

# Talk to Synod April 2013

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As a newly ordained minister I sat with a group of faithful ladies who were closing down their branch of the APW. The discussion was largely about how the last of the funds should be dispersed. I mentioned that as a student I had received a gift of money from the APW towards my training and suggested we might donate some of the left over funds to the current ministry students for their text books. The 87 year old saint, who had been treasurer for the last 35 years, looked at me strangely, but the conversation moved on. Several minutes later she interrupted and explained how an incident with a comb and her hearing aid just prior to the meeting had left her a little deaf so could we explain again “what it was we were wanting to give the students?” Relief came over her face as we spoke in loud voices about a donation for text books for training ministers. It was at that point she turned to me and admitted “I thought you said we should give them sex books!”

Here was a meeting to close down a group that had been attended by faithful women for more than a century. Faith had grown through the friendships, fellowship and deep, thoughtful Bible studies. They had given thousands of dollars to the mission of God’s kingdom. Now here, after bearing so much fruit, a chapter was closing and yet there was still room for joy, celebration and laughter and hope for the future.

This has not been my only encounter with this plucky 87 year old Highlander supporter. In my first few weeks in the parish I had sat beside her after the service had finished. I was aware of the increasing noise as my children among others were playing tag around and over the pews. Fearing what this parishioner was thinking I was just about to speak to the children about “respecting where they were” when she touched my arm with her hand and said “Isn’t it wonderful to hear the sound of children in church!” My heart leapt as I quietly thanked God for this special lady.

This parishioner saw the gift of the church family gathering as an all-age community. She also saw the choice required for her and others. Children and youth bring with them noise, mess and unpredictable behaviour. Not too dissimilar to many adults. But they are also reminders of the life and joy and hope found in the one who tells us “let the little children come to me”.

Bruce has asked me to consider the question “What is my dream for the Church...?”, “If I was starting from scratch, what would I do?” This is a very big question and I am not sure I know what or how I would answer.

The truth is our church faces challenging times with declining numbers, less and less young families, young people and children attending, issues of older buildings requiring strengthening, rural and urban parishes becoming unable to raise a stipend and support a full-time minister.

In a recent conversation with someone about these issues they reminded me that looking to the future may involve innovative ways of **doing church**, but that much more importantly it requires a rethinking of what **being God's people** in our communities looks like.

What we do will never have the impact that how we live can. As a community called to reflect Christ and His love we are shaped by His life within us through the Spirit.

To think about Bruce's question about starting from scratch I wonder if we already have some ideas from Church history.

Acts 2:41-47 speaks of new beginnings for the people of God.

*“They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common....They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

The life and joy and hope these new communities offered caught people's attention. The Gospel message changed their hearts, drawing them in and together they grew to maturity in the faith.

How might these pictures of the early church speak to us today in our contexts?

Near Lawrence, up on the hill beside Gabriel's Gully are the remnants of a place called Bluespur. In the Goldrush heyday it was a thriving community. If you manage to find your way there now one of the few things you might find is an information board

commemorating the life that once existed there. You will read that the Presbyterian Church established itself there through a group of faithful believers who met regularly for worship. It was supported by what I would like to call “**horseback ministry**”. An ordained minister would regularly visit Bluespur and assist them in their worship. It was an innovative, pioneering community. Interestingly it was one of the first to have musical accompaniment for its worship when the Minister brought a piano accordion on the back of his horse. Perhaps horse riding and piano accordion playing should be added to the Knox curriculum. The noticeboard you will find lists off elders who regularly led services and opened the word to the people, some of these elders went on to become notable New Zealanders including members of parliament. They were leaders in church and the wider community. This horseback ministry saw an ordained clergy travelling to the community and assisting them with worship and ministry life rather than being the sole leader and pastoral caregiver. They were a priest but also a trainer of leaders. The minister travelled to the people and fed and nourished their growth.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul is the original “horseback minister”? Communities of faith were birthed, encouraged and grown by Paul’s travelling teaching ministry and then maintained and grown by those appointed and left behind. Paul maintained contact with these communities through his letters – encouraging, admonishing and reminding them of the non-negotiables of the Good News.

Paul left behind churches with Jesus at their centre who challenged and fostered faith in the communities where they were.

I wonder if this idea of horseback ministry might work again, at least in some areas. perhaps it already is in the form of LMT’s. Where it seems small rural parishes are in decline could new life and growth be spurred on by allowing small communities the opportunity to meet together for teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer. But rather than leaving them on their own could an ordained minister or suitably trained lay person visit to assist, train up and grow those who meet regularly. Elders need to be called and empowered to understand how to lead services of worship, how to grow those in their care, how to live as ambassadors for Christ in the communities they live in. This is not to do away with the

ordained minister but to develop them in a role of coach, mentor, quality controller as well as priest and teacher.

How these local worshipping communities might look will differ in each circumstance.

Our reading from Acts reminds us that it seems the early church developed much around hospitality, around food and sharing meals together.

There are many examples of faith communities in the Synod region where these values are held very strongly. How much of the success of programmes like Alpha is based around nice food and drink and being cared for? Does starting from scratch include remembering what it is to be a community that eats together? How much does the communion table remind us of this?

In the 1990's the people of Lawrence-Waitahuna Parish made a difficult decision to sell their existing church building. This was not appreciated by all, and it was a painful journey for some. A house just along the street was purchased and an octagonal sanctuary added to the existing building. Today our Sunday mornings feel like we are meeting in someone's home. There is a sense of family, of warmth and togetherness which is a great gift. It is a building space that is easy to heat and creates space for people to be together after the service. Do our buildings welcome and encourage others to come in?

Please hear me right. I am not advocating doing away with our old worship buildings. Each congregation needs to seek God's vision for their community and how they might serve the Lord best there. I think we need to be able to see both the great missional opportunity restoring old buildings may bring about but also let die what is simply being held on to because it has served us well in the past.

I recently heard of an example of "horseback ministry" that had taken place within the Anglican Church.

In this rural town the Anglican Church consisted of 4 members and the decision was made to close its doors. The vestments were sent over to the Pacific Islands and it would seem the presence of that denomination in that town had ceased. Those 4 remaining members

decided to meet at someone's house for prayer, to open the Bible and to sing a few hymns. They shared coffee afterwards.

A vicar from another town came and supported them as they met. The interesting thing is after 6 months they had 8 regular attenders in their home. After 12 months a meeting for attenders and interested people was held and 28 people turned up. That's an average Sunday for adult attenders at many Pressy churches.

However when the travelling vicar retired not long after, the group slowly lost momentum and disappeared. There seems to be some key role for the "horseback clergy" in assisting and fostering healthy life.

Paul remind the Church at Ephesus of this when he tells them *"It was Christ who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* Eph 4:11-13

How are we going at "building the body" and "preparing God's people for works of service"? There is certainly a great need for every one of our people to grow to maturity in the fullness of Christ. How might we help our congregations grow up?

In all honesty I am still thinking about that question of a vision for the future.

But in dreaming of ways of **being God's people, of being Christ-centred communities** in the places we live in I hope there might be space for:

- holding the past lightly enough that it does not strangle the innovation and faith required to minister in our contemporary settings
- welcoming people of all ages to grow in Christ's name by the Spirit
- growing our current attenders to believe that they have significant parts to play in the life and ministry of the faith community they are part of
- building faith communities whose hospitality and care is a light and beacon to all in their community

Rev. James Chisholm in 1898 was commissioned to write a Jubilee Memorial of the first fifty years of the Presbyterian Church of Otago. It was called “*Fifty Years Syne*”. He writes of this Church:

*It consecrated all places by holding services in dwelling-houses, in barns, in wool-sheds, in stock-yards, on the hill-sides, amidst the vanishing bush in the gullies where men dig gold. “The first time the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper – wherein all the redeeming and hallowing elements of Christ’s mediation are gathered into focus – was dispensed in Dunedin, the tables were ordinary forms of man’s making: thus all handicraft was sanctified. At one of the earliest celebrations of the holy ordinance in Tokomairiro, some bags of wheat served the purpose of a Communion-table; at its first administration in Oamaru, the sacred Altar was a bale of wool: thus the agricultural and pastoral industries were consecrated.”*  
p.238

There was this wonderful pioneering spirit of trusting God, remembering the past but looking to be innovative and walk or ride by His Spirit into the new ways of ministering in a new land.

My dream is that we continue listening.

That they might write about us at this time what Chisholm wrote in his conclusion in 1898.

*“And so the Church by real acts.... From the beginning of the settlement kept her chief end in view, and sought to bring all men, with all that belongs to them, and all that they put their hands to, into subjection to Jesus Christ, and into the uses of his kingdom; so that whether they eat or drink, or whatsoever they do, they may do all to the glory of God.”* p.239