

Mission Advisor's Address to 2011 Synod AGM

Two years ago I spoke to the Synod about our fear of letting things die. Last year the subject was ministry. This year it's control.

The past year I have been thinking through this business of control. Now I need to be upfront right from the start. I'm the sort of person who likes to feel as if I am in control. I like everything planned out nicely and all sorted so that I know exactly where I am going, how I'm getting there, who's coming with me, what we will do and what we will achieve – and then ask God to bless the endeavour as we now go forth in faith. You see what a good Presbyterian I am?!

Even if I manage to get it all together like I would want, I find it seldom works out the way I planned! I'm sure God is laughing!

I have known deep down that we are not really in control at all we simply like to kid ourselves. You see none of us knows if we will walk back into our homes when we have walked out of them. No one knows if we'll ever see the person we are with now again.

I don't think for a minute that the people of Christchurch thought they had any control on what happened in their midst especially those who went to their place of work on February the 22nd; nor the people of north eastern Japan on the day of their earthquake and tsunami on March the 11th. If we could be in control we wouldn't organise a day like that.

Neither did I feel in control the day I was rushed away from the men's retreat and ended up in Dunedin hospital facing the triple bypass that I ended up needing. Bad organisation that, as the time was most inconvenient really. I thought I had everything under control. Friends and colleagues had been asking me if I was ok because I didn't look it. Yes I was fine just tired after all it was getting towards the end of another busy year.

Looking back I glad I wasn't in control because God is. The timing in the end was right. December and January are quiet months for Mission Advisors. You're all too busy with end of year preparations and activities. I only had to cancel two things. Also the timing was right because it meant that most of the recovery period was over this quiet work time and that I would be much fitter to face the rigors of the Canadian trip next month. Also looking back I can now see how the Lord's hand was on me as in the words of the cardiologist, I was a time bomb that was waiting to go off. He was amazed that I had not had a heart attack and was even upright considering the condition I was in.

I had no control over my situation.

It seems to me that our desire to control shows our own insecurity and lack of faith. If we truly believe that the church is God's and He is its head then why can we not trust Him to be in control? You and I both know that the institutional structures of the church love to control – after all how could we know who can be trusted, whose kosher and whose not. If someone doesn't fit the mould then they couldn't possibly be right. God couldn't possibly have a use for them. Above all we must conform. That really does show our sense of insecurity and way we feel threatened by the different or unusual. It's also seen in the way that so many of us feel threatened when we perceive that someone is moving into 'my patch'. I must be able to control that.

However God cannot be controlled by us as much as we try. The joke is that we are doomed from the start, He will in the end get His way but it might be rather rocky for us in the process.

- I think we are experiencing that as it is!
- Why are we so threatened by those who don't conform to our thinking?
- Why are we so snobby about our own importance – I'm sure it's our insecurity again.
- Can we not trust God with His church?

As I read Scripture God often sends the strange and non conformist, weird people as His messengers. They have always had a bad press. I'm sure it was no different for the people who God used to start this movement we call Presbyterian! After all, some of them were burned at the stake by the establishment.

God will not be confined to our boxes. Jesus tells us that the Spirit is like the wind – it blows from where we not where, nor where it blows to and that those who have His Spirit are like that. Boy that blows our desire to control and box things apart!

Leadership is not controlling. That's why I like the Presbyterian system of Moderators. One who allows the different views and wisdom to be heard so that collectively we may discern the mind of God. I believe that is one of our great strengths as a movement this collective nature of decision making. That's immensely frustrating for those who like to control or see leadership as a more solo act.

We fool ourselves when we think we are in control. I believe that the very fact that we like to think we are and strive to be so is one of the reasons we are hampered in our mission for God. Jesus tells us that we really haven't the power to control anything ultimately. 'Apart from me you can do nothing.' He says. That control is in the hands of God especially when we have handed our life over to Him through Jesus. We have given up our rights and will to Him. Well at least that's what we say.

- Why are we so frightened to let God take control of our fellowships, our church?
- Why do we think it all depends on us or me? Is it a lack of faith really?
- We are always striving, of course for the best reasons, to do better for God. But is that what God is asking? For in a sense we are saying to Him 'You sit over there and leave the running of your church to us.'

The church is God's not ours. What might it look like if we were more intentional of taking our hands off and seriously seek to work with God to make use of the resources that are His anyway. We may even discover there are far more resources available that we ever dreamed about. We will find I am sure that the paths we will be taken down will be ones we didn't even conceive were possible. You see so much of what we do is just that; we do, and what's more we spend an awful lot of time telling God what it is that He needs to be doing. If you don't believe me I suggest you listen to our prayers. When you think about it, it really is presumptuous.

My personal challenge, and one I would like to put to you, am I prepared to recognise my desire to control and am I prepared to give that up as part of my ongoing surrender to God through Jesus?

- Am I prepared to let God be God and lead me where He wills?
- Am I prepared to surrender 'my church' and 'my people' back to Him for Him to do as He wills?
- Will I wrestle with trying to stop telling God what I want and what He should do and learn to listen to His voice and then be obedient?

I think the results of this would be something we couldn't begin to predict. It's that that scares us. I know it would be an exciting ride that would really lead us into engaging in His mission in His world amongst the people in our midst.

I thank you again for the privilege of serving God among you and especially for the tremendous support Beverley and I have received not only during the time of my recent illness but throughout the year as you have opened your hearts and homes to us. I especially wish to thank the Synod Executive Committee for their unfailing love and support, particularly in the days following my hospitalisation. You really are an amazing crowd to work among.

I also ask if you would pray for Beverley and I as we go to Canada next month, that the things I have talked about this morning may be a reality for me. I'm to be the key note speaker at a conference in Alberta called Unleashing Eldership which will come at the end of a fortnight speaking tour throughout central British Columbia. We are guests of the Presbytery of Kamloops of the Canadian Presbyterian Church. The conference even has it's own web site which is a bit scary!

Thank you and God bless us all.