

**South Island Rural Conference 2013**  
**Rev Peter Dunn**  
**Talk 2**

**Slide - title**

I began this morning's talk by telling a story about the spiritual "wow" moment I and a group of other clergy had at the Restorative Justice Conference in Aussie. As I think back over my ministry I can think of lots of others, all like little markers, like little altars, where I recognise that the Lord was there for me. Sometimes a complete surprise, sometimes not asked for, but often an answer to a prayer.

The reason I need memory markers is because I am on a journey and most of the time it is not easy and it's so good to go back and rest. Something like those restful green meadows beside still streams in Psalm 23 that I notice come just before the valley of the shadow of death. Ministry leadership is a unique vocation when you allow the concept of "call" to be a determining factor in the decision to step forward into the role.

I notice in churches that some do jobs because they have to be done and many times there doesn't seem much joy in those people doing it. Some do jobs because they seek significance and if you happen to get in the way or attempt to take something away from them you find yourself in one heck of a row. Some do jobs because they believe that God has asked them to do it and they have sought the confirmation of the Church in their calling and in them there is a passion and love for whatever it is. In the Waipu Parish about the early 2000's we succumbed to the lack of volunteers to do things. We had large grounds and one of the defining missional issues that faced us was the lawn mowing roster. Having some influential leaders who grew up during the depression years made it very difficult to talk about money and paying for things from a practical spiritual perspective. But thankfully I was saved from ongoing ministerial frustration by Tei who received a call from the Lord and brought it to the Deacons for confirmation. Tei was in his late 60's, a Maori gentleman of some presence and mana, who had come to an Alpha Course to keep his wife happy, and became a Christian. His call was to mow the lawns and to quote him, "to serve his Father in Heaven and look after his place", which he did for many years. I think that is as good as an example as any of someone who believes they have call and they follow it.

**Slide - Statistics**

There is a resource I did a lot of work with when I was on the Council of Assembly with a work group that produced a strategic plan for the missional perspective of our denomination. The resource is a little dated now having been produced in 2009 but the trends it identified didn't stop with its publication. It was a statistical analysis of Presbyterian parish life commissioned by the Church Property Trustees that showed with numbers and diagrams the move from stability to exile ([http://presbyterian.org.nz/sites/default/files/for\\_parishes/Church\\_Statistics\\_Analysis\\_-April\\_09\\_final\\_revised.pdf](http://presbyterian.org.nz/sites/default/files/for_parishes/Church_Statistics_Analysis_-April_09_final_revised.pdf)). I have put a couple of them up, not really encouraging, but that's the landscape. Being in rural ministry at the time and being involved in mission leadership in the Northland Region for a long time and beginning to lead Churches Together in Northland into the unknown of the new Northern Presbytery dominated by big city issues, I was acutely aware that ministry in rural areas had specific and special challenges. One statistic in particular gave me confirmation of what many people know intuitively.

Of the 416 parishes in the analysis, 60% have fewer than 75 people regularly at worship, and regularly goes up to once a month. There is a quote that goes with this statistic. "The leadership burden is significantly higher in parishes with fewer than 75 at worship". If you dig a bit deeper 45% of parishes have less than 50 regular worshippers, and about 95% of that number is rural or small town. Almost half of those churches actually have 25 or less attending.

This what I take out of those stats. It's not my fault. I am not a failure. It's not because I'm Presbyterian, although I have been told it is on a number of occasions. You Anglicans been told things like that? You Baptists would never get such comments I am sure. It's not because the Christian faith has past it's used by date. It's not because God is dead. But it is because something is going on much bigger than my ministry in my patch.

### **Slide - Willow**

I want you tell you about a memory marker I have. I joined the Willow Creek Association back in about 2000, maybe earlier. In 2004 I was invited to a pastors conference at Willow Creek in Chicago. 80 pastors from Willow Creek Associations across the world were invited and there were six of us from NZ. That is a picture of the main campus in South Barrington, about 40kms from Chicago central. Get a handle on the size of the car park. Spent a week there mostly in a meeting room on the corner of the dark building overlooking the baptismal pool. It was November, and in that time the lake froze over and it snowed and Invercargill is not cold! The weather messed with the heads of the guys from Jamaica. This is a mega church with about 32,000 people attending worship on this site every week.

### **Slide - Willow auditorium**

This is the \$80 million auditorium they had just completed. Seats 7,000 and I have stood on the stage when its full, with 79 other pastors being introduced at the Wednesday night service. Under the stage are five levels, one for construction of sets and props, a level for music, a level for drama, a level for storage and a level to show off I think, all accessed by a hydraulic lift that bring things up into the middle of the stage.

### **Slide - Bill Hybel's**

This is the senior pastor Bill Hybel's. We had dinner at his place the night after being in the full auditorium. I was standing in the kitchen getting my slices of pizza his wife and daughter were dishing out having a conversation with Bill. He asked me about Waipu and my heart sank. He must have picked up my vibe and hesitation because he made this comment about Willow. Within a 20 minute drive of Willow live 2 million people, wider Chicago is about 9 million. He said he struggled leading in a way that made the church relevant in engaging his community with the gospel and he didn't think they were doing too well. That stopped me in my tracks. Then he asked me that terrible question again. Hows it going for me. So I rattled off some numbers and context, 90-100 worshippers with a catchment area of about 2,000 people, not feeling that great about it. Then he said this. "You are having a far greater impact in your community than we are. How are you doing it?" Amazing "aha" moment for me because it was like I had been lifted out of a ditch to see the big picture. Then he was really nice and said in context we sound like a good example of a mega-rural church. I thought if only he knew the truth he wouldn't say that. That was a two minute conversation that changed my outlook.

## **Slide - ditch**

Before that conversation I really battled ministry wise. That picture sums up my reality at the time. My feeling was that I was in this small church with so many constraints and problems and issues and all I could see on the horizon was the side of the ditch. It was my horizon, and so as time went on my life was about surviving another month, and then another week, and when it came to surviving day by day I was in real trouble, and I knew it. I could have easily gone truck driving at that time.

But as the Lord does after I crashed into the side of the ditch I was lifted out. The conversation with Hybel's was significant but didn't really bring a life change until I discovered something else. I really searched for understanding concerning my place and roll, not in terms of my parish, or in terms of my ordination or any claim the Presy Church might have on my loyalty, but what was my place in God's plan and mission - when I die to the notion that I am anything special or because of my gifts and skills are God's answer to the situation.

There is a parable of Jesus that always bugged me. The Parable of the Four Soils or The Parable of the Sower - taking it from Matthew 13:1-23 - the parable and explanation. I am not going to do an in depth exegesis or anything but I do want to read the Parable, and suggestively leave the picture of the ditch up - for a reason. What's your take on this?

*Listen, a farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died. Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked the tender plants. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted! Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.*

Let's open it up a bit and can you tell me from your ministry situation how that parable is working for you - truthfully.

## **Slide - path**

This is how I saw it. A hard road, weeds on the verges, not much fertile soil, I would settle for 2x harvest, even 1x would be good because at least numbers would stay the same - a typical exile pathway.

Can I show you another picture of the parable?

## **Slide - harvest field**

That is my most favourite parable of the sower interpretive picture. Can someone tell me what you see?

The exile path is still there.

The harvest field.

Ready to go or still to be planted?

Who is the sower?

Whatever your context, if you have been called into ministry leadership in it, that is your picture. The horizon of what the Lord is doing is way bigger than the horizon of any ditch you may think yourself in. I want to say to you that is your reality, and your call to ministry, ordained, ministry team, elder, leader, has you perfectly placed. Whether you mow the lawns, lead the worship, do the preaching, make the cups of tea, visit people, you are perfectly placed in your call. Whatever your occupation, your work is holy and part of your call to ministry.

### **Slide - Hybel's**

But none of this works without a few squeaky wheels. This week I had a supervision meeting with a ministry team. It is a team of four. Administrator, Pastoral Care, Worship, and Outreach are the portfolios. For this particular meeting they asked another parish leader to come for discussion on a particular project. Everything was going well until the other leader made the comment "So and so is the defacto minister". I think the person referred to has been part of the ministry team for at least six years probably more, and within the team itself is held in high regard. Talk about painful moment.

One of the impediments to a church working right has to be the ordained lay divide. I am fully in favour of having a pathway for highly educated people recognised for their leadership and giftings through a system where they are tested and affirmed by the church, and then are resourced to commit their lives to full time ministry. But there is a problem when those people take upon themselves a mantle of authority that excludes others from ministry. I also have a problem with people who look to an ordained minister and expect the full package of gifts and abilities that rightly belong to the priesthood of all believers.

We also have problems in smaller churches where it's not the ordained people who oversteps the mark on recognising the priesthood of all believers, but a clique of people who have taken a guard position on the local church. I can think of three occasions when I have been asked to go and mediate in a church dispute only to find that I was dealing with a dominant family grouping - and that's hard especially when they have probably financed the church for a generation or two. With such folk, I also observe that they are almost always in the stability mode of thinking and being in exile thinking is far too scary for them.

Another squeaky wheel is what I call the wandering prophet syndrome. There doesn't have to be an actual wandering prophet, but it's that person or group of people who hear directly from God and they tell everyone else they don't. In my ministry, this has been the hardest thing to deal with and I have suffered greatly because of them, both in my church and in other churches I have been involved in. At the core of the issue with them is that they have no concept of the priesthood of all believers. They put up special calling, special knowledge, special words, special anointing - and I find them very dangerous.

### **Slide - 1 Peter 1:17a**

This is what Apostle Peter says about Christians in a church setting. 1 Peter 1:17. *And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favourites.* That needs a little bit of interpretation - Our heavenly Father has no favourites. It seems to me that in a period of exile where the local church has to be serious about reconfiguring most things to

find a new expression of stability in a new place, this is the place to start. There are no favourites.

Have you grasped the magnitude of the reconfiguring needed to be faced yet? It is of the same scope if you can imagine the People of Israel being carted away from the stability of Jerusalem and the Temple and the comfort of the priests ensuring that worship continues - to lay people meeting in small venues called synagogues. And you know what strikes me. By the end of this year, 6 months away, for those of you in Presbyterian Churches or Cooperating Parishes with Presbyterian worship centres, many of the church buildings you worship in, those temples of the stability era, are going to be hit by yet another invader - earthquake regulations. Some historian is going to write about the coming of this invader as one of the critical happenings in the church, one that forced change. Exile does that to you.

### **Slide - 1 Peter 1:17**

Apostle Peter is interesting to read noticing how he moves towards chapter 2 and his great statement on the believer being a living stone in the new spiritual temple God is building. We didn't read all of verse 17. I think we should read it all. *And remember that the heavenly Father to whom you pray has no favourites. He will judge or reward you according to what you do. So you must live in reverent fear of him during your time as "foreigners in the land"*. Peter is writing from his context of instability, of precarious existence, that he describes back in verse 4 as a time of change and decay. A fascinating continuation of this theme is still part of our vocabulary. The word "parish" is still used by us, although it has come to mean a geographical entity. However, the root of that word comes from this text and the Greek word "paroikia", which means sojourner or traveling stranger in the land, or as the NLT that I use puts it, being "foreigners in the land." The theme of exile sticks with us.

Peter then does the theology and doctrine bit as he continues on from verse 17 talking about our redemption taking us up to verse 22. You know when we talk about the priesthood of all believers we usually pitch it at an intellectual level. Here is the proposition - agree with it. But Peter comes into the topic by talking relationally. You need to note this.

### **Slide - 1 Peter 1:22**

*You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart.* Skipping two verses of doctrinal commentary we come to chapter 2:1-3 *So get rid of all evil behaviour. Be done with all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech. Like new born babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness.*

This is 100% relational talk leading into Peter introducing the priesthood of all believers idea. As I said this is not an intellectual approach with a proposition to agree with. This is going right back to the core of the Christian faith - love that is patient and kind, that is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude, not demanding its own way, not being irritable, keeping no records of wrong, hating injustice and loving truth, never giving up, always hopeful and able to endure through every circumstance.

I have heard this taught as the chemistry that is the most important ingredient of the priesthood of all believers before the fivefold ministry and spiritual gifts. The chemistry in your ministry team will make or break you. The chemistry in your small church will make or break you. It has to be the primary consideration. Now that I am in a different situation where I have staff and are looking to make some crucial appointments to the ministry team at Windsor, it is not qualifications or experience or gifts that will make the final decision, it will be the question of chemistry. Give me someone I can talk with openly, pray with, keep a clean slate with and endure all things with, that's who I want on staff above everything else.

As Apostle Paul says as he begins his chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13, *If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging symbol* - and all the rest.

Let's pause and reflect. In your church God has no favourites. In your ministry team God has no favourites. Can I ask you to quietly reflect whether this is known in your context. Then there is the issue of the chemistry. For a couple of minutes you might like to discuss with one another whether chemistry, also known as the commitment to love, is been part of your ministry experience.

### **Slide - harvest**

#### **Feedback**

I want to begin to wrap this up. We are a church in a landscape of exile. In some places we are a remnant of what used to be. We have temple buildings that remind us of this every week as 20-30 people gather in a place that holds 1 or 2 hundred, and for some of us the new invader is going to take that from us. Our life is kind of precarious.

But the context is that this is what it is supposed to be at this time in history. This is no accident, even though it is so hard. That is why in talking about the priesthood of all believers where relationships and chemistry stand out as the most important aspects of the church that works, love that endures all things is in there.

### **Slide - 1 Peter 2:5**

And so back into 1 Peter 2. Verse 5 *And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God.*

I want you to notice that the Apostle sets two ideas side by side. In verse 17 that we looked at before he told us we are "foreigners in the land" carrying on the exile theme, now we are living stones being built into a spiritual temple, the idea that the spiritual temple is where stability is to be found in exile. But what really interests me is the term living stones beside holy priest. Since the Apostle has been carefully approaching this idea of the priesthood of all believers relationally, it seems to me that the term living stones is descriptive of what a holy priest is. It is very suggestive of dynamic relationship.

The first part of being a living stone must be our relationship with Christ. Intimate and knowledgable. This life is characterised by dying to the old life. I know that that is a cliché, but to be a living stone linked to the living corner stone has to imply that old has been replaced with new. For example, deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy and unkind speech put to

death in a ministry team and new life found in sincere love for your sisters and brothers. I tell you what, it only takes one of those four negatives to make a ministry team toxic, only one in a church to make it toxic.

I have been in the terrible situation of leading people to Christ in my early years of ministry and saying to them I suggest you go to the church up the road. If you are in a toxic situation there is something wrong with the relationship chemistry and you have to put it right. In the example I have given there was a person in the church who was the moral watch woman. She could sniff out a sin from the other side of town. We started to experience the phenomena of people coming to church in the belong before you believe Holy Spirit movement. Heard of that one? So we had smokers, of both legal and illegal stuff that were equally immoral, we had some couples coming who weren't married and living in sin, and who knows what else. Didn't dare ask. And when this dear sister approached a couple in their 50's who were divorcees, another sin, and living together to tell them they weren't welcome unless stopped living in sin within my hearing, I felt violated actually.

So how do you deal with something like that? My first reaction was to yell at her, my second reaction was to get someone else to yell at her. Somehow I didn't get my chance to do that. I talked to a wise elder in the church. He said let's win her over. So you know what happened. Helen and I invited her and her husband to a meal at our place and treated them like nothing had happened. From there over a number of months fellowship developed, I saw her in a different light, and through conversations that never actually addressed that incident that made me angry, she was won over to a grace perspective. She became a good advocate for the poor and needy who were also the most obvious sinners and she was very sensitive and compassionate to peoples needs. She still had some rough edges mind you and said some silly things on occasion, but toxic she ceased to be.

I have introduced another part of the priesthood of believers. How can you sincerely love one another in your ministry team? There is only one possible way. Share a meal - the basis of fellowship. The difference is as I have tried to portray in the pictures on the screen. Top picture - living stones. Bottom picture - piles of stones with a label.

A holy priest. Holiness speaks of being apart, distinctively different from. I love the way the Welsh language speaks of the Holy Spirit. They refer to "Aspir Glen" - "Clean Spirit". Love that. A priest. From the stability of the temple era, someone who serves God where everything they touch and everything they do in the temple is holy to the Lord. The priest who enters God's presence and communes in the safety of the sanctuary. The priest who goes and announces to the people the presence of the Lord. In Christ, that's you and me. Flat management on this one folks.

Your priesthood comes not by education, or ordination, or laying on of hands, or spiritual gifting, or being gifted as an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor or teacher. You are a priest by the simple fact that you have been redeemed by Christ and you have put your trust in him, and you have proved your redemption by dying to the old and living in the new life in Christ, where Aspir Glen fills your life with the knowledge and actions of Christ.

You are going home to the church God has called you into. He has carefully placed you there. It is not an accident. But I have to ask, does your church, your ministry team know about the priesthood of all believers? Can your Church be described as the spiritual

temple of Aspir Glen - or is it a bit rough around the edges with living stones out of place - or could it be that it's toxic? What are you going to do about it?

Let's talk a little as we close.