope in this form is a misguided belief that we can tinker with this system to give it a few more years; oil the creaking hinges or a patch up job as Jesus refers to . . .

"Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved." Matt 9:17

We are coming to the end of one season and as hard as it is, we have to let go.

In the words of T.S Eliot:

"And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."

We no longer hold pride and place in our society.

Over the past three years we have been declining by 750 people per year.

We will be closing more churches and we will not be able to supply and fund ministry as we once did.

With the ever increasing cost of compliance alone to meet the requirements of New Zealand law and to operate according to our own regulations we will not be able to continue the way we are now.

Maybe, our real hope comes in our hopelessness,
by letting go,
by lamenting,

*By . . . glimpsing not only struggle,
but the joy of the struggle.*

The best evidence of this is in the changing seasons,
a continual process of life and death, of re-formation.

Hope is found in the passing of the seasons as each season does its unique work.

I wrote this poem as a reflection on my own seasons but as I read it
Listen for what season you may be in,
listen for the season of the church?

SEASONS

For the last couple of years
I've been wearing a watch with no numbers.
For me, the time is always now.

Each day I check my calendar to see what day it is,
it is always today.
The numbers of days labour with words
but the seasons wait in silence for a listening
beyond the noisy centre;
a conversation not shouting to be heard.

Looking out the window
I see the last of the Japanese maple leaves holding tight,
refusing to let go
of the changing season.

Endings are announced within the brilliance of gold and crimson;
a signature of beauty to a season past.
The signs were there all along but I refused to let go
of this glorious ending.

There was no eulogy or mournful song
as the last leaf fell dead to the ground.
In silence the soul waits with no respect for time.
I entered the darkness
so it too could become my friend.

Somehow, in a grace not of my own, there is an opening,
a spaciousness to which I'm invited.
The mute sings a song of joy as light breaks the fast of darkness.
I hesitate: can I give myself fully to this opening?
Knowing if I did, I could not remain the same.

To whom or what shall I make of this return?
Extravagance is empty if not for another,
a path of plentitude
a harvest of grace
a grateful heart
silent
broken
open
and shared.

Grace and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Nga mihi nui.

- Very Rev Andrew Norton