

THE CHURCH

Exodus. 6.1-8, Matthew 16.13-19, 1 Corinthians 12.12-27

Last Sunday morning I spoke about “change” and I said that there were things happening in the Methodist Church of New Zealand in our own day that are quite exciting.

That evening I attended the induction of Misilei Misilei, the new Presbyterian at Warkworth Methodist Church. Misilei is a fine example of the growing ministry stream coming from our Pasifika churches. After the service I got chatting to Paula Taumoepeau one of the leaders of Vahefonua Tonga (The Tongan arm of the NZ Methodist Church.) Paula was excited about a brand new Tongan Church in Papakura.

It came about like this: A member of Otara Tongan Parish needed a bigger State house than the one in which he was currently residing which was in Otara. He was offered, and moved into, a better and bigger one in Papakura. As it turned out this was a good move for him as he had two brothers who were already living in Papakura. However, his brothers did not go to church. So he invited them to regular family prayers at his new residence. Once he was more familiar with his new area, he found out that there were other Tongan families who also did not attend any church. So he invited these other families to join with him and his brothers' families in their regular family prayers. More families got invited until there were 15 families meeting which included some Rarotongan and Maori families. Obviously, the family home was now too small for the prayer gathering so the man who started the meetings had a chat to his Parish presbyter in Otara. They considered the possibility of joining in with worship in the Otara Church, but there was a fear that some of the new converts would be unable to travel the distance to Otara on a regular basis. So, in consultation with Mission Resourcing, the Vahefonua Superintendent formed the group into a new Methodist Church. An official “Blessing Service” was held on the 29th November 2009 and congregational leaders were elected.

However, it is also true that the bigger picture of the church in New Zealand is not so bright...

While our Pasifika churches are seeing encouraging growth the Palangi/ Pakeha churches are in decline. On the whole we have neither retained adult children of our church members nor attracted Pakeha with no church contact. This is seen in the census figures that show a rapidly declining percentage of the population identifying themselves as Christian – and those that do are increasingly inclined to use a generic term rather than a denominational tag.

In 2001 – 60.6% affiliated with a Christian religion

In 2006 – 55.6% affiliated with a Christian religion

This decline is most significant among younger age groups. There is a resurgent interest in spirituality and even in Jesus, but the church is not as popular as Jesus, especially among the young. Some of this has to do with the challenges that our changing culture presents to the church.

I was speaking to one of my ministerial colleagues recently and asked how he was getting on in his new church. He replied, “Well, we are having some trouble moving church into Twentieth Century”.

I corrected him, “You mean the Twenty-first century.”

“No,” he said, “we haven't contemplated the Twenty-first Century yet. I mean we are having some trouble moving this church into the Twentieth Century!”

I spoke about change last week. This week as we think about the church...

We need to recognise the changing culture

So what has changed in the culture? At the risk of making sweeping generalisations, let me make some observations:

There has been a breaking down of authority structures

Have you noticed that younger people do not respect authority the way older people do? The world has changed. Let me give you some examples:

When I returned to some post-graduate studies a few years ago what a difference I found. In the past, students revered lecturers. Now students are required to do performance evaluations of their university lecturers.

At Whangaparaoa College, where my children attend, there are no 'teachers' and 'students' what that have instead is 'learners' and 'lead learners.'

In many business circles there has been radical shift toward employee involvement in decision making.

These changes are partly technology driven. The world-wide web empowers us all by giving us access to information. When our Sarah was 3 years old she developed a rare and life-threatening blood condition called ITP. (Thankfully, she has grown out of it now.) We found parents of other ITP children on the web and within a couple of days we knew more about the condition than many of her medical professionals.

Norman Brookes, our new Synod Superintendant could set up a website with information on Auckland Methodist Synod. My 12 year old son could do the same (based on the stories he hears around home) and it is quite conceivable that his site would turn out to be more entertaining and more popular. It could even become world famous!

Authority structures have been levelled out. The upshot of all this is that where religious professionals want to maintain clerical power they will put themselves out of step with main-stream culture. Conversely, a church run by a Ministry Support Team made up from the congregation may have an appeal in the wider culture that a pastor of a mega-church could never achieve.

Institutions are not faring well

Institutions, from the monarchy to the Boys' Brigade, are not faring well. Churches are negatively caught up in this shift. Some churches have responded by saying that we have to shout the gospel message louder. Meanwhile many people seek to fulfil their spiritual needs outside of the institutional church. A quick web search reveals that an increasing number of people are satisfying the desire for Christian community by means of on-line relationships in "virtual churches." For some, the relationships which are developed on-line are as real, meaningful and permanent, or even more so, than what they have been able to achieve by physically meeting together with other Christians.

Those looking to explore the spiritual dimension are, more than ever, likely to shy away from anything with an institutional look. And there are very few new people who come to church to find answers. Rather, if they do come, they come with attitude, "I'm on a spiritual journey and so are you. Can we share in this together?" While there is a resistance to institutions, people still long for the sense of community that is afforded by an authentic network of people. I believe that this is something that this church can and will provide.

People want to participate

When Kraft Foods wanted to put out a new Vegemite last year, they knew that they were messing with an Australian icon. They didn't start with a big newspaper advertisement for their new product. They surveyed 300,000 Australians before mixing Vegemite with cream cheese. Then, rather than just launching it onto the supermarket shelves labelled with "vegecheese" on the jar, it was labelled "Name me." Today's generation wants to be involved in the process. They want to participate.

That's why the TV is full of reality shows and Facebook pages are so popular.

That's why my 12 year old is making his own little movies which he can post on the web.

That's why 1ZB traffic reports now come for you as you phone in to report motorway hold-ups.

That's why we don't need traffic police to catch a driver in the act of a dangerous manoeuvre. We can simply dial #555.

That's why my kids love going to Te Papa. There are no lectures, but they learn heaps because everything is hands-on.

People love being empowered to be involved in the process. Local Shared Ministry then is an aid to reaching the new generation because it moves the church from a presentation mode to a participation mode. It requires all of us to participate.

If it's true that the church needs to recognise the changing culture, it is also true that...

We need find a biblical template for building today's church

As John Wesley said, "In all cases, the Church is to be judged by the Scripture, not the Scripture by the Church." So what does the Bible say about the Church? We started this morning with a reading from Exodus where God said to Israel, "you are my people." So begins the idea of a called-out People of God. The ideal was for a people who could represent God's will on the earth. The First Testament records Israel's attempts, and failures, to live up to that ideal.

Then, in our Gospel reading, we saw Peter declaring that Jesus was the expected Messiah. Following immediately on from this confession Jesus speaks of a Messianic community that he will form. "I will build my church." He promises that it will prevail through adversity. "The gates of hell will not prevail against it." He calls it "my church". He could have said "my synagogue" as this would have been understood by his hearers as the community of God's people. Instead Matthew records "my church." So this was something distinct from the Jewish religious community and their associated buildings. In Matthew's time the word "church" was used in a secular sense of a gathering of citizens for the purpose of decision-making.

The Day of Pentecost, when Peter preached the gospel for the first time, is recognised as the founding of the church. Then, through the New Testament letters, we get several wonderful, dynamic images of the church. It is like a *bride* getting ready for a bridegroom. It is like a *building* with each of us represented as a building block. And we are all being fitted together for the glory of God. Then in our Corinthians reading today the church is likened to a *body*, all the parts with different functions, but linked and co-operating together.

According to the Barna Research Group in the USA a large percentage of Christians now see *no link* between their spiritual life and church attendance. In fact you often hear people say these days, "Well, I've got my faith, but it's a personal thing." Paul makes absolute nonsense of such a claim.

If we've got Christian faith, according to the passage we read, it's communal not personal. We are to be locked in to a local community of believers. We are the body of Christ. We are joined together in such a way that we depend on others, and others depend on us and the gifts that we have. It's like being a hand or an ear. By itself, an ear is worse than useless. It's amputated. It's grotesque! In the body it is invaluable. It's indispensable for the normal functioning of the body.

We need each other. For the church to be healthy we need everyone functioning. Everyone aware of their unique gifts and working at what they do. Over time, with the advent of professional clergy in each congregation, many of these tasks that were distributed to all of us, have been taken over by the minister. Instead of us all recognising that we have ministry functions we have expected one person to do almost everything. Not only do we set ourselves up for disappointment when we expect one person to be an expert at preaching, outreach, worship leading, pastoral care, Christian education and administration – but we also take these tasks away from members of the congregation that God has gifted. The process of Local Shared Ministry that we are adopting gives these ministries back to the congregation. (And because of this, while you are seeing me at the front of the church during this transition process, once the Ministry Support Team is called you won't see me at the front at all. I'll be out of sight. My job will be to meet with the team and help train people in ministry tasks.)

We are to care for each other. There was a time when I had terrible toothache. It was some kind of root-canal problem. For a week and a half I was taking painkillers day and night every 4 hours. Ever had bad toothache? Or an in-growing toenail? How do you react?

Do you say, "Excuse my tooth – it's having its problems lately"?

No! It's "Excuse me, I'm in agony with my tooth at present."

My whole body reacted in sympathy with the aching tooth

So it is with the church. The pain of one member becomes the pain of the community. That doesn't happen in a group of three hundred. Big churches have to break down into small groups to make it work. In a church community that is functioning as a body, when someone gets ill people will ring up, they will drop around or call in with a casserole. As Paul says, "If one part of our body hurts, we hurt all over. If one part of our body is honoured, the whole body will be happy" (v26). And I am sure that kind of thing happens a lot here in our East Coast Bays Parish church communities

Conclusion

The essence of being church has very little to do with maintaining a building, meeting a budget, maintaining denominational structures and attending meetings. These things are only incidental to the main game. The main game is this: a group of ordinary people are called together to be the ministers of Christ in this place. But sadly the main game often gets lost altogether! For us to be the Methodist Church in East Coast Bays all of us as a ministry team must work here together.

St Teresa of Avila put it this way in the Sixteenth Century, "*Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.*"

Rev Andrew Gamman – East Coast Bays Parish Enabler

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