

Candour



Presbyterian Church
of Aotearoa New Zealand

NEWS AND VIEWS FOR MINISTERS

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Downward Mobility



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Contents

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Contributions

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

The editor on (04) 801-6000 or candour@presbyterian.org.nz

Advertising

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The next deadline (for the November issue) is Monday, 31 October.

The theme will be:
Finding the DNA of a parish.

Cover image

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Correction: Thanks to John D'Audney who pointed out that the verse of "All Along the Watchtower" quoted in the editorial of the September edition of *Candour*, was in fact by Irish band, U2 (from an 11 November 1987 live recording that appears on their CD *Rattle and Hum*), rather than the Bob Dylan original.

GUEST EDITORIAL

Allister Lane..... 3

ESSAYS

Some simplistic observations on our4
common heritage in its twilight years from
a would-be neo-monastic *Bruce Hamill*

Church growth rhetoric: is bigger6
always better? *Kevin Ward*

Living simply vs consumerism: our9
society in light of the Gospel *Stuart Simpson*

REVIEWS

Recollections and Reflections by.....13
Skoki Coe – Reviewed by Stuart Vogel

The Wisdom of the Seasons: how the.....14
Church year helps us understand our
congregational stories by Charles
M. Olsen – Reviewed by Graeme Ferguson

AES COLUMN

Martin Baker..... 16

Glen Innis

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Think what you had for breakfast this morning

Allister Lane, St John's in the City, Wellington

Very likely you do not produce the food yourself. Like me, you probably bought it at the supermarket.

Using this VERY simple analysis, we would have to conclude that we are more used to being *consumers* than *producers*.

Identifying ourselves as consumers in this way does not seem very spiritually sinister. Does the identity of a consumer inevitably carry us toward the inescapable peril of total obliteration by a consumer culture? Does a complicit attitude in a free market economy guarantee we will eventually be consumed by a consumer culture?

No doubt we are more likely to consider *consumer* to be an economic identifier, but it could also be a theological identifier. We are consumers of the body and blood of Christ – we are sustained in our faith by this consumption.

In a profoundly counter-cultural way this “communion consumption” is not a self-indulgent greediness but is the sign of a humanity set free for sharing and serving. In fact, we are not only sustained, we are transformed. By consuming the bread and the juice of communion a new “species” of humanity is created; what Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, calls *homo eucharisticus*.

Ministers of Word and Sacrament have the responsibility to preside at this sacrament of consumption, ensuring the church community remain faithful to the apostolic witness.

In a magazine about ministry, we should ask what an identity as consumers and as leaders of communities gathered around a sacrament of consumption means for the role of the minister.

The reality is that many ministers feel the temptation and pressure that comes from living in a consumer culture.

The temptation can be to capitulate to the pervading obsession with growth, perhaps expressed most unashamedly as the demand for constant economic growth – without which (we are told) consumers will die! Giving in to the temptation to pursue unrestrained growth will at best neglect the Gospel, at worst misrepresent the Gospel.

As well as temptation, ministers feel the pressure of a consumer culture from our church communities seeking growth through our ministry. The CEO model of ordained ministry implicitly judges a minister’s performance by growing congregational numbers – or, at least, bucking the trend of decline. The implications of such pressure can be subtle and spiritually poisonous.

So how can we unwrap ourselves from consumer culture?

Maybe this is a futile goal. Like living amid any culture we find ourselves influenced. The goal is to stay away from corruption by the culture and stay faithful to the Gospel, as well as engaged enough in the culture to meaningfully share the Gospel which critiques and shapes a culture toward the Kingdom of God.

However, given the temptations and pressures of consumer culture, what will help us remain faithful to our baptism and our call to ministry?

I would suggest a robust awareness of our identity; our identity in Jesus Christ.

The Good News, of course, is that this identity is not one we have to manufacture, but is an identity given to us in grace. Our identity as the species *homo eucharisticus* is gifted to us again every time we consume the body and blood of Christ.

We are grateful for the contributions to this issue of *Candour* as they help us reflect on the sometimes subtle pressures of a consumer culture and encourage us all to draw on the collegial network we are part of as we seek to remain faithful in our ministry.

P.S. We actually have four chickens – so, when I have scrambled eggs for breakfast, I feel like I come pretty close to avoiding consumer culture (for the first half-hour of the day anyway!)

The Rev Allister Lane is minister at St John's in the City, Wellington, and has provided the guest editorial for this edition. He is on the Candour editorial committee.

Editor’s note: Candour extends thanks to those who have contributed to the discussion on Kupu Whakapono generated by our recent guest editorial on creeds and confessions of faith. As is our policy, Candour has published views from both sides of the conversation on this matter.

We welcome responses to published articles, and these can be sent to candour@presbyterian.org.nz

Some simplistic observations on our common heritage in its twilight years from a would-be neo-monastic

Bruce Hamill, Coastal Unity, Southern Presbyteriany

In all of this brave talk about the missional church there has not been much talk of what went wrong. Recently I've been writing and speaking a lot about Christendom as the major mistake. Here I want to offer some (hopefully) provocative potted comments on the western Protestant Christianity I have experienced from later in the 20th century till today.

In my experience in the Presbyterian Church we tend to group ourselves loosely (and with a bit of argy bargy) into three or four categories of church, each of which has its own particular contribution to offer. Here is how I would list them and what they offer:

TYPE	CONTRIBUTION	ICONIC MOMENT
Traditionalist	a social life – “the church family”	Bible class socials
Evangelical	an intellectual system – “we know what we believe”	Billy Graham crusade
Charismatic	an emotional worship event and outlet	Healing services

- liberalism tends to hide under the umbrella of traditionalism
- all types come with a side-serving of moral exhortation
- hipsters and ministers tend to think they're above all this and have taken the best of each tradition

Now clearly this is not all that these categories of church offer, however this oversimplification arguably captures something of their distinguishing characteristics, even if they morph into one another over time and overlap at certain points.

However, I highlight them not to notice what they each contribute out of their diversity, but to indicate what they have in common, and more specifically how they all demonstrate a common blind spot of the 20th century western church. What I think they fail to offer is an alternative way of life to that of the wider society, which, in the 20th century has been predominantly characterised by:

- militarism
- individualism
- consumerism.

In response to these key social phenomena the Church has not demonstrated any significant alternative. In contrast to militarism, I see little significant pacifism. In contrast to individualism I see few significant embodiments of common life. In contrast to consumerism I see few significant practices of sustainable simplicity.


In fact I suspect we've forgotten that that's what the Church is supposed to be – a significantly different *social* phenomenon. We think of it instead as an agency that puts on church services and provides other commodities. In fact, we have found ways of fitting into this culture and making our religion a commodity for its citizens (ourselves and those we would like to convert). With the interesting exception of emerging neo-monasticism, Christianity has offered something for the private lives of our new global empire, but not much of a concrete witness to that empire.

As a result, when we think about communicating Christ to the world, what do we think of doing? We imagine either (a) taking them along to our church family for friendship (traditionalism), (b) persuading them about Christianity so they'll "believe in Jesus" (evangelicalism), or (c) taking them along to a highly-charged worship event (charismatic).

Of course, none of these things are necessarily bad in themselves, but what about the crucial witness of our *life together*? What about the social form of the life and death of Jesus? The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand has certainly developed a richer understanding of what it means to communicate Christ to the world than the default modes suggested above, however, at the 2004 General Assembly I sought leave of the Assembly to modify its wonderful statement about its mission "to make Jesus Christ known". In particular I sought the addition of a sixth face of mission "through embodying a new life together". The motion was lost. It seemed to me at the time to be a clear sign of a blind spot in our tradition.

"All are welcome!" we say. "We want to include people of all kinds," we say. But what are we welcoming them to and including them in? Is it a spiritual "gift shop" where all the products are free, or a shared lifestyle which might cost them (and us) everything they have and hold dear?

I suspect it won't be the cost of buildings or ministers that will be the biggest barrier to the future of the Presbyterian Church... it will be the cost of discipleship.

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Church growth rhetoric: is bigger always better?

Kevin Ward, Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership, Dunedin

If you ask almost any church leader about how their church is going, it is most likely the response will be given in numbers of some kind: the numbers at worship on Sunday, growth in membership, or how many new Christians they have seen in the past year. It is a cause for reflection that this kind of response would only have been given over the past century or so (perhaps even half century).

For most of its history the question church leaders were more concerned with was what made a true church or a faithful church – a church that bore authentic witness to the Gospel. We find this the constant concern of Paul in his letters. The early church gave its answer in the creeds as when the church is “one, holy, catholic” and “apostolic”. During the Protestant Reformation the reformers, sure that the Roman Catholic Church was no longer this, added that it is where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. As the Protestant movement fragmented, other defining characteristics were given by different groups, but still seeking to answer the question of what was true of a faithful church.

A different understanding of the church developed as Christianity moved from what had become its homeland in Europe, to North America. With the gradual abolition of state churches came the development of the new form of the denominational church. And along with that came the understanding and legal definition of the church as a voluntary association of like minded individuals. Church was sometimes seen not as a unity or communal body, but a collection of individuals coming together for their mutual benefit. Within this there was a much greater focus on the local and the congregation, than the wider connexional church.

These forms developed within an open market place and led inevitably to a more competitive attitude to church life, and a greater focus on winning people to their church. In the 20th century, with its increasing individualism and consumerist approach to life, churches came to be seen more and more as vendors of religious goods and services. It is in this more open and market oriented context that the church growth movement developed and began to ask fundamentally different questions about the nature of church life. Very few people now talk about the nature of the church. Instead of asking “What are the marks of a true or faithful church?” it became about asking, “What are the marks of a successful church, or a growing church?”

It needs to be recognised that the church growth movement developed during the 1960s and 1970s in a time of considerable pessimism about the future of the church, when attendance and membership had plummeted. It sought to develop scientific principles to reverse this trend.

The church growth movement’s focus was on factors within the life of a church that could be altered to make it more effective and so grow. The emphasis of the movement has reinforced the notion that numerical growth is the pre-eminent measure of success of a church. The assumption has been made that a church growing numerically is also likely to be one that is effective and developing in other aspects as well.

Further, the concepts of growth and effectiveness have often been equated with size; big churches must be growing churches and they are therefore effective. Consequently by examining the characteristics of growing churches – which are usually large churches – it is assumed the factors that contribute to this success can be determined. This is the basis of the church growth literature.

I do not want to completely bag the whole notion of growth as something we should be concerned about as we seek to be more faithful ministers of the Gospel and leaders of the church, at both a local and national level. However, I have become more and more convinced that it is not what our focus should be. Growth, if it does come, is like many of the best things in life, a by-product of a focus on other more important, and I might add “eternal” qualities. The difficulty is that these eternal qualities are often difficult to assess, and in an age that wants to assess, measure and quantify everything, they tend to be placed off the radar.

There has, though, been a shift in language as a consequence of the criticisms that have been made of the growth emphasis and focus on numbers. Discussion has moved away from church growth to church health, partly promoted by the popularity of the *Natural Church Development* material. However one often gets the impression that with much of the literature that goes under the name of church health, the goal and criteria are still the same. All that has changed is the language and emphasis. A couple of Canadian researchers put it this way: "Much of the existing literature under the title of church health really deals with church growth. We have come to realize that church health and church growth are not the same thing. It is true though that healthy churches tend to grow as a consequence of what they offer their members."

So, having set that framework for the issue, I want to finish by making three important points.

Firstly, context is important in considering how faithful, and I might add effective, a church is being in its location. All of the church statistical data shows a significant relationship between the context a church is located in and the likelihood that it will have been experiencing growth or not. Research in the US, for example, shows that mega-churches exist almost invariably in upwardly mobile, relatively homogenous areas. An area with young families moving into it is a very different context for a church than an aging older suburb which is losing industry, commercial and retail facilities and schools. Likewise the decline and changing nature of rural populations needs to be taken into account and has, I believe, in fact impacted Presbyterian statistics more than any other church group in New Zealand.

I have been doing some work in rural Taranaki this year, and it has been very enlightening to see the effect of the changing nature of dairying on rural communities. Originally there were many small farms located nearby to a dairy factory and small trucks collected milk in cans; in the 60s, collection moved to tankers and larger more regional factories, and now there are large articulated tankers with trailers and a few super factories. On top of this has been increasing mechanisation on the farm itself and considerably fewer and larger farms. So for this reason it is important not to set an arbitrary figure of, say, 40 attending worship to measure whether a church should continue or not. I can see considerable merit in a figure like this in an urban or suburban context, but where this may be the only church for some distance, a church that remains somewhat below that may in fact be bearing faithful (and effective) witness to the Gospel. It does raise questions about how we can provide effective ministry for those kinds of churches.

My second reflection around growth comes in terms of the church size issue. Is bigger always better? Much of the church growth rhetoric seems to assume this. It develops its criteria from looking at churches which have grown to become large and then makes the assumption that if all churches followed these criteria they would also grow and become large. This is a quite fallacious argument.

First, it ignores the fact that, despite the rhetoric, the vast majority of those coming to these churches are people who have moved from other churches, and not people who have been evangelised and come to faith from outside of the church community. Thus while it may have led to the growth of some particular churches, it has not led to the growth of the Church overall, or the kingdom (reign) of God to look at the larger and even more significant picture. So, there is a declining percentage of church attenders in all Western countries, despite the growth of a good number of larger churches.

Secondly, it could be that in fact by now (we have had four decades of this kind of rhetoric) all those who want to go to large churches are in fact already going, and to close down smaller churches, as some within this school advocate, would simply lead to greater and faster decline in the Church overall.

Now, once again I am not waging a campaign against large churches. I have been involved in a variety of ways with (and still consider myself an honorary member of) one of the largest churches in New Zealand for all of my adult Christian life. Many play an important part in Christian witness to the Gospel and can do important things that smaller churches cannot do, although they may be able to if they were to genuinely learn to cooperate together and share resources (including ministry) instead of being preoccupied with their own patch. I believe we need a variety of church types, and size is one of those variables. However it is clear that sustaining a model of church life served by a full-time minister and possessing its own independent building is not really feasible with less than about 120 in regular attendance. So, looking at our understanding of and models for ministry, as well as rethinking how we use buildings, are important factors as we move forward.

My final consideration is the way in which a preoccupation with growth and size leads to a pragmatic approach to church life and ministry that can be quite destructive to what the church is actually here for. A church may grow and become large and visible, but it may no longer be a faithful witness, sign and foretaste of the Gospel. Bryan Stone writes that the prevailing models of evangelism fostered by a church growth focus are:

“...inadequate to the Christian faith, ecclesiologically bankrupt, morally vacuous and tyrannized by a means-end causality that is eschatologically hopeless insofar as it externalises the means from the end... Both the ‘end’ and the ‘means’ then tyrannize the church as it is forced to forget itself and the One whom it follows in the name of both the end and the means. In the process, the church’s fundamental calling to bear faithful witness is edged out in favour of what ‘works’.”

When this happens, the church ceases to be the church in any true sense of its calling and purpose.

An example of this is the current emphasis on culturally specific or niche marketed churches, seen for instance in some of the Fresh Expressions and Emerging Church approaches. This is a reworking of the old church growth homogenous unit principle that people like to come to faith without having to cross cultural or social barriers, so narrowing yourself to mission and ministry with people just like yourself is the best way to grow the church.

This focus was widely criticised when held in the spotlight of texts such as Ephesians 2, Galatians 3 and Romans 15, as well as the whole concern for justice in both Testaments. The Gospel is not just about our relationship with God being reconciled, but also about our relationships with people who are different from us, as we are all brought into the new community in Christ and the cultural and social barriers that separate us are broken down. As Gordon Fee puts it, “If I build a church of people just like me, how do I know the Gospel is working?” Culturally specific or niche churches are just one of many cases where a preoccupation with growth – where it becomes the end – corrupts the Gospel and the church.

Does growth matter? Yes, I think it is important, and I have sufficient faith in what God is about in the world, that if we focus on bearing faithful witness to that, then as the parables of the kingdom tell us, in God’s good time the growth will come and a great harvest will be in evidence. The challenge for us is to keep our focus on what really matters and trust in God and the Spirit for the outcome, rather than our own agendas and techniques.

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Living simply vs consumerism: our society in light of the Gospel

Stuart Simpson, St John's in the City, Wellington

I was presented with a number of topics and asked to choose one to write about for the latest *Candour*. Interestingly enough the first topic "living simply vs consumerism" had recently been talked about in St John's evening service.

Over the last few weeks a number of our young people have been involved in "living below the line", a new awareness and fundraising campaign organised by Global Poverty Project. It's making a huge difference in the fight against extreme poverty.

The Global Poverty Project says this: "Quite simply, it allows thousands of people in New Zealand to better understand the daily challenges faced by those trapped in the cycle of extreme poverty, and builds a movement of passionate people willing and able to make a meaningful difference for those who need it most. At the same time, we'll be fundraising for five different organisations that are fighting poverty in a myriad of different ways.

"The week of Live below the Line is a week like no other. For five days in August, thousands of people across New Zealand will spend just \$2.25 each day on food, and use their daily experiences to bring extreme poverty to the centre of conversation in homes and workplaces. We're all challenged; we struggled without caffeine, and have a faint feeling of being not quite full for the whole week. We pool money with housemates, colleagues or family to make that \$2.25 stretch just a little further.

The Global Poverty Project says this:
 "Quite simply, it allows thousands of people in New Zealand to better understand the daily challenges faced by those trapped in the cycle of extreme poverty..."

"We do all of this because while we choose to struggle to Live Below the Line for one week, there are 1.4 billion people who have no choice other than to do it every day."

As I said, a number of our young people were heavily involved in this fundraiser, however it became apparent that they were more than just physically challenged by lack of food.

One reflection was how, in having so little, the young people needed to rely on others to help them.

Another comment expressed how the group involved in the fundraiser had to share their food so that there was enough for everyone.

Still another participant commented on how much waste we make in a normal day.

Personally I know I waste a lot of things, often without thinking. I have become used to having what I want when I want it; it is almost an expectation on my part that I can have access to the fridge whenever I am hungry, a car with fuel at the ready whenever I need to travel, free time for hobbies and the simple pleasure of buying a book when I feel like it.

I'm not saying any of these things are bad, in and of themselves. Yet, have we ever really considered what we use and consume without thinking? Have we ever walked in the shoes of those who only live on \$2 a day, not for a few weeks, but for a lifetime? Have we ever had to go without water, electricity or food? Are we living lives of expectation? Do we expect to have everything we want,

when we want it? Many in Christchurch over the last year would have experienced first-hand the lack of what many of us take for granted.

Furthermore, do we ever consider how our expectations, our waste and our consumerist lifestyle impact others, ourselves and our relationship with God? Do we, as God's people, need to live and model simpler lives or is our consumerist lifestyle what is at the centre of the Gospel? The Gospel according to John says of Jesus, "I came so they could have life and have life abundantly." (John 10:10b)

I hope to at least answer some of these questions in this article, and if I don't, at least I will have given you cause to ponder.

In my time as a missionary in Madagascar I witnessed groups of people who had been indoctrinated through missionaries with French and English culture rather than by the Gospel. This may seem harsh and yet the primary Gospel message was "if you are a Christian you will sing the songs we sing, wear the clothes we wear and speak the languages we speak". Breaking this down even further, these Western cultures offered a vision of abundance, and because these cultures were seen as Christian cultures, Christianity and abundance became synonymous. Interestingly a synonym for abundance is great quantity, which is exactly what we live with in New Zealand.

While in Jamaica on a mission training course run by the Council for World Mission I was struck by how much the people had and yet didn't have.

While in Jamaica on a mission training course run by the Council for World Mission I was struck by how much the people had and yet didn't have. What I mean by this is that people struggled, although there seemed to be food everywhere, clean water and plenty of land, I remember asking a minister I was staying with, "Why is it that people live in makeshift homes in rough neighbourhoods and struggle to have enough to eat when there seems to be so much?" His answer surprised me: "Many people in Jamaica believe that they need to be like America to be happy. They move to Kingston to earn more money so they can build big homes and buy new cars and then find too many others have done the same thing. If they knew what they had and enjoyed what they had been given rather than trying to be something that they are not, Jamaica would be a different place altogether".

Many influences and models of life have caused us to believe that having more makes us happy. Buying more makes life worth living. The Gospel abundance that Jesus proclaims can even be twisted to fit our consumerist ideology: the theory that progressively greater consumption of goods is economically beneficial.

Beginning in the 1990s, the most frequent reason given for attending college had changed to making a lot of money, outranking reasons like becoming an authority in a field or helping others in difficulty. This correlates with the rise of materialism – specifically the technological aspect; the increasing prevalence of CD players, digital media, personal computers and cellular telephones. Madeline Levine in *Challenging the Culture of Affluence* criticised what she saw as a large change in American culture, "a shift away from values of community, spirituality, and integrity, and toward competition, materialism and disconnection".

Only a few nights ago as I was channel surfing I came across the programme, *The Biggest Loser*. What intrigued me the most was how it was possible that so many people were overweight. Some

of the contestants weighed up to 200kg. This programme has been going for 12 seasons and now there are various versions produced in Asia, Australia, Israel, Brazil, United Kingdom and Poland. New Zealand has still to produce such a programme. Why are there so many overweight people? Why has obesity become such a huge problem for most people living in developed countries? Today, 30 percent of children between the ages of 10 and 17 are obese and 60 percent of all adults are either overweight or obese.

There are a number of contributing factors, such as lifestyle changes and more sedentary jobs. However I believe one of the biggest contributing factors is that we have more than we need; we eat more than we should.

So, how do our expectations, our waste, and our consumerist lifestyles affect others, ourselves and our relationship with God?

A consumerist lifestyle affects others by:

- The overuse of water: global water consumption increased six fold over the last 100 years. It continues to grow even though more than one billion people worldwide still lack safe water; more than three million die every year from avoidable water-related diseases.¹
- New Zealand faces an increased demand for water for hydro-electricity generation, farming irrigation, recreational use and domestic supply.²
- Our over consumption causes others to lose out, for example our desire to have more chocolate, coffee and bio-fuels has seen an increased demand for palm oil and an increased work load for many who are already exhausted physically.
- The poor get poorer the rich get richer.

A consumerist lifestyle affects the individual by:

- Lifestyles become self-centred and selfish rather than selfless.
- Too much of a good thing can become harmful to our health. For a country that has so much, we have one of the highest rates of suicide in the Western world.
- Isolation: if we are able to have what we want when we want it, then we will have no need for a community where people rely on and support each other.

A consumerist lifestyle affects the relationship with God by:

- Causing us to ignore God's call for humankind to care for God's entire creation not to subject it to abuse. This disobedience destroys one of the fundamental reasons of our existence.
- In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus talks about the sheep and the goats he gives clear examples of what a person is to do if they say they follow him, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

How may this look in light of our consumerist culture? If we over eat in New Zealand are we taking away food that others may eat elsewhere?

Is our consumption of water causing others to go thirsty?

Is our buying of brand clothing causing those who put the garments together to become enslaved to unjust employers; employers who pay so little that the workers are unable to put clothes on their own backs?

Does our over consumption cause us to be more like goats (goats do eat everything by the way!)?

- If we continue to consume the way we are in New Zealand, then I believe we are failing to live the way of the Gospel, we are failing to understand what it means to love our neighbour; we are failing to fully grasp what Jesus meant in Luke 4:18-19, where he preaches in the synagogue:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

- If God’s people continue to over consume I believe that we would have succumbed to cultural and societal expectations rather than being a faith community that seeks to model God’s Kingdom.

So then, we’ve explored how living a consumerist and materialistic lifestyle can affect creation in many different ways. Therefore, does this mean we need to live more simple lifestyles? What are we now meant to do, if having so much is so bad?

First, we have to be careful we don’t throw the baby out with the bath water, where we find ourselves suddenly living monastic lifestyles. Libertarian critics of the anti-consumerist movement respond by saying that the movement is largely based on the perception that it leads to elitism. Twitchell, in his book *Living It Up*, sarcastically remarked that the logical outcome of the anti-consumerism movement would be a return to the sumptuary laws that existed in ancient Rome and during the Middle Ages, historical periods prior to the era of Karl Marx in the 19th century.

Therefore we need to make sure our response is not merely a reversal of what we have now.

Living simply, I believe, starts with the acceptance that we have and use too much.

Accepting this allows us to then ask the questions “Why do we have so much and how should we respond in light of Jesus’ command to love our neighbour as we love ourselves?” Loving our neighbour means more than pastoral care. It means more that intercessory prayer.

What it means is that we begin to live a life that somehow stems the flow of injustice: the injustice of poverty; the injustice of omission; the injustice of materialism; the injustice of abuse (which includes slavery and child labour); the injustice of waste, pollution and over consumption, just so we can fill our desires.

You may say “this is too big” however, before you decide that this is the case read these words by Friedrich Nietzsche:

“He who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying.”

Let’s not try to fly before we have learnt to stand. Let’s consider the food we eat and how much we eat. Let’s consider meeting more as a community and eating together. Let’s turn the tap off when we are brushing our teeth. Let’s car pool, cycle, or even walk. Let’s pool our resources together; share gardening tools; share our gifts and our expertise. Let’s be a louder voice and a community that models something other than consumerism and materialism.

Recollections and Reflections

By Skoki Coe

(2nd edition; Introduced and edited by Boris Anderson; New York/Tainan: The Rev Dr Skoki Coe's Memorial Fund/Formosan Christian for Self-Determination, 1991, 275pp)

Stuart Vogel, Northern Presbytery

Shoki Coe is not a name many Christians in New Zealand today will recognise. Nevertheless, Coe was one of the most influential world leaders in theological education in the mid- 20th century. He re-established Tainan Theological College in Taiwan (which had been closed for 14 years under Japanese colonial rule) as one of Asia's foremost colleges during the tense, repressive, white terror, post-war years of the Nationalist government under Chiang Kai Chek. Coe was later the director of what became the World Council of Churches' programme on theological education. He is the only person who has ever been elected twice to the position of Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan, and his commitment to Formosan Christians for self-determination continues to inspire Taiwanese believers.

The reflections in this book come from a crucial time in church history that is now passing from living memory. That distance in time and historical context makes Coe's recollections all more the more important because they bring alive some of the great figures and issues of the ecumenical movement of that period.

In the early 1950s, for example, DT Niles made a distinction between mission and evangelism which later came to be focussed in the World Council of Churches', *Commission on World Mission and Evangelism*. This distinction puzzled Coe. Was evangelism something that takes place in the Christian West and mission something done in the non-Christian East? Coe was a committed ecumenist and the movement that Niles started led to the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan adopting the successful *Double the Church Movement* between 1955 and 1965.

In 1971, Coe had a conversation with Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann warned that academic theology could become so contextualised in particular situations and times that the process of thinking theologically could become "fossilised". In these recollections, Coe reflects on how contextual theology can also easily become what he terms "chameleon theology"; that is, it can change colour according to the context. One of the values in this book is the way that Coe deals with the issues of text and context, and with those that pertain to the particular and the universal.

If theological education is to move forward in renewal and reform, it must accept what Coe called the "double wrestle"; that is, "wrestling with the text from which all texts are derived and to which they [all] point, in order to be faithful to the context; and wrestling with the context in which the text is at work, in order to be relevant to it." (p 268)

Contextuality is the missiological discernment of the sign of the times, seeing where God is at work and calling us to participate in the historical moment and assessing it in the light of the *missio dei*. Through this process, the dichotomy between theory and practice, words and action, classroom and street, is overcome. Coe is clear however, that this is a provisional, evolving process, moving from place to place, time to time, throughout Asia and the world. Christians are a pilgrim people always undertaking contextualising theology afresh.

Coe's life and ministry, however, were spent as a Taiwanese pastor banned from Taiwan for 22 years because of his stand on Taiwanese self-determination. The value of these reflections lies in their ability to evoke the sense of a Church under pressure – and the challenges and opportunities such pressure brings. The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979, for example, meant that the relationship between the United States of America and Taiwan was no longer one between governments, but between peoples. On one hand, Taiwan was politically isolated. On the other hand, however, a new opportunity was created for the Presbyterian Church. The strength of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) made it an alternative voice for the people of Taiwan. Coe's words reflected a huge opportunity and challenge for the PCT: "What a responsibility now to speak, not merely for itself, but for all and to speak of love and truth, with faith in Jesus Christ." (p 190)

By their very particularity in time and place, these reflections make us face the question of how we are doing as a pilgrim people, doing contextualising theology in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

The Wisdom of the Seasons: how the Church year helps us understand our congregational stories

By Charles Olsen

Graeme Ferguson, Northern Presbytery

Charles Olsen's book provides an engagingly wise guide for ways in which congregational stories can interact with the seasons of the Christian year to make spiritual sense of the ongoing life of the congregation.

He begins by outlining a three-fold rhythm of prayer as letting go, naming God's presence, and taking hold of life once more. He then suggests that this basic trinitarian triad is recapitulated in the segments of the worship hour in church, in the hours of the ordinary day, the days of the week and the seasons of the church's year. For example, when does the day start? How would it be if we begin with evening prayer – evening and morning, the first day – as we rest in God? We can then rise to share with God in the work of the day. We would then be moving from letting go in evening prayer to resting in the divine wisdom as we sleep, on to the active taking hold once more in the new day and go with God into its tasks, living alert to signs of God's continuing presence – one day.

Each season of the church's year has its own rhythm. We are free to see our own stories in relation to the larger narrative of the divine presence and activity. We rediscover the spiritual ground for the church's existence in the rhythm of the divine life lived out in the life stories of each congregation.

Olsen calls these rhythms "the waltz of the Gospel". Advent, Lent and pre-Pentecost are times of letting go in our yearning and waiting. Christmas, Easter and Pentecost name and celebrate God's presence. In Epiphany, Easter and the ordinary times of the Pentecost cycle we take hold of the Gospel by proclaiming and sending. "The journey of faith becomes a lilting waltz rather than a rigid march". Olsen writes with a limpid directness expressing spiritual wisdom in straightforward and unassuming ways.

His grasp of the movement within the trinity is also deeply engaging. He listens to the periods of waiting rather than rushing past into high celebration. When the high points come they have been prepared for and anticipated. People have taken time to work through the dark times, have let go of attempts to hide weakness and failure and have shed illusions. They are then free to know the inflowing presence of God in grief and weakness before they move out again. They have waited in prayer and stillness.

The second half of the book tells the stories of six congregations named Trinity. Each reflects the dynamic interaction between the Father who gives life, the Son who lives life, and the Spirit who handles the daily operations of life. Olsen listened to their stories through pain and weakness, conflict and disappointment, to renewed life. Each showed God's presence as giving, suffering and empowering in their stories. All that was needed was a wise commentator who could invite them to see their life within the life of God and discern the divine activity in their ongoing story. I am sure he is a superb facilitator. Even better, he is a spiritually-graced USA Presbyterian!

I am not sure when Olsen was in New Zealand. He speaks warmly of Michael Thawley's hospitality. They spoke together about the tension within the church where people had a myriad of distinct stories which could not be mutually acknowledged. Some were passionate about the divine justice and others yearned to share divine holiness. This conversation led Michael to learn from Walter Bruggemann how both streams were present in the biblical tradition and how each could bless the other in their one greater shared story. I wish I had met him then. He would have drawn together several elements I was looking for in order to understand the mission stories of the local congregation.

The Alban Institute has for many years been producing material researching the mission of the local congregation. It is committed to supporting people who are struggling to be faithful in ministry and witness. This book is a spiritually graced and practical contribution. It speaks out of a life lived deep in the life of the trinity, seen in local congregations who live out the rich rhythm of the Christian year from waiting to celebration, from crossing boundaries to life and death decisions, from the dance of victory to the everyday slog of putting one foot in front of the other. All the seasons of faith are lived within the divine self-giving and each celebrates God presence over, with, and within us. This is a deeply refreshing book to be read for your encouragement.

TAKE PART IN THE CHURCH LIFE SURVEY

What does the Church Life Survey offer your parish?

The Council of Assembly is offering to pay for any parish that wants to do the Church Life Survey. So why should your parish take up the offer?

This survey is quite unlike the dry statistics of headcounts we do in June. It is focused on the impressions and feelings of person in the pews and it asks questions about their views on a whole range of things in parish and wider life. Some examples are:

- What aspects of this church/parish do you personally most value?" and
- Which music do you find most helpful?
- Does this parish resource your spiritual journey? ... or have an effective mix in services? ... or have helpful preaching/teaching?
- Do you feel you have grown in your Christian faith this year?
- Do you feel the presence of God at work? ... at home? ... in nature?

The focus of the survey is to ask questions that could be useful to parish councils, both as a "temperature gauge" of where their people are at but also potentially as a way of knowing how the current parish programme could be made more useful. To help, once the parish has input the information from the survey through an easy-to-use website, the site will automatically generate a number of customised reports that can be downloaded for free (or sent for a small cost). It is the potential usefulness of the survey for supporting parish decision-making that was the most attractive feature for the Council of Assembly.

To participate, parishes must register individually through the survey website www.clnz.com. The survey forms will be sent out to your parish in late October, and the survey should be done in church (either during or immediately after the service) on a Sunday of your choice in November.

The Church Life Survey is organised every five years by an interdenominational committee (on which we are represented). The last time most Presbyterian parishes participated was ten years ago. The survey is anonymous, and the organisers have ensured appropriate confidentiality for the data. For further information on the survey, contact our Presbyterian representative on the committee Margaret Galt at mgalt@paradise.net.nz.

Learning new ways to learn

Martin Baker

A few years ago, during my ministry in Auckland, I entered a competition for admission to a training programme for copywriters. The course was sponsored by Auckland's main advertising agencies and provided an opportunity for participants to attend three months of training, after work, in the office of each of the agencies involved. I was, and am, fascinated by the way that words and images influence and change people's behaviours and thought that this would be an ideal way to develop some new skills.

People who wanted to attend the course had to write an ad for a somewhat obscure product, a marine anti-fouling agent. (the stuff you paint on the bottom of boats to prevent barnacles and other things growing on them). The product I developed was branded 'Kling-on Killer' and centred on narratives to do with *Star Trek* (yes, I know) and the then Federation's number one enemy, the Klingons.

I managed to get on the course and endured three months of unbridled, and usually a somewhat vicious critique, of every print, television and radio ad I attempted to script. Agencies work differently from churches. Their very existence depends on the ability of a team to create communications that directly influence the decisions of their target audience (or maybe there are some similarities?)

One of the things I think I learnt from the course, quite apart from copywriting, is how to personally engage in situations where your work comes under intense, and typically in the ad agency world, quite vitriolic scrutiny, without having your ego dismembered in some very unpleasant sort of way. Anyone who has worked as a creative in an ad agency knows what that is like. Perhaps it's not so different from the experience some of us may have had of attending a practical course on preaching.

A couple of weeks ago there was a feature article in the *New Zealand Listener* on the paradox of the importance of experiencing failure in order to grow and succeed. Failure forces us to reflect on our assumptions and inferences.

Chris Argyris, in an article he wrote for the *Harvard Business Review* 20 years ago, suggests that this is why smart people are often very poor learners. They haven't had the opportunity for introspection that failure affords. So for them, when something does not work out so well, they can be very defensive, and instead of examining their own behaviour, they cast blame outward – on anyone or anything they can.

It is almost painful to speak about the concept of failure in terms of ministry. I think our Church is blessed with wonderful ministers. Smart, faithful people with a passion for the Gospel. But some of my own friends and colleagues in ministry, whose preaching I have enjoyed, have watched as their congregations have shrunk to the point where their stipend could no longer be funded – or they have become disillusioned themselves with their own skills, gifts and calling and have moved into other jobs. I also note from our data that the number of ministers supported with stipends has dropped from around 420, 20 years ago, to just over 250 today.

Argyris suggests that while often the most able people profess to be open to critique and new learning, their actions suggest a very different set of governing values and betray a profoundly defensive posture: a need to avoid embarrassment, threat, or feeling of vulnerability and incompetence. He argues that we need to consciously learn how to learn by allowing for a more critical assessment of the assumptions supporting the decisions we make.

Surrounded by so many nice people in our congregations, it can be very difficult. But the blessing of a trusted elder or friend who can tell you that your sermons are not making sense, or that the way you conduct meetings is damaging or causing division, or even that it is time to move on, can, in my experience anyway, be a huge help to growth and learning.

Perhaps, also, we have faced the challenge of being the one at a session meeting who asks the basic questions of why we are doing what we are doing, or being a prophetic voice calling for change. Able groups, as well as able individuals, can find it just as difficult to provide the type of critical analysis that will lead to a new way of doing things.

In the preaching course I attended, the tutor told me that I had a 'rocking problem' and to imagine that both my feet were stapled to the floor. The horror was not in what he said, as embarrassing as that was, but in the realisation that over the years no one had said it to me before.

Thanks again for all you do for our Church and its mission

Martin