

The Surgeon

Mission Advisor Address to 2007 Synod AGM

Last year, as I introduced my report I said, in part, referring to the challenges parishes face:

"In many cases we need to plant a church within an existing church. Something that is new and different that grows up within—a seedling that is sheltered by the mature trees until as it grows toward maturity itself, while it in turn shelters new growth. Every structure has it's own life cycle. We are an organism first—the body of Christ—and an organisation second which supports that body. We seem to often confuse the two."

During the past year I have not seen any need to change that assessment. In fact I am more strongly convinced that this needs to be very seriously considered.

I work with many wonderful people of great faith in the parishes. They really are gold.

However there is still little appreciation of the radical change that we have to make in our mindset, or worldview, of church.

- It simply can not be business as usual.
- We can not hope and pray for a return of the 'good old days.'
- There is a reluctance to face up to the seriousness of our situation.

I recall, some years ago, the surgeon standing at the foot of my hospital bed and telling me that I had cancer. As a young man in my early thirties with a growing family, that was something I did not want to hear. However I had to hear it, I had to take it on board. I needed to so that I could co-operate with him, and others, to deal with this with the hope of coming through. I did not want to die. As you see I didn't! However my life is now very different from what it was before. It is interesting that when you are given that sort of news how quickly your perspective and priorities change. The surgeon, being fearful of upsetting me could have told me that I was fine. If he had done that he would have been very derelict in his duty.

Today, I am like that surgeon. All is far from well in our midst.

- we are deeply in denial,
- we are fearful of facing reality,
- we are clinging desperately to a Christendom model of being church that increasingly is losing touch or has already lost touch with the community we are called to serve.
- We generally exist for ourselves, many of you have told me so.

If you wonder about this just think for a moment what would happen in your place if there was a serious move to say, remove the pews from church to be replaced by more user friendly seating. That could be a subject for a Tui beer billboard – Remove the pews? not a problem – yeah right!

There are a few notable exceptions, but even those, which may be considered 'successful' are living on borrowed time.

Some of our rural parishes are beginning to come to grips with these issues, their desperation levels have risen high enough.

It is a sad fact of life that we often do not seek help until it is almost to late.

What to do?

- Discover the meaning and power of that earliest of creeds 'Jesus is Lord.'
- We need to have a change of thinking. How often have we heard that and nodded in agreement.
- How often have we said to our leaders that we want them to help bring change – but so long as it does not affect me or the way I want things done.
- Many of us are unable and or unwilling to make that change.

We need to come to an understanding of:

- who we are and why God has placed us here,
- who are the people within the communities in which we live,
- what is the demographic and cultural mixes,
- what is the projected future of the community,
- Where does this community itch and what can we do about it.
- how do we begin to relate to this community in the light of this information.

We can at least **not** stop others who want to explore possibilities.

We can at least support new and radical experiments of expressions of church, knowing that some of these may well fail. But better to have a number of failures by trying, than fade away for the want of trying. Any success is progress.

I would like to see the Synod, perhaps through it's Ministry Resource committee, foster ways of planting new expressions of church. I think that this should be our first call for mission expressions and not seeking to prop up something that has certainly had it's day.

- We need to seek out and train church planters, not only in new housing areas but within our already existing places.
- Encourage existing congregations to allow these new expressions to be worked out in our midst and with the resources we already have. Allowing others to start something new in our midst, not fight for our turf.
- Look at how we can meet the challenges that are posed say by the rapid growth of such areas as central Otago and the Taieri plain in Dunedin, or the regional prison in Milton. Think regionally not parochially
- be so captivated by the graciousness of God that our desire is to see His Kingdom being promoted and advanced not to be interested at all at promoting church, our tradition, or whatever.

As a people of God, we do not exist for ourselves, we only have meaning, as C S Lewis expressed it 'draw people to Christ and make them like Christ', in other words, extend the Kingdom of God by word and deed as Jesus demonstrated.

Synod has shown that it can think differently. We are blessed with resources. Perhaps we can do the experimenting here and gift that experience to the wider church.

- It will require of us a willingness to take risks,
- It will require us to talk with each other, across parish and Presbytery borders
- It will require a preparedness to find ways of being flexible within an institutional system that can often seem cumbersome and slow to respond to change.
- Can we give permission to be flexible and innovative?
- Are we prepared to start with a blank canvass and see what picture begins to emerge?

We serve a God who is the master creator and in whose image we have been made. Part of that image is to be creative. We also have the promise that the God we serve not only walks this journey with us but is also before and behind us.

- We do not have to rely on ourselves,
- We are or can be a people of hope.
- We know who leads us into the unknown future.
- Can we trust in our God?

I thank those who have provided hospitality to me and in other ways blessed me in this work. I thank you for the privilege of serving you.

Bruce Fraser
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