



Diocese of Dunedin
Strategic Property Consultation 2020

Extra Reading:

2. Changing the way we see property in church life



[Blue Pears in the Wilderness](#), a reflection from former Diocesan Ministry Educator Rev'd Alec Clark on how we need to move from inherited church (often represented by our buildings) to a future, much more flexible and mobile church state - and to recognise that we are currently in a transition zone. We need to think about traveling light, focusing on what really matters and attending to human need.

[Church Buildings or House Churches](#) - an article from an evangelical perspective arguing for the biblical and practical advantages for meeting within homes, with some useful biblical references.

[2 Wrong Ways to Think About Church Buildings](#) - an article from Christianity Today which talks about new buildings but also has some interesting points to make about a common problems: that most churches thought their building was a permanent representation of their congregation, whereas we need to be thinking of how we can flexibly respond to shifting demographics and needs.

Blue Pears in the Wilderness



The Task of the Inherited Church in the Neutral Zone

A Study Leave Report

November 2016

Alec Clark

Blue Pears in the Wilderness

The Task of the Inherited Church in the Neutral Zone

God of opportunity and change,
 praise to you for giving us life at this critical time.
 As our horizons extend, keep us loyal to our past;
 as our dangers increase, help us to prepare for the future;
 keep us trusting and hopeful,
 ready to recognise your kingdom as it comes.

A New Zealand Prayer Book He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa page 135

Context:

In the early 16th Century, it took 100 years for the amount of human knowledge to double.

By the 1960's the amount of knowledge that we have doubled every 10 years.

Now the amount of knowledge we as a species have available to us, doubles every 2-3 years.

It is estimated that by 2055 our knowledge base will double every 24 hours.

A lot of this is now due to the capability of computers growing exponentially. Each year their ability to handle material and process it doesn't just double, but will increase by as much as ten times the previous year's ability. This means that even the computer industry itself can't keep up with the degree of change. They are having to cut back on the potential they sell as, in general, their clients can't comprehend the degree of change occurring or cope with the potential available. On this basis a computer expert has said that having a 2-3 year plan for your enterprise is essential. A 5 year plan is a bit optimistic and a 10 year plan is a waste of everyone's time. We just cannot imagine sufficiently how things will have changed over the 10 years to make any of the planning realistic or useful.

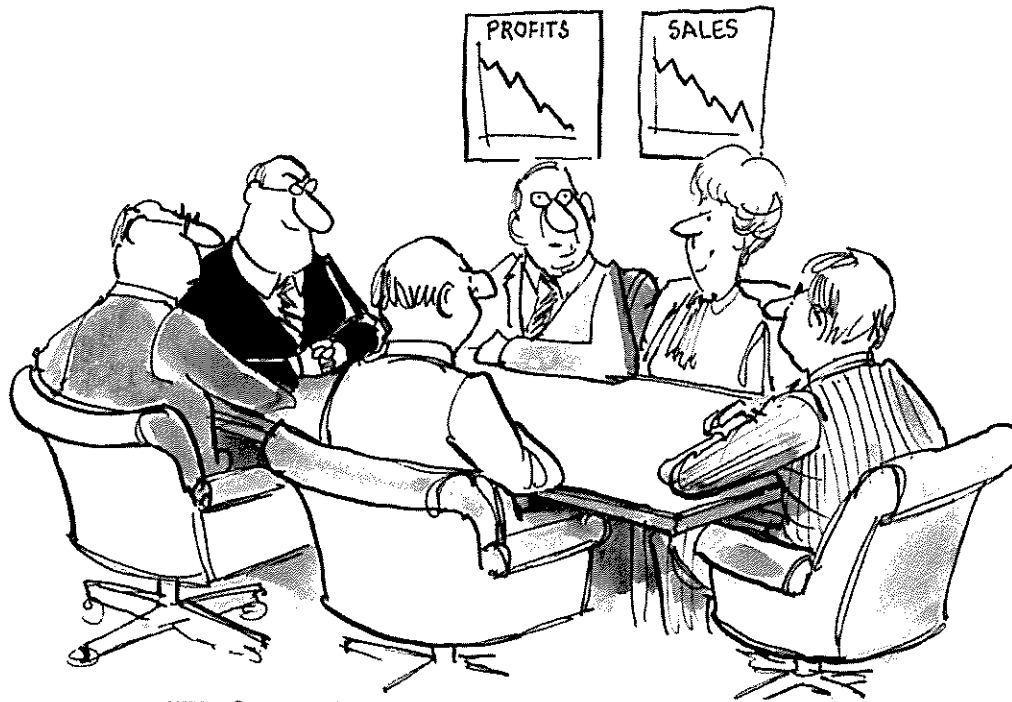
John Drane in his introduction to the New Testament has suggested that the birth of Christianity happened in a time when new knowledge had undermined the Meta-Narrative (the big story that helps people make sense of life) of society. But those who had challenged this Meta-Narrative had not sought to replace it with anything else to provide security or meaning for people. This resulted in people being eager or desperate to find something to give meaning to life, and to search for a new sense of relevance.

This seems to parallel well were we find ourselves today. With the rise of knowledge and our access to it, all the old stories that were universally held and gave a meaning to why we live and die, have been swept aside. People has called them untrue and therefore meaningless. In our society in general, the Birth narrative of Jesus would be seen as a Christmas story. It would be sat alongside the story of Santa Claus. In the minds of most it is a fairy tale, like for instance Hansel and Gretel. A good story, and one worth reading to children. At the back of it there is probably a helpful moral to be learnt. But in the end who would base their life on Hansel and Gretel.

Once again our society is on the search for a new and relevant meaning for life. One which makes sense of all the new knowledge we all have access to. People are open to discovering this meaning

almost anywhere. But as the holders of the old Meta Narrative, that has been recently discredited, most people will not look to the Church and its “fairy tales” for this new meaning.

This is the world in which we live. It is not a choice, it is a fact. A fact that the church must face and deal with



“What if we don’t change at all ...
and something magical just happens?”

This degree of change is happening across our western society. Every aspect of our lives is being reformed or revisioned by the new potential that is available. Education is changing, banking is changing, health care is changing, the way we relate to each other is changing. This new potential and change may excite us or terrify us, but it is happening anyway.

As with many other people, my response to change is mixed. I am happy with the changes that allow me to make model trains more easily with 3D printing. But I am less happy with the changes at my bank which means I need to learn yet again a new way to access and manage my money, with less access to real people. No one is asking my permission before making any of these changes, they are happening to all of us.

Our world has always been in a process of change, it has just accelerated. And this acceleration of change will not stop. It would be great if each change came separately, and we were able to deal with one, before having to think of the next change. But it isn’t like that in the real world. Change happens all the time, and at any moment in our lives we are probably in the middle of numerous change processes. Some will be big and others will be minor.

But the degree of change that our society is experiencing is affecting the way we think about our lives. Having upended our world in one place, as we discover new things about physics, or biology etc, we don’t have a chance to stop and get our heads around it, because other people are already challenging these new concepts and pushing further into what is possible. This particularly busy period of change in the world has been called the Great Emergence. Many people have written about this phenomena and suggest that we currently are in the middle of this change. The Great Emergence has been going on now for more than 50 years and has about the same time still to go.

Anyone with a computer can access the internet and find facts almost instantly. This allows people to have a lot of information on a lot of topics. Knowledge is not restricted to those who have studied and understood what it all means. All our knowledge and presuppositions about life are being challenged and changed. We now have a greater ability to explore and examine what we have previously accepted as facts. But little time to integrate all we know into a coherent and satisfying understanding of life.

The Church is not immune to these changes that have happened in society. The society around the church has changed radically, and as this has happened, their relationship to and view of the Church has changed just as radically. Even if we do not want to accept change in the Church, it is too late. The change has happened. People in our society have moved past the Church and no longer find it an institution worthy of their confidence or a valuable place of knowledge or wisdom. The change has happened, all we are left with is trying to ignore its reality or discovering how we want to react to what has happened and continues to happen.

Inherited Church to Future Church:

The Church is in a process of change. Much of the organization, training, and public presentation of the Church as it exists will not fit or foster life in the Church as it changes.

The Inherited Church

The inherited church is the name used to describe the church which currently exists. One we have inherited from the past with all sorts of history, procedure, structures, systems and expectations. The inherited church are those of us who are already within the church and its structures. In my own context this is the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Pasifika.

The Future Church

Future Church is some future shape of the people of God that we are being invited to move towards. It is an unknown destination. There is as yet no certainty about its shape. Will it be a new organisational structure? Or will it be a new way of relating to God? People all over the world are feeling (or perhaps kneeling) their way towards Future Church. Very few are yet prepared to say they know its nature or the shape it will take.

Future Church is not one place or one experience of relationship with God. In a postmodern world any one answer will not work. (One Way Jesus is no longer an appealing marketing strategy.) Future Church is unclear and uncertain, all of the current alternatives; Fresh Expressions, Progressive Christianity, Emergent Christianity, Post Church Christianity, New Orthodoxy, New Monastic Orders, etc. ... are all strivings in the direction of Future Church. But what will eventually arrive and allow our relationship with God to thrive is still not clear.

Inherited Church to Future Church is the area of change that this report will be looking at. Unfortunately not providing an answer to what Future Church is ... or even how to get there ... that still seems to be a mystery that God is encouraging us to unwrap as we move forward.

However we can no longer sit around waiting to see what emerges. We do however, need to move out of passive immobility, which is allowing everything and everyone to drain away into the sand.

I believe we must enter the 'neutral zone', recognizing the ending of what was, and beginning the process of moving and discovering the way ahead. The Church should look at where God's Spirit is present and where it is not. Then begin seeking for what is God's call to this community. It would be wise to consider all the options, God's wisdom and word comes from many unexpected places.

Change Model of Transition – William Bridges

In any process of change William Bridges suggests there is three parts to the Transition. An Ending and a new Beginning, but between these two is a period called the “Neutral Zone”. There are specific tasks that should occur in each of these parts to ensure a good, useful and sustainable change. Most change processes normally take place over a relatively small time period. But we are part of a change process that is taking roughly 100 years. Our part of the task is the next 50 years. Because this period is one or two generations, then some of the conventional wisdom on managing the Neutral Zone will have to be applied differently. None the less, Bridge’s model of Transitions is I believe very helpful to us as Church as we seek to find our way forward.

Some sectors and types of Christianity in the Western church claim to be making in roads into growth, but no matter how much the growth there is in a specific area it is in the context of overall decline. Change is required and being experienced in the whole western church. There is no one right answer or one right solution to the situation we find ourselves in. Some people may choose to become more orthodox or more liberal in response to what they see is changing. But it all remains part of the overall change that is happening to the Church. Each group and each decision will experience a “neutral zone” between “here” and “there”, as we all face the changes and transitions in front of us.

Emerging Church

Phyllis Tickle in her books and lectures on emerging church has popularised a theory of regular change within society. Approximately every 500 years there is a major change in the way society sees itself. At its base these changes are about – or result in a change in where we see ultimate authority resting. At one time the answer to where ultimate authority lay was the Pope. In our immediate past change the Bible became the final authority. In our present change the final authority of the Bible has been questioned. The Bible is not being discounted as Sacred Scripture, or as the Living Word of God. But if the Bible was to be the ultimate authority when challenging issues arise, then people began asking, “which version of the Bible is correct”. Or “whose interpretation of what the Bible means” is correct. Our increasing knowledge, and everyone’s ready access to it, has undermined the Bible as the source of ultimate authority.

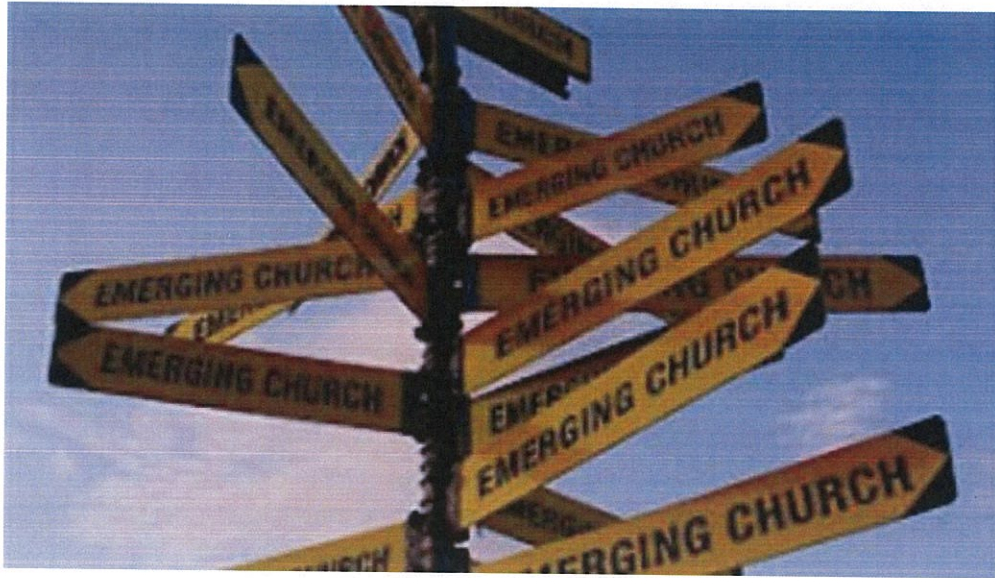
The Church is now seeking what is the new final authority.

Between each section of change there is about 100 years of changing from the old to the new understanding of how life is organised. Phyllis Tickle and others have speculated that we are about in the middle of this process. So 50 years in with 50 years to go.

Previously when the western world has made these changes, they have occurred in step with the secular society and the church (largely because the differentiation was not that clear). This is the first time that church and society are engaging this process of change separately. Both groups are facing change and having to ask itself similar questions about what comes next and on what authority do we decide, but they are not doing it together.

Phyllis Tickle; *“there is already a growing division between those who will attempt to stay with and revive the Existing Church. They will fight the Future or Emerging Church as being non or sub-Christian. There are others who are already leaving the Inherited Church to create Emerging Church. The shape of these communities in America are already beginning to emerge.”*

The church finds itself in the Neutral Zone in its move from Inherited Church to Future Church. There may be very little we can do to hasten or create Future Church, as this is in God's hands. This generation of church goers may be so formed by the Inherited Church that they may not be able to be anything other than what they currently are.. But there is a role for the Inherited Church in the Neutral Zone that could help the work of those who will create, or be the Future Church.



DECLARATION

In academic writing it is normal to place yourself in relationship to the work you are writing, and while I am clear that this is not an academic piece of writing, this may still be helpful. So I would confess that I am a Pakeha, middle class male, with limited academic credentials and limited life experience beyond this country. I have grown up my entire life within the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand. Apart from 3 short years working for a bank, all my working life has been as a priest in the Anglican Church. The church has educated me, fed me and gave me purpose. I am formed by my relationship with the Anglican Church. I have spent 18 years working in Parish Ministry and 18 years working as a Diocesan Ministry Educator.

I am aware that the Church is being changed. I believe this is a work of God. I would like to engage with, and where possible, assist in this work of change. Yet one of the other things I know of myself is that whenever I sit down with a blank sheet of paper and try to imagine a new church, it always comes out looking quite a lot like Sunday morning 10am. I have been formed by the inherited church.

I have worked at listening to God, and try to be aware of my prejudices in what I write. Still I acknowledge I may be wrong, and still caught up in the church I owe so much to, that I can't get beyond it.

Having got that out of the way. I have really enjoyed having the treasure of time to stop and explore my topic "The Role of the Inherited Church in the Neutral Zone".

Things they are a changin' ...

In this reality I am striving to work with and understand the will of God.

But I know there is a chance I may end up defensively trying to protect my own patch of security or familiarity.

Blue Pears in the Wilderness

In preparation for this Study Leave God has given me a number of pictures that I believe are relevant to the work I am trying to get my head around. One of the pictures just came to me while I was reading the passage of the Israelite people in the wilderness. I was invited to see this story from a different perspective and asked if that would change anything.

The second picture came to me in the way of a dream, about Blue Pears.

How do I know that these were more than random thoughts that happened to fly into my brain for that moment? Well there is no scientific way to describe this. However these random thoughts did not go away. They reoccurred, and they made sense of some of the issues that I was grappling with. In the end, anyone who reads this will have to make up their own mind about their validity.

I believe God is keener to talk to me, than I can ever be willing to be in the presence of God. Every, and any method of communication seems to be used by God to make contact with me. The other day when I was in a panic about a situation I found myself embroiled in, I heard a set of words from one of my Beatles CD's in a way I had never heard them before. They remain the words that were crafted by John Lennon or Paul McCartney, nothing was changed, but when I heard them, in that context, with the concerns I was allowing to get on top of me, they became God offering me reassurance. When I hear God having conversation with me like this, people have asked how did they occur. The plain truth of the matter is I don't have a clue. These conversations are clear and real to me. But how they happened I can't tell you, because I don't really know myself. This may not be helpful, but I am wanting to be honest. All I can tell you about this process is, that if you want to communicate with God, you will. God is at this moment desperately trying to communicate with you, and reassure you of how much you are loved.

Everything else comes out of this first piece of the relationship. You are utterly loved by God.

Blue Pears

I dream quite a lot. Most of the time when I wake I find it difficult to clearly remember my dreams. Some dreams reoccur frequently. For a number of years I had a recurring dream of not having feed my caged birds properly. They were starving because there was not enough seed for them. After a period of time I learned that this dream occurred when I was not paying enough attention to my spiritual life. Not paying attention to the Spirit.

I know from the basic dream work I have read, that most dreams are about and for the individual. This dream that I had before my study leave has a clear message for me, but I also think that in it there is a message and a challenge for the wider Church. Dreams don't always make logical sense, nor do they conform to normal rational sequences.

"This dream is set in a huge industrial complex. The size of a Hydro Dam's generator room. Massively high ceilings, industrial warehouse style size. Cathedral like but much bigger. Lots of concrete and steel. Within this space there are lots of productive ventures going on. Over all it is a well organised, sophisticated establishment with lots (hundreds) of people working there. They are all engaged in important work for the betterment of humankind. Some are generating income, others are support services.

In one small, insignificant corner of the complex there is a small channel neatly cut into the concrete floor. About a metre long and a third of a metre wide. Water flows briskly through

this channel. In the water are Blue Pears, which are harvested by hand. This is my job in the complex. They are harvested because of their value. Blue Pears are “gold”.

I am happy and content working in the Blue Pear harvesting department, even though it is reasonably insignificant part of the complex. I get paid for my work, but I don’t profit from the ‘gold’ the pears contain. Suddenly it is discovered that the Blue Pears are much more valuable than the gold they contain. I am not clear what this new value is, but it is not a monetary value. The effect of this new discovery will be important for all of humanity. Just as I become aware of this new importance, the machine that brings the pears to where they are harvested, breaks down. It will need new batteries to allow it to work again. The batteries get ordered, but they will take a while (weeks) to be delivered.

As we wait, quite swiftly, the whole of the economy and society begin to break down. The world outside becomes dangerous and destructive, at war with itself. It gets much harder to get supplies like batteries and even food.

All the ventures that happen in the complex begins to close down. There is a process of “pearing down” the business. More and more people need to be made redundant. The building empties. It becomes a fortress against the chaos outside.

But the potential of the Blue Pears must be guarded, because when they can be harvested again, it will bring the whole world back into balance. I don’t know how this will happen, but I have absolute faith that this is true. It will end the chaos, destruction and misery.

I am responsible for holding this space. To do so I will need to marry two husbands, so that when the batteries arrive there will be someone with enough strength/ability to get the harvesting going again.

While this scene is chaotic and even dangerous, it is also hopeful. I don’t know how the pears are valuable or how they will make a difference, but I have absolute faith that they will. The complex as it empties becomes more still and peaceful.”

This was the dream. I immediately knew it was important and different from most of my other dreams. It seemed to be saying that sticking with what we have always done, and being faithful would in the end reap rewards. I was lucky enough to be going to my Spiritual Director shortly after the dream and spent most of the time exploring it. I was encouraged to try and re-engage the dream and ask God the questions about which I was still unclear. As I did this I came to have some greater feeling for King David as he was confronted by Nathan about a simple story of a man and his lamb. (2 Samuel 12:1-15). In my initial engagement with the dream I had taken it at face value. It seemed absolutely correct to be the one guarding this valuable resource, and I was clear that waiting on the batteries was the correct thing to do. I was a bit worried about the two husbands, but God would make all things clear. So I went back to God and asked for further clarification about aspects of the dream.

God: “Where do you imagine Blue Pears might grow Alec?”

Alec: “Well probably on Blue Pear Trees.”

God: “So Alec why are you sitting in an empty Cathedral waiting for batteries that are never going to come?”

Then all the following thoughts tumbled out.

It seems likely that the building was built over a Blue Pear orchard. Being extended slowly over time, till the orchard itself was destroyed. The pears coming through the trough are probably wild pears that have fallen from the few remaining trees left after the building had

been constructed. The whole enterprise was built on Blue Pears and their value, but the real Blue Pears have ended up side lined in a small constricted channel, pushed aside by all manner of good and useful things.

The gradual removal of everyone from the building is the natural response of the world to an organisation that has lost contact with its soul, what Blue Pears really are and where they come from.

I am not sitting there protecting the last hope of humanity. I am sitting there protecting the last vestige of a distorted vision.

Staying alone in the building is quiet and peaceful, but it is isolating me from the reality that is happening outside. I need to get Out among the chaos and danger, the hurting and the needy.

Cancel the order for the batteries (but don't waste time on that).

And plant some Blue Pear trees.

I don't think pulling down the building to replant the orchard will work. The ground will be soured by what has been there. It is time to move on and find new places to plant. Maybe not an orchard, perhaps guerrilla planting instead. One tree in vacant land on a road side, in roundabouts, wherever possible.

If the Church was to replant the orchard we would remain in control of the growing, harvesting and distribution. I think the call is to create Blue Pear saplings and give them away to anyone who will take them. Trusting them to make what they will of the Blue Pears, losing control and monopoly and believing that the rest of society will recognise and embrace the values inherent in the Blue Pears.

Later on after further conversations with God, these pieces fell into place:

Two husbands. Don't ever let people tell you God doesn't have a sense of humour. I finally felt that this image was about the hard work I put into trying to live between the extremes of the Church. Liberals and Conservatives (or any other poles you wish to choose). The concept of the two husbands was a recognition that my central and compromised faith would never have the energy of an out and out Evangelical or Liberal. So if the pears were to be harvested there would need to be someone with more energy than me! Why husbands, because I would never be fully "in bed" with either of them.

Why Pears: This took longer to discern. But as I grew up I had a wonderful tree house in a pear tree. The tree was massive, so it easily held a two storey tree house. However we did not attend to the needs of the tree very well. Each year it would produce a huge crop of small, bullet hard and wooden tasting fruit. Eventually the tree was cut down to make way for a more productive tree. The Blue pears in a similar way had lost their central use, through lack of care. Instead of being a free and generous gift, full of juice (that dribbles down your chin) and a source of life giving energy, they have become wiser and hard and unapproachable. Locked away in a small concrete trough, somewhere in the back of the whole enterprise.

Someone with more knowledge about dreams suggests that in dreams blue is normally related to things to do with God. Pears from God.

I continue to work on the dream, and it continues to give up useful insights. But I think that the central message is becoming very clear. God is challenging me to move out from my church based understanding of life, and to re-engage with the Spirit of God in the midst of the real world. A challenge both frightening and liberating at the same moment.

Into the Wilderness.

I was reading the story of the Israelite people leaving Egypt and seeking the promised land. But to get there they need to go through the wilderness. They expect that this journey will be a short trip across a piece of geography to get to the place where God is leading them. Instead it turns into a 40 year journey through the desert. In that journey they learned things about God and themselves. Once they made it into the Promised Land, they began to acquire wealth, and sought status, and intermarried to ensure their position and power. In the process God again became just one of the components of their life.

For many commentators the church in the wilderness is a common theme at the moment. They imagine the Church in its current situation as going into the desert, into the wilderness again. Leaving behind the certainty and organisation of "The Church" and having to discover afresh a real and dependant relationship on God. Waiting each day for manna and quail so we can survive till the next day. At the end of this process we will find a new Promised Land where the Church will be restored to its right relationship with society.

In a conversation with God, I was asked, "What if the invitation was only ever into the wilderness?" History is always written after the event so maybe the idea of the Promised Land was the justification of the people after they had conquered another nation for their better looking land.

But, what if God had invited the people to live in a wilderness,
in a relationship where they were dependent on a close relationship with God.
Where their very sustenance, day by day is dependent on the provision of God.
Where they are not distracted by issues like wealth or success or competition.
Where they learn to rely on each other because their lives depend on it.

What if the Promised Land was not a piece of geography,
but a state of being with God, that could occur anywhere, anytime.
Growing constantly deeper into the relationship and love of God.
Coming to know that
nothing else matters more than this daily, constant being in the presence of God.
That this is not an optional choice,
but what keeps us truly and fully alive.

And what if this is the same relationship we are being invited into now.
To leave behind all symbols of power and status.
To let go of our structure and organisation,
that ties us to certain forms of actions and reactions.

To instead live our lives responsive to the Spirits guidance
here and now.
To grow in relationship with God,
and with each other,
because ours and others lives depend on it.
To seek to serve each other,

and the creation that God has given into our care
 What if there is no other place or event that we are waiting for,
 no Promised Land to look forward to.
 Because **this is** the Promised Land.

That we too are invited into this growing dependence on our relationship with God
 and the community of faith.

That this is a process which will prepare us to live where ever life leads us.

So that we will be light on our theological feet,

able to react to every new twist and turn,

challenge and opportunity

with grace and the love of God.

Constantly finding new ways,

with Gods love,

to serve those we find ourselves living amongst and with.

My heart shrinks thinking of an invitation of this size, and certainly it scares me to the very core of my security seeking soul. But it also makes my heart sing to think about this way of living and relating to God and my fellow pilgrims (all of them, not just the ones I like). I believe this is an invitation from God, to live intimately together in the wilderness.

So Blue Pears in the Wilderness.

The task of the inherited church in the neutral zone:

I believe we are in the midst of massive change, change which is swamping many of our faith communities, who do not know how to react or where to turn.

How are we called to “be” or to react in the place we find ourselves ... what is the task of the inherited church in the neutral zone?

The Neutral Zone

The neutral zone is a term from the work of William Bridges on Transitions. Bridges suggests that change is relatively easy. It is the transition from one reality or place to another involved in the change that is more challenging. He proposed that transitions have three parts, an ending, and a beginning and the bit in the middle. This bit in the middle has been called “the Neutral Zone”.

The topic of this report is based on the premise that the Church is in a process of major change. As a church or as individuals we can resist that change or seek to work with God in that change.

Whichever stance we chose to take, we will still have to engage with the change. So the title is really asking “what do we do now?” While we wait to see what God is bringing to birth in this new and radical change, what can we do to help (or at least not to hinder) the work God is engaged in.

And also, how to support others who are part of the inherited church and may be wondering which way is up and where they should lend their energy.

We have left Egypt behind. Or perhaps it has squeezed us out. The place which used to give us purpose and a place to stand, has grown so small that it cannot contain a structure the size of the inherited church. We are being squeezed out by lack of space and resource. Once there was a place for an organisation that gave meaning and purpose to our whole society. Not only was there a place, but it was at the very centre of power in that society. But now all that held us in that place of privilege has been questioned by society and been found wanting. The church no longer provides meaning or purpose for most. Our society has moved on to find other more acceptable places to find explanations for meaning in life. Other places to find authority which changes where power is to be found..

We now sail in a magnificent boat, too big for us to crew, in need of major survey and rebuilding. It is hard to keep afloat. The space we have aboard is neither big enough for the cargo today's society wants to carry, nor high enough quality or comfortable enough for passengers to want to travel with us. There is a niche market for taking people on short trips for nostalgic reasons. But people don't want to commit to the journey long term. Some want to save some of the boats being scrapped, so they can retain some of their personal history. But those dedicated to the "why" that originally launched the boat, are just too small in number.

Those who do remain dedicated to the original task that launched the ship (in my opinion the love of God), are aware that the 'why' remains relevant and real. God has not deserted humankind or God's creation. But the structure and systems that have grown up around the church, are probably not those needed for God's mission to humankind at this time. However what would be relevant is also not clear yet. We have left one known and certain space, even if we didn't want to, but we have no new one to go to. We are in the wilderness.

The only way through the wilderness was by following the signs God provided for us. A cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. While we are on this journey God provides us what we need. Manna each day in the morning and quails each evening. Not much variety, no menu to choose from, but no one needs to starve. In the wilderness the people of Israel grew very close to God. Because God was necessary for every day survival. God wasn't a philosophical concept to be decided for or against. God and your relationship with God was what kept you alive from one day to the next.

Around the world people are trying to discover what God is doing next. They are looking for a 'promised land' that will lead them out of the wilderness and into a land of milk and honey. Perhaps where they can again be at the heart of society where they can reclaim authority. But in the meantime we are in the wilderness. We need to discover how to live in this place. Where all we have previously taken for granted is no longer relevant. All the structures, rituals, symbols and resources we have worked so hard to provide and protect, just don't connect for non-members in this time and place.

At least the people of Israel had to leave Egypt ... this meant a change of location, situation and resource that made the change obvious. For our generation, while everything may have changed, nothing has changed. Many of us are in the same buildings our grandparents worshipped in, and sometimes built. On the same street, in the same town. Nothing has changed, but everything is different. Once the people of Israel were in the desert it was pointless saying "If we just work a bit harder at what we have always done, everything will be fine". They are now in the wilderness, the Egyptians have been left far behind. In our situation it is seductive to believe that if we found the piece of the puzzle that was out of alignment: leadership, right belief, better giving, more attendees, greater faithfulness, deeper spirituality, then everything would come out all right and we could go back to the way that it was. But we are in the wilderness, no matter what it looks like on Sunday morning. There is no going back!

So what do we do now? How do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? What are the rules and the objectives of this new place we find ourselves in?

Living Creatively through Change and Transitions:

Before it is possible to enter the neutral zone helpfully, endings need to be managed. The Church in New Zealand has been in the process of this ending for several generations. In some places this has worked well and in others little has been done to help people as their understanding and expressions of Church end. Many congregations, diocesan systems and Diocese themselves are still negotiating the process of ending. As change is now ongoing, and not politely waiting to end one piece before another starts, we are all constantly caught in some piece of ending. Below is a list of the tasks that can helpfully be attended to in a period of ending.

Letting Go : Endings

1. Identify Who Is Losing What

- what is actually going to change ?
- what are the secondary changes that the transition will cause ?
- who is going to have to let go of something ?
- what is over for everyone ?

It is important for these questions to be thought through. It will allow leaders to understand who will need to be carefully managed and cared for. Loss and grief often fall unevenly in a group. Sometimes people have been key leaders in an organisation, and with the changes required they will no longer have a place in leadership. This can be hard to accept and understand. Others will have connection to a particular building, item, process etc because they or their family were involved in its coming into existence. These people may need to have individual attention when decisions about these items are discussed.

2. Accept the Reality and Importance of Subjective Losses

Just because it doesn't seem important to you, doesn't mean it isn't important to others. To miss the value others put on a particular item or issue they are losing, can make it impossible for these people to come forward with you in the change process. Letting people know that you accept that for them this is a deep and important issue, even though others might not see it like that, begins a process of allowing them to move on.

3. Don't be Surprised at Overreaction

- look for the loss behind the loss.
- the loss may trigger memories of unrelated unresolved losses from the past
- or be a symbol of a greater loss

Often times the loss and grief that people are expressing is not just related to the particular piece of loss we are currently working with. We are all constantly dealing with loss in our lives, sometimes when this is not dealt with well at the time of the loss (maybe at the time it wasn't even recognised as a loss), then it may well come out at another moment of loss. This means that a seemingly small piece of loss associated with change, can engender huge amounts of grief from some individuals. This may be the safe place to let out their grief for many unacknowledged griefs. Or this can be the final straw that demands that this grief be attended to.

When this occur it can make the whole process of transition more difficult for all involved and potentially derail a seemingly easy piece of change. This grief and loss is real for the people feeling it, even if it is misplaced.

4. Acknowledge Loss Openly and Sympathetically

Those in leadership during the times of change need to be prepared to take some lead in talking about the loss that occurs. So individuals need to be listened to. They need to be encouraged to talk about the cost to them of the changes that are occurring. Places need to be created where the loss can be publicly acknowledged. This allows individuals to know they are being taken seriously and are not alone in their sense of loss.

5. Expect and Accept Signs of Grieving

Anger
Bargaining
Anxiety
Sadness
Disorientation
Depression

In common with all loss and grief the signs above may well be present. Both for the people we offer leadership to and also for ourselves. It can be helpful to notice and acknowledge them. Noting they are normal parts of loss and grief, and not the project coming to pieces.

6. Compensate for Loss

What can be given back to balance what has been taken away.

Compensate for loss – if they need to give up x can they keep y

Sometimes when loss comes through a definite decision of a community to move forward in a particular manner, then it can be possible to ensure that those who have been identified as losing by this decision are recognised. There may be some way to help them retain part of what they value, even if they are having to let go of others.

In the larger sense of change that is overtaking society as a whole this process may be more difficult to achieve. Change is imposed on us by society and technology rather than individuals. In this case there is no one to compensate us or others. It may be that leaders can helpfully name, in these situations, what of the process that was valued but is now disappearing is going to be retained in what continues.

7. Give People Information. Again, and Again and Again....

Half truths and untruths end up making the situation more difficult.

In times of uncertainty and change people feel they don't have enough information to know what to do. This may or may not be true. Sometimes people can't assimilate the information when they are first given it. If you are wishing to be helpful to people in a time of change it will be helpful to create a culture where information is given regularly and repeated often. Even the information that there is no information can help people feel they have not missed out on something.

Sometimes it is difficult to know which information can be released for public consumption. In these situations it may be helpful to acknowledge the difficulty and try to be clear about when more information may be released, and if possible why it is not being released now.

8. Define What is Over and What is Not.

It is important to clearly name what is being lost and what is not, or others will make this decision in their own mind. This can be very unhelpful for congregations and groups when people start causing fear with what they suggest will end. In our current situation of change, many people fear the death of the church. Or worse that God is only a myth, and they have been wasting their time in the Church. The reality is that worship, our relationship with God, some form of Christian community will all survive this change. What is changing is the way we organise ourselves. The system of being Anglican or Christian, what we might mean by these terms, they may all change. The important and deeper things that underlie all this, and that these systems and beliefs are supposed to serve, they will not be changing!

9. Mark the Ending

If it is possible find a way to mark or celebrate the ending.

This is easier when it is some concrete thing that is coming to an end. But when it is ideas and systems that are ceasing, it isn't always as easy to find a way to mark their ending or even see when that ending is.

The value of having something to mark an ending is that it allows the value of what has ended to be acknowledged. Many people are concerned that because our current system of organising and being Church is ending, that somehow they may have wasted their time in the Church and have been doing the wrong thing. A proper ending would allow us to say very clearly and publicly that we have been doing the best and the right thing at the right time. However now a new thing might be needed for the good work we have done to continue. The values that were inherent in the old process will be carried forward in this new system in the following ways.....

10. Treat the Past With Respect

Don't talk about the past in a negative fashion. Moving on to new and more appropriate ways does not mean that what happened before was wrong. We need to value what has been as we move forward to whatever it is that God calls us to next. This also in time will change as the Churches and society's needs continue to change.

11. Let People Take Something of the Past with Them

They may take a physical something – vestments – into the new arrangement.

Plaques from a closed church could be incorporated into another worship centre.

This may allow them to let go of other things.

12. Show how Endings Ensure Continuity of What Matters

People will find it easier to let go and move forward if they can see that the important and underlying values of what they treasure continue in what is to come. Any changes we might make, is to ensure that future generations are able to continue to know the love of God.

Once the ending has begun, then we enter into the period between. The Neutral Zone. Where things are still ending, and the possibilities of new beginnings start to form. But neither the endings nor the beginnings are the reality in this place. They still have to be lived with, but another agenda is in play in this space.

Neutral Zone

In Change management process there are things leaders can do to ensure a successful transition and a useful experience while in the Neutral Zone.

Managing the Neutral Zone

1. Be Aware of the Signs
2. Normalise the Neutral Zone
3. Redefine or Reframe the Period
4. It's a Creative time
5. Create Temporary Systems for the Neutral Zone
6. Strengthen intragroup Connections
7. Use a Transition Monitoring Team

These points were discerned when working with Transitions that lasted months or a short number of years. We are involved in a Transition that has been going for 50 years and probably has another 50 to run. The work we are involved with will not be completed (if that is a helpful term) for another generation or maybe two. We will be making decisions or not making decisions for people we may never know. We are working towards a future that most of us cannot even imagine, because of the degree of change and potential for change that is occurring. So all that follows has to be viewed in that context.

Be Aware of the Signs:

The first thing to do when working in the neutral zone, is to notice you are in it. People often get discouraged or feel defeated by what they are experiencing, and need to be reassured that they are just common signs of the Transition they and their community are involved in. God has not deserted them, they are just on a new journey of discovery with God.

There are many signs that indicate when you are in this period of transition, listed below are some common signs.

i) **Anxiety rises and motivation fails**

People are unsure about what is happening, and therefore how they should respond. All the strategies that have previously helped them when things aren't going well, don't have the desired response. When they look outwards for support or direction they find others in the same place. There are people offering easy and quick solutions, but after trying some of these without marked success people become cautious of the next "band wagon". After a while motivation to do anything dwindles, as nothing seems to bring the results that were being sought.

People frequently feel they are the problem. It can appear to them that everyone else is doing OK and it is only them who is having difficulty. It can feel as if everyone else is well connected to the leadership or to God or to the church, but they are the ones being left out of any conversation. This is normally not true, but because they feel it, it is real for them until they can be reassured otherwise.

ii) **More workdays are missed than normal**

Retreating from the workplace is a relief when being present in the workplace brings only more uncertainty and a sense that you are failing. So people become sick more often, or find creative ways of not being present to the difficult situation. This might be by becoming engaged with other work where people notice and appreciate your input in a different way. Or just getting out of the workplace on any legitimate excuse.

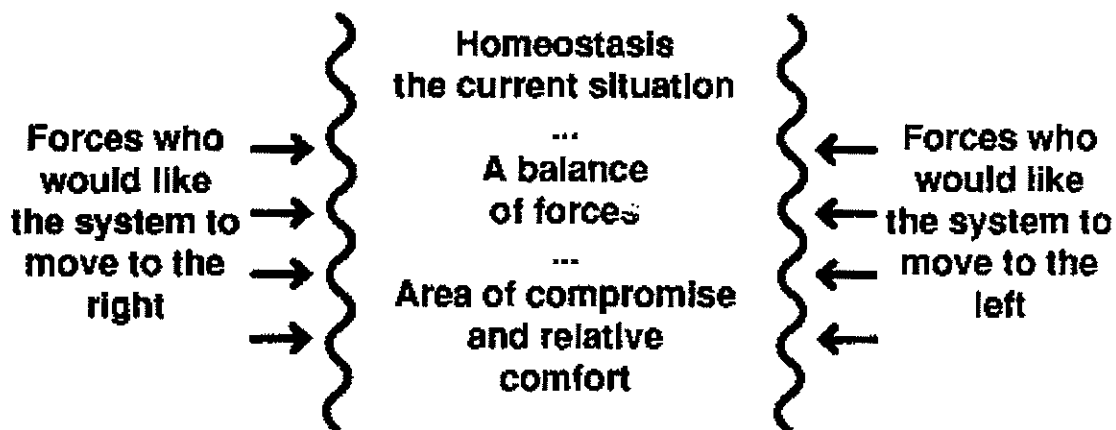
In the church setting this might be seen in people attending worship less frequently than before. Withdrawing from responsibility in the parish. Or leaving the church altogether. This is frequently because the changes that the church are going through are too painful or cause too much uncertainty for the individuals concerned.

iii) **Old weaknesses reappear**

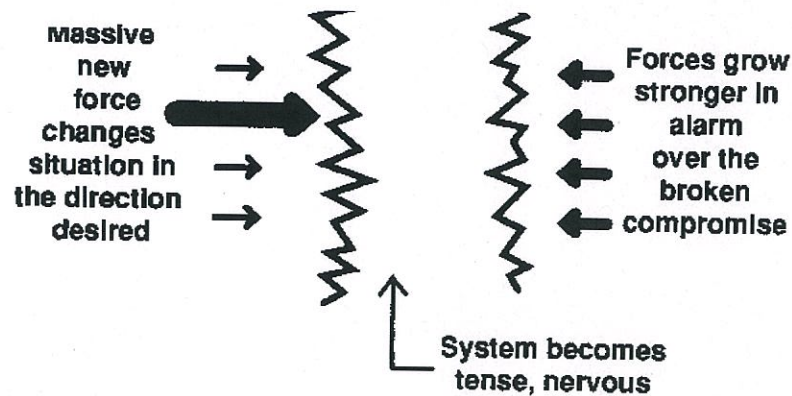
Issues for yourself or the parish, which you thought long dealt with, re-emerge and need to be dealt with all over again. The old equilibrium that had been established within the system has been thrown out of kilter by the anxiety caused by change. People sense in the confusion another opportunity to make their case for their passion. For example, all the changes to worship that were supposed to bring hundreds of new people through the doors has not succeeded. So maybe it is time to go back to Sung Evensong.

Dynamic Equilibrium

Most of our lives are lived in a dynamic equilibrium. Where we have found the place of balance between the forces that we live amongst.



This occurs in almost all places in our life. Work life balance is an example. There are forces that require us to attend to work. Some people would be happy for us to spend all our time dealing with the issues related to work. On the other side is the need for recreation, family, rest, down time. When we have got this balance correct we are in a dynamic equilibrium, and both work and self are able to cope with the situation. But this equilibrium is always dynamic. It is not static and set in stone. A whole raft of things can change the balance and make a difference to your system. Becoming sick means you can spend less time on work and for this period must spend more time focusing on your own health. In this situation the equilibrium will change. For a while work will not be concerned. Sickness is just a reality of life. But after a period of time there will be pressure to know what is happening and when you will be back at work.



A version of Dynamic Equilibrium that might be familiar to some. There are people in a parish who would dearly like to go back to having a robed choir 'like we used to have'. There are others who are very clear that the only way to make an impact on our congregational numbers is to have a band. These are the two forces pushing against one another. The place of equilibrium or acceptable compromise is a keyboard and a mix of hymns and modern songs. Neither side have given up on what they would really like, but they have found a place where they can live with each other.



Forces who
want balance
to move right

Homeostasis

Current situation

Stability / Balance



Forces who
want balance
to move left

If anything changes, then both sides will immediately make their case again, even though the people in the middle had thought that this had been resolved.

iv) Personnel are overloaded

Change is beginning to occur. People continue to maintain the old system, as no permission has been given to let them change. Yet on top of this they have to work out how to engage with the reality of what is changing. Both in terms of the new systems or processes or worship that is emerging. This raises anxiety from people throughout the system. Those still wedded to the old system demand things stay as they are till proper decisions are made. But those already caught up in the change are demanding that new process need to be in place now for the reality they are living.

People's generosity and determination to make the system work is not dimmed necessarily, but the physical and emotional amount of work increases and becomes difficult or impossible to deal with.

v) Polarisation increases

There is a tendency to see the world in “us and them” terms at the best of times. In the Neutral Zone this intensifies. Those who want to stay or go back to the established ways of doing things become more clearly opposed to those who want to pioneer new ways of engaging the needs of the system. Once these lines have been established then it becomes very easy to demonise the people on the other team for all the problems that are currently occurring, and making your life difficult.

This form of polarisation can pop up in all sorts of places and in all sorts of ways. In general it is a sign of the dis-ease in the community.

vi) Vulnerability to attack from outside increases

While we are busy falling apart within our system, it is very easy for others to take advantage.

For example at the moment the whole idea of “Bible-in-Schools” is under review. Once upon a time the Church would have been a much better organised to answer the questions of a small group of motivated parents. However we are busy with our own internal changes and challenges and have not been able to mount a credible defence of this work.

These are some of the signs that let us know that we are in the midst of a change process, in the neutral zone. It can be reassuring to notice them and see them as the sign of change not failure. To know that they are signs or symptoms, and not the problem. To be successful in change it is important to focus on the actual process of change, and not get caught up in dealing to the signs of the anxiety caused by the change.

Our society is caught up in an endless array of change. There is always change happening in one or more parts of our lives. Even as we age we are dealing with change within our own bodies. Because the multiple levels of change are constant it is easy to see the signs of the Neutral Zone in our society. This makes it more difficult to be able to say exactly what piece of change these signs might relate to. Within the Church system, dealing with massive change at this time, we can easily identify all of the above signs within ourselves and the people we work with. We need to be aware that some of these signs, anxieties, overload may be coming from any number of other changes that we and others are dealing with at the same time. In my own life I am in the middle of the most exciting and largest change the church has dealt with in 500 years. I am also about to retire. Both of these issues will in different ways confront me with all the signs and opportunities of change and transition. Identifying which anxiety belongs where can be a difficult task.

As pastors we may need to be aware that sometimes the anxiety that people within the Church are exhibiting may be about the changes and challenges we are facing, but it may also be about other personal or professional challenges that people are facing at the same time. Either way they will require good pastoral support. A listening ear as they make decisions, or as they live through their loss. Sometimes they will need reassurance that God will be beside them through all these changes.

Normalise the Neutral Zone

People generally do not like uncertainty. Change asks us to leave one set of known expectations and to move to a new place. Once we arrive there we hope that there will be new certainties, in a new set of expectations. So generally people who have to face change are keen to move from one set of certainties to the new ones as swiftly as possible. "Let's get on with it, just tell us what to do and we will do it."

However it is important to resist the urge to move too quickly through the Neutral Zone. The piece of change that the Church finds itself involved with has been underway for approximately 50 years and may not reach any sort of conclusion for a similar period of time. This is not a mere blip to be gotten through, but a major re-organisation of the whole way we organise and see ourselves as God's people in the Church. Why is it so long? Because we have become so wedded to our system and structure that has served us so well for about 400 years. It is going to take a serious amount of time to reorientate ourselves to a new way of being. Moses was in the wilderness with his people for a generation, till all those who had lived and been bought up in the old system died off. When they reached the "Promised Land" they were a different people, people who had not known the old way and the old processes.

During this time of waiting and reorienting we also need to take time to redefine who we are, and what it is that we are trying to achieve. At times it would seem that our task at the moment is saving the Anglican Church. I hope that by the time we finish this journey it will be clear that the Anglican Church is just a vehicle for the real task of enabling people to make connection with God. I would happily sacrifice the Anglican Church, if it meant that it was easier to do the more important task. In the meantime I continue to hope that the Anglican Church can be a good vehicle for helping people to recognise and grow their connection to God.

There is a journey to be undertaken. We are already on this journey, but there is a long way to go yet. So we need to help people to understand that we will be "in the wilderness" for some time. Help them to not look for simple and quick solutions, but to take the time offered to us to rethink who we are and what we are called to do. It is normal in this time to feel both frightened and confused. Letting others who journey with us know this, is really helpful. We have been forced to let go of some of our certainties and known expectations. We want to know what we should do now. Yet the only honest answer that we can give is, that we don't yet know. Of course this creates confusion and fear. The task while we are here is to live here. Neither looking backwards nor focusing to quickly on a need to know a future. We are here, so is God. Live here, with God, taking the opportunity to live into God's love, encourage others to develop their relationship with God and what it means to live in union with God and our fellow believers.

Another Metaphor and experience of Our Change

The production of the New Zealand Prayer book may be a good example of both the opportunities and the challenges of being in the neutral zone.

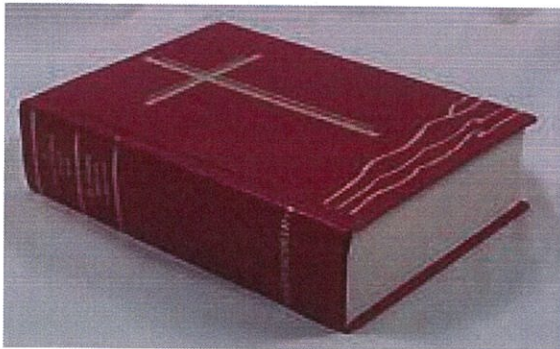
In the 60's and 70's it was obvious that the liturgies we were living with were not working for us. So permission was given, somewhat reluctantly, to allow liturgical experimentation. From this experimentation emerged a whole lot of bad liturgy that had to be laid aside. But also a whole lot of excellent liturgy emerged. More importantly than any liturgy that emerged, a generation of people had to engage with what made liturgy work. What was it we were trying to do in worship of God. Lots of people learned skills, that the generations before hadn't, because there was no point. All they had been allowed to do was open the prayer book at page (whatever) and "read" the service.

The 70's and 80's were the neutral zone of this transition. We had left behind the 1928 services and the "English Liturgy". We were seeking another way that spoke of who we were and of when we were. Temporary rules were put in place to allow this experimentation to happen properly and in order. As a result liturgy flourished. Good stuff and bad stuff and slightly boring stuff. But it flowed and people learned and engaged with what liturgy was about and how to create it.

Then in the late 80's people got nervous. People felt this experimentation couldn't go on forever. The response was that a new prayer book, incorporating the best of the experimentation, was created. We have ended up with a great prayer book, but because of the exponential rate of change in society in general, much of what was shiny, new and relevant, is now almost irrelevant again. Because we had to cease experimenting with liturgy and use what was in the prayer book, we are back to people opening the prayer book at page 404 and reading the service. A whole generation has not learnt what makes liturgy work and how to creatively worship of God.

In this story of transition, there was an ending. A place where the church recognised that the liturgy we had was not working for us. At this point the ending begun. Permission was given to begin experimenting with different liturgy, slowly and in a very limited fashion to begin with and then permission and encouragement grew. We had entered the Neutral Zone. Rules were put in place about what was possible and what was not. People talked together a lot about what they were doing and discussed what the principles they were trying to work with were. The creativity sparked more creativity. People who had had little interest in liturgy, became interested, because there seemed to be the possibility to make a difference.

Then people started getting concerned about the experimentation. A move was made to formalise the liturgies again and to produce a Prayer book. This marks the start of the New Beginning. Once the book had been produced, there was an expectation that only authorised liturgy would now be used. All those people who had worked hard on learning the principles of liturgy now had to just follow what is in the book. People who felt they had a stake in what was happening liturgically found they no longer did. In general people have devolved back to not knowing about what makes liturgy work.



A New Zealand Prayer Book: He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa

So at one level the transition worked. We produced a new and momentarily relevant Prayer Book. But at another level the transition failed, in that the newly learned skills of liturgy were lost when the book was printed. Not enough work was done to encourage this skill to continue to be used and valued. Instead the church reverted back to the previous known place of ... "open the book at page (whatever) and 'read' the service." Now it is just a slightly newer book. Maybe here again we were invited to live with God in the wilderness ... and maybe there was no "promised land" of a completed, set, prayer book. Because God understood our rate of change would so quickly overtake whatever was produced.

Redefine or Reframe the Period

At the moment this long period of “limbo” between what was and what might be can seem very negative or threatening. Some people feel that the Church is dying and that maybe God is too. It is an important task in this period to keep renaming what is happening as a growing place – not a problem.

Things are changing, but let us be clear about what it is that is changing. The way we organise our structure, the way we engage with the rest of the world, the way we express our theology, where we find our ultimate authority. All of these might be changing. But God is not changing, nor is the need and desire for worship and community. The very essentials that are at the heart of our relationship with and faith in God are not about to change. Into the future we might not be able to have parishes or Bishops or Diocese’ in the way we have over the last 400 years. Yet we will still need to organise and support those who wish to meet to offer worship and grow in their experience of God.

Some people fear that this change is a condemnation of what the Church has been doing the last 400 years – or the last 50 years. It needs to be said clearly and repeated often, that we have done a good job of worshipping and following God. The church has, in general, been faithful to their vision and understanding of God. We are now called to listen again, to listen deeper. Then there will be a call to follow and serve God in a different way. As we continue to try to faithfully be God’s people in the world.

People are fearful that changing what we do is giving up on the truth. Or that falling numbers are a sign of failure. It is important to frequently reassure people that they and God are walking together into the wilderness. That this is change, not failure. That this is a path we have been invited onto. We might not know the way ahead, but we have not lost our way. God is going before us and calling us on.

So we are going through a time of change and growth, but we are not going out of existence. The Living God, continues to live and to engage the peoples of this world. These things are not going to change. This message needs to be repeated regularly alongside the message that the change we are involved in is necessary, already happening and has a lengthy time still to run.

It's a Creative time

With any change process comes a certain degree of chaos as old systems change and new ones have to be created. However it is also a time for creativity.

Metaphor of Our Change Process

(This is another picture given to me by God during a prayer time)

Emigrants to New Zealand in 1840's.

There are obvious things that encouraged people to make the change from living in Britain. To give up their known life and risk everything on a trip to "who knows where". They were looking for a better, more tolerant, more lucrative, freer, purer world. They stepped on board the ships because they were told what it would be like on the other side. People painted visions of the South Seas, warm tropical weather, lush growth, plentiful land, and space to become someone. Friendly natives who would welcome new people. There were some limited reports back from others who had travelled there, but largely the reality of emigrating was an unknown. 'None of ours' had experienced it.

So some of the travellers are setting out on this journey willingly, filled with inspiration for what will be. Others are following but less sure of what might be, and conscious of what is being left behind. Others are going with the family, because that is the decision that was made, but they would have preferred to stay put in their known environment, even with its difficulties.



We have stepped on board. We are now "at sea". We know what we have left behind, both positive and negative. But we don't yet know what is coming in the new land we have yet to reach.

We are now caught up in life on board the ship.

It is full of new opportunities; a chance to lose your old identity over board on the journey, and to start with a whole new identity. There is time to play at new things. Chance to meet people you haven't really known before – life time friendships could be forged. As all the old tasks, responsibilities and authorities have been suspended there is a chance to try new

things. New skills will for this time be valued and valuable. With nothing else to do while we await our arrival, people might try things they have always wanted to, and never had the time or the courage to try.

The other reality is, that we can't go back. Even if the trip is unimaginably bad, to go back would mean having to repeat the trip again.

Being in the Neutral Zone, the space between two places, it is natural that things will be different. This allows a chance for experimentation, doing things differently. Sometimes this will be forced on congregations and groups because of the physical changes that are happening to them – they have access to different spaces, the numbers of their group can no longer sustain what used to happen. But it is also possible to take an initiative in this time and deliberately try new things. Perhaps projects that were not possible once, may now be possible. Our new reality will also lead to new possibilities.

People may be prepared to step up to new things during this time, because it is not the norm. So people may be prepared to take on different leadership roles, or to let go those that are no longer needed. All of the skill building that is possible will be a real resource for whatever happens after the Neutral Zone. Despite not knowing what this will be, or what it will look like, leadership will be needed and worship will remain an important part of the community of faith. So having people who can competently and confidently fill these roles will be necessary. Using this transition time to build this resource is a wise use of time.

Because things are different at this moment, people can be more open to a new creative challenge than they might otherwise be. As things are changing anyway, it can be a good time to work with God to see if a bigger more creative change would be beneficial. And rather than just changing the least we can so we remain as much like we used to be as possible, we should ask God if a new shape or a new direction would be helpful at this stage.

A real story: A parish was forced to leave its normal worship space as repairs needed to be made. For several months they had to worship in the hall. The congregation was one that was in the process of greening, and there was some degree of conflict between the older long term parishioners and new younger incomers. This conflict frequently found expression in matters related to the style of worship. A small and struggling choir with a repertoire of organ based hymns was highly valued by the older congregation. The younger members wanted music closer to their own generation's music. In the church building everything was set out to support the logic of the continuation of the choir and its style of music. Once the congregation was in the hall a move to a more relaxed and varied styles of music happened naturally and was not opposed by the older group. They were in a different place, of course things would be different.

Create temporary systems for the Neutral Zone

Old processes no longer work. Sometimes because they have run out of people to make them work, or because we can no longer afford them, or because they no longer make sense (this is sometimes harder to spot than the other two causes).

But new processes haven't yet been created. We don't yet know what God is calling us into. Is it a new system of organising ourselves as Church? Is it to enter fully into the wilderness of an intimate relationship with God? Is it to leave structures behind altogether and be the people of God in the community God has called us to serve? Because we know so little about what the future might be, it isn't possible to create new support structures at this time.

Yet people need to continue to meet and offer worship, to continue to care for and support each other to reach out to those whom God has called us to serve. All this needs some form of organisation, structure and systems. One of the challenges is to find or create temporary ways of organising ourselves, that break free from the old ways that are no longer sustainable, even if they are tantalisingly familiar. We are to create new ways of being and organising. In doing so we need to be careful that we don't unintentionally allow these new systems to become the end point of a discussion and discovery process that is only just beginning. These new systems are only temporary, to get us through... they are not to be confused with the New Beginning to come.

In this process and in this time in the Neutral Zone we need to be careful not to set people up to fail. For a number of years now we have been doing this in the traditional parish model. No matter how you do the counting or measuring, the number of people who choose to be members of the Christian Church are falling, and falling fairly rapidly. Yet in our parish expectations, mainly unspoken, our new vicar is supposed to put all this right. They will have the words or the connection with the community, the leadership gifts, or teaching gifts that will turn everything around and make our congregation grow again. The vicar has just been set up to fail. Clergy sometimes do the same for parishes when they import a new programme into a congregation that has set another parish alight and transformed their fortunes (sometimes in a different country, frequently in very different circumstances). The expectation is that doing this programme here will have the same beneficial effect. The parish has now been set up to fail. This process can happen at every level of the organisation, a diocese can do it to parishes or regions, diocese can do it to Bishops.

It is necessary for much greater conversation to occur before expectations are set up. We need to try and get all the unspoken expectations out on the table, so we can look at them – and where necessary laugh at them and remove them from the table. At times we will need to be clear that we can't be entirely clear what our expectations are as we journey into an unclear future with God. Our tasks may become, not to achieve X, Y and Z, but to remain faithful in listening to God, and to journey where we believe we hear God calling us. Now how would we measure that?!

The leadership skills that people will need in this setting will be quite different from our old set of skills. Following the rules in the Diocesan Handbook, or reading the Statutes of the Church, may keep you out of legal bother, but they may not help much in navigating this new journey with God. Our new leaders may need to have the skills; to know their own relationship with God, to know and be valued by the local community, and to be able to share their treasures of faith with those who are on the journey deeper into God.

Strengthen intragroup connections

When the rock group the Beatles were going through their very messy break up, each of the four members felt they were the odd one out. They were each sure that the other three were “in the know” and excluding just them.



This happens frequently when groups are under stress, especially. So it becomes an important task during the Neutral Zone to keep up the communication with as many people as is possible in your team. In the Church many of our leaders are introverts, which means that they tend to imagine they have communicated when all they have done is think it would be a good idea to tell people something. Introverts need to be really careful to ensure they are doing the communication required. If this is not your skill, then who are you going to deliberately work with, who you trust to gently remind you about communicating?

With all the issues that are flying around at a point of change it is easy to underestimate the importance of communication. There are much more important things that are demanding your time. But if you give into this thought, you will end up wasting more time repairing the fall out from anxious people who feel they are being left out of the discussions and decision making. There may not actually be any discussions or decisions, but people need to know this, so they know they are not missing out, or being forgotten.

It would be good to make clear decisions about how things will be communicated. If you are a leader in some area, you may choose to meet with those who share the leadership with you. In this group you then decide who will share the information with which other groups, so that it is kept moving out to all people who need to hear about what is happening, without you needing to do it all. Decisions can be made about how frequently you will meet to talk about what is happening. Stick to this agreed timetable, even when there is nothing to share ... because then people will know that they have not missed out on things. Also a meeting with no actual agenda can frequently be a place where people feel able to bring up issues that are bothering them, but don't feel they are large enough to impose them in a more important meeting. And if you get to a meeting and there really is nothing to talk about, this is a great time to pray, maybe it is God who has things that need to be communicated.

Your leadership team should also make decisions about what to and what not to share with others in the organisation. In general try to make as much material as possible available to all who wish to know. When you need to restrict some information, ensure that all of the people in the team are clear why this is. If this is not clear they may well inadvertently share unhelpful material in an inadvertent manner. If we don't give information on a matter that people are expecting an answer, they can be very quick to speculate about what the answer is and why it is not being shared. So agree a statement or line of discussion to be used, that lets people know why this information is not able to be released at this time.

In the process of strengthening communication, it is important that as many people as possible get the chance to share their thoughts, concerns and suggestions. Most people are wise enough to know that not all of these will be able to be taken up, or incorporated in the final decisions. However, when people have had a chance to say what they feel God is suggesting, or share their great idea, they will feel heard and be able to stay on board, even when a different decision is made. Of course this requires more than just listening to others input and then dismissing it. Even if the idea is not going to work, try and mine it for the essential elements of it that are compatible with where the group is going, and show how these basic principles are being up held even if the specific idea is not taken up.

Intra group connections can also be strengthened by the leader being visible and available. All leaders will need to pay attention to the pastoral needs of those who are in the group. These needs will increase during this period of waiting on God.

Use a transition monitoring team

There are a number of reasons for using a Transition Monitoring team. One is to ensure that the process of transition doesn't get way laid by other less relevant issues. But also for a monitoring group to be able to work, we would need to be able to articulate to the group what they are to monitor. In the Dunedin Diocese at this moment people are clear that change is required, but there is no agreement as to what that change should be. Many people feel that all that is required is to get in better leadership and everything will go back to the way it was. Others think we need to change our theology and then things will move forward more helpfully. Yet others would like us to leave behind our old fashioned ideas of church and God and move further into the community. Each of these groups has something important to say to us in terms of what God is asking of us into the future. But I don't think any of them have their head around the size of the change that we are involved with at this moment in history. We have left the land we have been living in and we have entered the wilderness. Many people from the Isrealite camp wanted to go back to Egypt, but it was not a possibility. We need to stop looking for things that will allow us to go back to what we are used to. Instead we need to look for the path that God is encouraging us to take into the future. A monitoring team would help in this process, because they would require us to have some idea of where we were hoping to move.

This direction may not be entirely clear, but we could at least work at what are the components that we think would need to be part of any future we wanted to be part of. It is probably good that we can not be clearer than that. Things change so quickly that our goals will change as we make progress and understand more about: our potential, the journey God is inviting us into and the reality of the world in which we make all this real. The transition monitoring team will be a great help in encouraging us to notice what is changing and where and when we might need to change our plans.

An external group will be able to be more hardnosed about the journey we embark on. The pastoral nature of our calling allows us to be held up by the needs of very small groups of people and strong willed individuals. People with a bigger brief will challenge us about the relative importance of individual issues over the larger goals we are aiming for.

The Anglican Church in Taranaki have usefully used a Transition monitoring team in their ongoing transitioning work. Their experience would be a valuable resource for others starting off on this journey.

So what do we do?

To give people some hope and direction through this time it can help to establish some goals. We might not know the final destination or shape of where God is leading us. But we do know some things about God that are unlikely to change. We are a people of God, called to serve and called to help people discover, explore and enhance their relationship with God. So we need to be setting Goals that help people:

1. **Grow closer and deeper in their own relationship with God.**
2. **To grow to know and trust the people they live amongst.**
3. **Learn how to disciple other people.**

Remember, even these three simple things will be beyond us if we try to do them by ourselves. We need to approach each of these as a community of faith.

1. **Grow closer and deeper in their own relationship with God.**

During this time doubt is easy to come by and hard to overcome. So encouraging people into deeper personal relationship with God, to explore what it means to be loved by God, is a good use of time. In the wilderness metaphor, the people of God are forced / sent out into the wilderness. There they are fed by God on a daily basis and without the food provided they would starve as there is nothing else in the desert. This is an image that resonates with me. We are now in an unknown place. It is neither Egypt that we have known and grown accustomed to, even if we did not like our treatment. Nor is it a future "better place". Because we are in this middle bit, then things are not certain or clear. All we have to sustain us is our relationship with God. This makes the normal processes of daily prayer, faithful reading and wrestling with the word of God, very important. Without these disciplines to feed us, we will starve.

If we have the luxury of the time and resource it would be good to make space for regular retreats. Time to leave behind the normal working demands and to concentrate exclusively for a period on our relationship with God. If it is possible to have a led retreat where someone else can help you reflect on a particular situation or theme, that is great. But just taking time to go away somewhere by yourself for several days and be quiet, and pray more regularly and listen carefully for the Word of God to speak to you, is good.

Retreat in Daily Life or Week of Guided prayer is another resource that people might explore. It is a way of taking time out each day for a week to pay attention to our relationship with God. This is more practical for some people who just can't afford to take a week away from their work.

Retreat in Daily Life:

http://www.sgm.org.nz/uploads/2/0/1/6/20165561/clarissa_vicencio-wickens_-_retreat_in_daily_life.pdf

Longer online version:

<http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/cmo-retreat.html>

Another resource which can be very helpful in developing your relationship with God is a Spiritual Director. Normally this resource comes with a cost, and some people may not be able to afford it. But for those who can it is a really helpful resource to have someone who can keep an outside overview and ask you the questions you are avoiding. They also encourage and point you into helpful directions forward or for you to explore. If you can't afford or find a good Spiritual Director, you might well think about finding a group of people who can share together their spiritual journey. A safe place where

people can share what is happening for them (or what is not happening). Monthly meetings to share prayer and listen to each other can be very helpful and encourage members deeper into their relationship with God.

Group Spiritual Direction:

<http://shalem.org/1995/01/01/group-spiritual-direction-what-is-it/>

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/spiritualdirection101/2012/09/how-to-do-group-spiritual-direction/>

2. To grow to know and trust the people they live amongst.

This has two very different faces of creating community

i The Faith Community

For many parishes we now talk about worshipping communities. This is the people who gather together each Sunday (or other appropriate day) to offer worship to God. This is a good and important thing to do. However for many this is all that happens. One meeting a week to worship God. If we are to get through the Neutral Zone we will need to develop much deeper sense of community together. Preaching is a helpful way to break open the word of God, but I don't think that it is sufficient to feed or grow a community. We need to be finding ways to explore together what God is saying to us as individuals (see the section above) but also what God is saying to us as a community of faith located in this place, or connected to this community of interest. Our relationship with other parishioners needs to be more than just sitting politely beside them on Sunday. We need to become more involved with one another, to care for one another. To be ready to challenge one another and to encourage one another in our walk with God and in our daily living.

This runs contrary to all of our current secular society who would say what I do in my life is my own business. Even writing this report I feel nervous about other people having access to my life and relationship with God. But the more I read the Gospels, the more I am convinced that all Jesus asks of us is impossible. If we try to achieve what Jesus sets before us, as individuals, we are not strong enough to do them. It is only when we face these commands and challenges together as a community of faith they we are able to contemplate living them out.

My relationship with the others in my faith community is not an optional extra. If I want to be able to serve God as Jesus directs, I need these other people.. and they need me. So each week I need to be there, not because I like the worship, or the preacher, or the person I sit alongside. I need to be there because it is crucial to me and the others in the congregation. We all need each other. Then we need to start living as if this is true. How we deal with one another would become different. If I have a difference of opinion with the other, at the moment I can just not talk to them or avoid them. Largely this would go unnoticed and uncommented upon. But if I need each other member of this community so that I can be sustained, then I need to work on the damaged relationships. I need to build strong relationships that can and will survive the normal scars and difficulties of life. This may sound daunting (it does to me), but when God and the love of God is involved, then it is possible. This may ask for a bit more of our time than an hour once a week.

We need our worshipping communities to become also faith communities. A community we can rely on to have our back, to stay with us even when things get difficult or mucky. And we need to be do the same for others in our faith community. All of this will make it possible to then attend to the needs of the second form of community that we need to be engaging:

ii The Geographic community / Communities of Interest

Who is it that God has called us to serve. What do they feel, care about, want to have happen in their lives. What are the issues that they worry about, who do they care for, what would they like to change. Becoming connected to the ordinary rhythm of the local community will help us all to know where and how God might be calling us to serve. Do not allow your size, age or lack of resources convince you that you have nothing to offer. These are only minor issues when you are working with God. The greatest gift you will have to offer will always be yourself and the wisdom that God has given to you. Incredibly small things can make big differences if they are offered in the right way at the right time. Your sense of community alone will be highly attractive to many people. Though some will find the radical nature of serious Christian community hard to take in a highly individualised society.

God has called us to serve and love the community in which we find ourselves. This may be the geographic community we are physically based in. But for others it may well be another community of interest. This could be formed around work or leisure groups, or around online communities. All of these can be real communities. All of these groups can do with some assistance to understand their relationship with God better. It is important to engage with these communities knowing that they will already have had some experience of God. They may not yet have learnt how to describe this. Or they may not even be aware of this engagement. But God is always actively trying to engage every human being. So we should not approach the communities we find ourselves in as people who have no ideas about God at all. We are not there to “make” them Christian, but to help them discover, or unfold or understand the relationship with God that already exists. God has begun the work, we are there to assist people to understand and develop, when they are ready for this to happen, when they are open to this engagement.

Of course our call is not just to enhance others relationships to God. We are also called to love and serve, to forgive and support those whom we share this planet with. As we grow into a closer relationship with our communities God will show us the opportunities for serving, loving, supporting and forgiving.

3. Learn how to disciple other people.

Discipling or mentoring is the process of passing on faith to others. It is more than just the passing over of information. It is about helping to form people in the faith. So it entails a relationship that will exist for some time. Working with people as they grow, develop and trial being and doing the faith. This relationship will have benefits for both sides.

There are several programmes and books available providing information about ways that people and faith communities can disciple people.

<http://www.makethefirstmove.org/makethefirstmove>

I believe that some of the Church’s current work on discipling is just slightly off course. It seems that the reason that we are encouraged to disciple people is so they can save the Church. Our work sometimes seems to be to convince people to follow God so they can join our congregation and keep it going. The discipling that I believe we need to learn is one which is all about the person we are mentoring. What is it they need to know? How is God wanting to lead them on in the relationship? Which of the gifts, treasures, toanga that we have discovered will be of use to them? It may be that when we finish this relationship with the other person they decide to have no further connection with the Church. This doesn’t need to be seen as failure, because we have engaged them in their relationship with God, that was our calling. The rest is up to God.

In the Blue Pears dream, this is the final challenge to go and give away Blue Pear saplings. We are not to control what happens next. We are not to replant a Blue Pear orchard, where control of the trees and their output are retained by the Church. We are to trust the love of God and the wisdom of those engaged by God. We give them everything we know about God, that they are interested in. Then we wait to see what God and they will do with this. Again this is not just a transfer of information. We will need to be prepared to live with and engage these people sharing our lives and our experiences. Sometimes it will feel that this sharing has been honoured and valued. At others it may appear that we have wasted out time, or the gift has been squandered. But that is the thing with gifts, you can only give them. What people do with them next is up to them, because it is a gift.

Investing time and energy in these areas during this time of change, seem most likely to use our “waiting time” best. To ensure that we don’t just wander around in a sea of well meaning words, programmes and task it will be useful to set some check points along the way, so that people can see they are making progress. Measuring things can be a trap, but a certain degree of measuring allows people to feel they are not just wasting their time and energy.

So these three things are what I believe God is asking of the Inherited Church (us) in the Neutral Zone. It can look very much like carrying on as normal, they are all tasks we have been told to engage with for a long time. But it is anything but carrying on as normal, because the focus is now utterly different. We are being asked not to do these things to maintain a religious organisation. The reason and focus for doing these things is now to resource the people of God for a future. We aren’t sure what that future is yet, but we believe that God is gently leading us towards this future. The pathway is into the wilderness, leaving behind much of what we have valued in the past. But on the way refocusing on who is at the centre of why we exist and what we do.

The God who loves us is calling us into a new way of being, with God and with our communities.

Creator of the Universe, infinite and glorious
 Give us eyes to see your plan unfolding,
 Your purpose emerging as the world is made;
 Give us courage to follow the truth
 Courage to go wherever you lead,

A New Zealand Prayer Book He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa page 120

Appendix 1:

If the Bible is no longer the Final Authority, it will need to be decided what place the book still holds for us in the Church. To me personally it is clear that the Bible remains the “Living Word of God”. Not because of the unassailable truths it contains, but because God dwells in the book. Every time you open it and read from it, you open yourself up to the living God. God will speak to you if you are seeking to hear from God. It remains for me a holy book, filled with wisdom and mystery. But I no longer believe it is a statute book to which one can appeal for a full and final answer on any and every question. The wisdom of God and God’s people did not end when the final canon was decided.

In conversation with God, I was asked to ponder,
what if the Bible was never intended to be a rule book.

What if it is a family photo album
full of stories of other members of the family
stories of engagement with God
those that went well ... and also those that didn’t

The stories are to encourage us ... and to remind us
about what worked well
and what to learn from those that didn’t.

What if these stories were never meant to have stopped 2,000 years ago
but that we are the continuation of those stories.

And we are to draw courage and inspiration from the family stories
for our continued interaction with God and the Creation.

What if each time we meet a new situation we went,
not just to the Bible,
but to God to know how to handle it or what to do.

Asking a 2,000 year old text to speak into our every modern context
might be to ask quite a lot.

But asking the God that lives in that text
who is always alive and present to us
who created and continues to create
who invites us into the own going creation;

then we might get some interesting answers
or at least some more interesting questions.

and we might add some great new stories
to the continually growing family photo album.

Booklist

The Great Emergence	Phyllis Tickle
Emergence Christianity	Phyllis Tickle
Facing Decline Finding Hope	Jeffery D Jones
Transitions	William Bridges
The Way of Transition	William Bridges
A Generous Orthodoxy	Brian McLaren
The Church is Flat	Tony Jones
Introducing the New Testament	John Drane
Christianity after Religion	Diana Butler Bass
Metavista	Colin Greene & Martin Robinson
Emerging Church	Don Kimble
On leading Change	ed. Francis Hesselbein & Rob Johnston
Building Communities from the Outside in	J Kretzmann & J McKnight
Discontinuous Change	David A Nadler et al
Introducing the Missional Church	Alan Roxburgh & Scott Boren
The Forgotten Ways	Alan Hirsch
Called to Lead	Stuart Crosson
A Churchless Faith	Alan Jamieson
Losing Our Religion?	Kevin Ward

Church Buildings or House-Churches?

truthaccordingtoscripture.com/documents/church-practice/house-churches.php

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[PDF](#)

Biblical and Practical Advantages for Meeting Within Homes

By Darryl M. Erkel

Whenever we think of planting churches, we imagine the process as starting within a home and, eventually, ending with the purchase of a building. We tend to pity those who do not have the means to secure their own "sanctuary." We might even look upon them as "second-class" churches because they lack the apparent amenities of a spacious building. But should house-churches really be pitied? Are they truly "second-class" churches? The following truths will help to answer such questions and, hopefully, demonstrate the practical wisdom of gathering within homes over large, religious edifices.

1. For the first three-hundred years of its existence, the Church of Jesus Christ met almost exclusively in private homes, as opposed to large buildings specially designed for religious services (Acts 20:20; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon v.2; 2 John v.10). Howard Snyder notes that "Christians did not begin to build church buildings until about A.D. 200. This fact suggests that, whatever else church buildings are good for, they are not essential either for numerical growth or spiritual depth. The early church possessed both these qualities, and the church's greatest period of vitality and growth until recent times was during the first two centuries A.D. In other words, the church grew fastest when it did not have the help or hindrance of church buildings" (*The Problem of Wineskins*, p.69).

2. There is nothing wrong about meeting in a building per se. However, if a group chooses to do so it must be careful to not erect a structure or procure internal furnishings which stifle mutual edification and participation from the saints (e.g., pulpit, pews, a rigid "order of worship," etc.). In other words, any property or building must be held lightly and should be an expression of a clear biblical understanding of the true nature of the church. Buildings, therefore, should be *functional* and *conducive* to the body-life principles of the New Testament (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-14; 14:12,26-32; Ephesians 4:11-16; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:24-25; 1 Peter 4:10-11). Structure, you see, *is* important, for the structure of your congregational meetings can either liberate the saints for ministry, or it can suppress genuine interaction and participation!

3. Homes are conducive to the family concept and mutual edification which should mark the gatherings of Christians. It is amazing how "religious" and tight-lipped people get when they enter a church building. The setting and furnishings all give the impression that one has entered the holy of holies and that the only thing expected of him or her is to be silent and "maintain an attitude of worship." What a contrast this is with the atmosphere and setting of the house-church where the saints interact, serve and fellowship with one another! Mutual edification is much easier in a home than in the more traditional church setting. Many people have difficulty sharing burdens or a word of exhortation in a common church structure, but such difficulties are greatly reduced when the assembly meets in a home.

4. To speak of a "church building" is to apply a wrong and misleading name since, according to the New Testament, God's "building" or "temple" is *not a pile of bricks* but, instead, the people of God – "You are God's field, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:9,16-17; 6:19; Hebrews 3:6; 1 Peter 2:5). Is it not obvious that our ecclesiastical traditions have distorted the clear teaching of Scripture? Walter Oetting writes, "If you had asked, 'Where is the church?' in any important city of the ancient world where Christianity had penetrated in the first century, you would have been directed to a group of worshipping *people* gathered in a house. There was no special building or other tangible wealth with which to associate 'church,' *only people!*" (*The Church of the Catacombs*, p.25).

5. A home is a much better setting for the celebration of the Lord's Supper which, by the way, is an informal, full-on meal (Matthew 26:17-29; 1 Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:17-34). The late William Barclay once said, "There can be no two things more different than the celebration of the Lord's Supper in a Christian home in the first century and in a cathedral in the twentieth century. The things are so different that it is almost possible to say that they bear no relationship to each other whatsoever. The liturgical splendor of the twentieth century was in the first century not only unthought of; it was totally impossible" (*The Lord's Supper*, p.101).

6. To spend large sums of the Lord's money on building projects, maintenance and renovation is a waste of God's money (at least in most cases). It is to squander money on that which is to perish. Instead of using such funds to send out more church planters, feed the poor, assist needy believers, and promote the spread of the Gospel, we "evangelicals" have used it to build elaborate cathedrals and huge auditoriums which, in most cases, are only used once or twice a week. Is this being a good steward of the financial resources which God provides? How many churches even stop to consider the necessity of a church building in the first place? Do you think that on the great day of judgment Christ will be pleased with our plush and gaudy edifices? Does it grieve your heart that most "evangelical" churches have a larger budget for building projects, staff salaries, and maintenance than for missions, the poor, and people-oriented ministries? What does this reveal about our priorities?

7. The building of permanent and extravagant structures appears to betray our belief that Christ is coming soon and that, as believers, we are a pilgrim people. One brother has said it well, "To spend wasted money and time building large, beautiful places of worship knowing that the Lord might come at any time was unthinkable to the New Testament church. The fact that the church today has no problem with the idea of spending both time and money building large, extravagant buildings is really only a reflection of just how much we're *not* expecting Jesus to come back any time soon! The church of the first century followed in the footsteps of Abraham and other Old Testament saints who were "looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10) . . . The question must be asked, has today's church demonstrated this 'alien' mindset by its plethora of building plans? Or is it rather the case that our actions show forth a materialistic mindset that has been conformed to this world; one that reasons to the effect that 'We're going to be here for a while so we might as well settle down and get comfortable?'"

8. House-Churches are an effective witness to unbelievers. Meeting within a home means that the Gospel and brotherly, Christian love becomes audible and visible to all. The unbeliever, therefore, observes our fellowship and hospitality as well as hears our prayers and songs. While it is not the only method of witnessing that God may use, it is an effective one.

9. The idea that Christians must meet in specially designed buildings is contrary to the New Testament which places no significance on *where* one chooses to worship (John 4:20-24; Acts 17:24). In fact, such an emphasis on buildings, temples, and external furnishings comes from an Old Testament economy and not from the New Covenant which attaches no importance to such matters.

10. Some have supposed that if Christians were to meet in homes, a great deal of reverence would be lost. The "service" would lose its formality and the proper reverence directed toward God would diminish. But this argument *assumes* that a Christian gathering is to be "formal," whereas we know from the New Testament that early church meetings were quite simple and informal. They were nothing like the highly liturgical and formalistic meetings that mark our places of worship. Moreover, we must remember that reverence is the attitude of one's heart toward God and is, therefore, not dependent upon its external surroundings. Besides, why can't reverence for God be maintained within the house-church setting?

11. It is not necessarily "cultic" to meet in a home. A group is considered "cultic" when its doctrines deviate from Scripture; when it possesses an authoritarian form of leadership; or when individual members are not permitted freedom of thought – *not simply because it chooses to meet within a home!* In fact, the "cultic" argument against house-churches is really counterproductive, for many cults and false religions own vast amounts of property or religious buildings (e.g., Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Science, Masons, Islam, et al.). Should we assume that these groups are legitimate simply because they possess "official" places of worship? Furthermore, many Christian

denominations, which own large churches and property, are not always free themselves from false or aberrational teachings, apostasy or unfaithful pastors? Thus, meeting in an "official" church building is no guarantee that a congregation will be free from cultism or heresy. We must remember the words of John Newton: "Let not him who worships under a steeple condemn him who worships under a chimney."

12. Historically, many renewal movements which helped to correct the abuses of the established and institutional churches, have met within homes (e.g., the Anabaptists, Mennonites, the Methodist "class" meetings, the early Brethren movement). Thus, contemporary evangelicals must remember better their ecclesiological heritage and roots.

13. Persecution has historically forced Christians to abandon official church buildings and meet within homes where, instead of growing weak because they must gather in houses, they have grown strong, close-knit, and learned more fully what it means to be the family of God. *It has been the house-church model which has most consistently promoted such qualities, not the church building model.*

14. The house-church is a culturally relevant model which can be adapted in any geographical region or culture. This is not necessarily so when attempting to erect a church building in a foreign country, for not only do building permits have to be secured before the church can "officially" gather (in some cases taking several months to obtain), but the building itself is often viewed with suspicion and identified more with the "Americanization" of their culture and land. By establishing churches within the existing homes, people will tend to feel less threatened by foreign missionary structures and more apt to participate in a setting that is both familiar and comfortable. Roland Allen, in his classic work, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, 1962), warns of the hindrances which church buildings bring when erected in foreign lands:

By our eagerness to secure property for the church we often succeed in raising up many difficulties in the way of our preaching. We sometimes, especially perhaps in such a country as China, arouse the opposition of the local authorities who do not desire to give foreigners a permanent holding in their midst. We occasionally even appeal to legal support to enforce our right to purchase the property, *and thus we begin our work in a turmoil of strife and excitement which we might have avoided . . .* Now the purchase of land and the establishment of foreign missions in these establishments, especially if they are founded in the face of opposition from the local authorities, naturally suggest the idea of a foreign domination. The very permanence of the buildings suggests the permanence of the foreign element. The land is secured, and the buildings are raised, in the first instance by the powerful influence of foreigners. That naturally raises a question in the native mind why these people should be so eager to secure a permanent holding in their midst. They naturally suspect some evil ulterior motive. They suppose that the foreigner is eager to extend his influence and to establish himself amongst them at their expense (pp.53,55).

15. The church building model, with its plush carpeting, soft pews, and various attempts to encourage a family-home atmosphere, will never fully achieve its goal because, from the outset, it's the wrong setting and structure. *Unconsciously, it is desperately trying to be a house-church, but never will.* It wants all the benefits and blessings which meeting in a home brings, but is unable to shed its rigid and institutional shell.

16. The argument that the early church was forced to meet within homes because of persecution will not stand for the following reasons: (1) Persecution of Christians was not as intense and widespread as is commonly assumed. It was sporadic and did not necessarily affect all the churches at the same time. (2) When persecution did arise, they primarily gathered in the catacombs where greater safety and privacy could be found. (3) Even when persecution did break out, the early Christians made it no secret where it met; hence Saul knew just where to go when he sought to imprison Christians (Acts 8:3). The interesting point here is that when believers were faced with persecution, *many of them still continued to meet within homes.* This demonstrates a continued preference, even in the face of hostility, for the house-church model.

17. Even the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, believed in and understood the value of having Christians meet within homes in order to have their services. In fact, Luther wrote about three types of divine services. The Latin liturgy and the German service were for the unlearned people, many of whom were not even believers. Those services should continue, he believed, for the primary purpose of evangelism. However, a third kind of service was most needful – a "truly evangelical" one. It would be held privately for those "who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the Gospel with hand and mouth." Luther describes such a gathering:

[They] should sign their names and *meet alone in a house* somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reproved, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ (Matthew 18). Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example (2 Corinthians 9). Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set out a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer, and love (cf. Ulrich S. Leupold, *Liturgy and Hymns*, Vol.53 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965] pp.53ff).

Luther confessed, however, that he did not have the people to implement such an important task (this is because church attendance in Protestant territories was compulsory and also because a high percentage of the members were unregenerate):

As yet I neither can nor desire to begin such a congregation or assembly or to make rules for it. For I have not yet the people or persons for it, nor do I see many who want it. But if I should be requested to do it and could not refuse with a good conscience, I should gladly help and do my part as best I can.

What needs to be understood here is that Luther was not talking about a small group within a large parish. Rather, he was talking about small house-churches with their own sacramental practice and ministry of the Word!

18. The kind of church meeting described in the New Testament suggests a small group setting as its primary worship context. Much of what the New Testament records about early church gatherings will not fit into the large group meeting, no matter how much we try to force it. Paul's exhortations to the various churches *presupposes* the small group or house-church setting:

The size of the house-church becomes a crucial factor for the relative effectiveness of other New Testament church practices as well. The Lord's Supper (properly conducted with one loaf and one cup), the Love Feast, mutual participation, etc., are all essential elements of a church meeting; yet all have been fully or partially abandoned in today's church simply because these practices are no longer functional. Why have ceased to be functional? It must be kept in mind that the letters which are written to the New Testament churches are in fact written to *house-churches*. Because they are written to house-churches the instructions contained in them are geared to work in a small group setting – they were never *meant* to work in a large group setting. Consequently, they *don't* work in a large group setting. To attempt to apply New Testament church practices to our contemporary large church is just as unnatural as pouring new wine into old wineskins (Matthew 9:17). Ironically, the institutional church structure has attempted to rectify this by abandoning the "new wine" and holding on to the "old wineskins." Consequently, today's church more closely resembles Judaism or Catholicism than it does *New Testament Christianity* ("Toward A House-Church Theology" [Part 2] *New Testament Restoration Newsletter* [October – 1991, Vol.1/No.6] p.2).

Written by Darryl M. Erkel (1997)

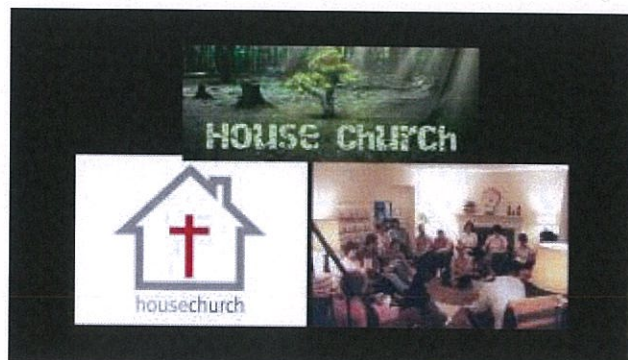
Related Videos

Returning to the Biblical Church life that Jesus gave to us through the Apostles. Eph2:20 Contrasting anti-biblical churches vs biblical churches.

Suggested Reading:

Del Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988).

[ed. Steve Atkerson] *Toward A House-Church Theology* (Atlanta, GA: New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1996).



John R. Davis, "How Church Structures Can Effectively Help or Hinder Church Growth," *Evangel* (Autumn – 1992), pp.73-83.

Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Reprint, 1994). See also Robert & Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Australia: Albatross Books, 1986).

Frank A. Viola, *Rethinking the Wineskin: The Practice of the New Testament Church* (Brandon, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 1997).

Lois Barrett, *Building the House Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).

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The following article is located at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/august/2-wrong-ways-to-think-about-church-buildings.html>

Ed Stetzer Blog, August, 2013

JANUARY 9, 2020 LEADERSHIP, MISSIOLOGY

2 Wrong Ways to Think About Church Buildings

What Churches Should Avoid When Considering Construction

ED STETZER | POSTED 8/13/2013



I am often invited to speak to a lot of different churches in a lot of different buildings. Some churches obviously put great care and thought into their building. It clearly reflects portions of their theology and serves to further their ministry goals. Others? Not so much.

So, with that in mind, what are some of the most common mistakes pastors make in church design and the building of facilities? In other words, what things should churches avoid when considering church construction?

It seems to me that leaders can go in two different wrong directions with their church building in a society like ours—they can think too trendy or they can think too

permanent.

Thinking Trendy

Most of us have probably driven by a church with green windows and roof that looked like it was from *The Brady Bunch*. These churches built trendy in the 1970s and now they're regretting that. A photo slideshow of "[The Ugliest Churches in the World](#)" finds most of them went for a modern look that's not so modern anymore.

But, even more than the aesthetic appeal of a church building, I think many churches are going to wish they had not built gigantic multi-thousand seat auditoriums, and many others will regret the quaint columns and brick building on the edge of town.

I think many churches are going to wish they had not

For example, before planting my current church, I served as an interim pastor for a church in Nashville with a 3,000-seat auditorium. Meeting with the staff before I left, we all agreed that if the church were started today, we would not build in the same way. However, the same can be true for several of the churches I've served through a church revitalization process. The building is no longer a help and they wish they had done it differently.

built gigantic multi-thousand seat auditoriums.

Think about a church like [LifeChurch](#). They are one of the largest churches in the nation, and yet their buildings do not generally seat thousands. There is a definite "technologification" of gathering and the facilities are utilitarian. Now, I think that there are some unintended side effects to this, but it has undoubtedly opened up new possibilities to churches today.

[I've written before about what I believe the future of multisite will look like](#)—forgoing a large building at the beginning in order to intentionally plant churches and venues across a single region. This method enables churches like [Seacoast](#) and others to overcome some of the problems that can be problematic for other multisite methods.

Those who are adapting and planning for the future avoid the pitfalls of trendiness and often build buildings that can be turned into something else. They can be used as a liturgical, contemporary, or traditional facility, but if the church outgrows, they can repurpose. If it declines, they can take appropriate action.

Churches who merely try to stay trendy are in a never-ending pursuit.

Churches who merely try to stay trendy are in a never-ending pursuit. Styles change. They always have. Those churches whose thinking is driven by current popularity will have buildings that no longer suit their needs and will fade out of style.

Thinking Permanent

Every year, LifeWay Research and Outreach Magazine release a list of the 100 largest churches. Of those, many weren't in existence 20 years ago, while most of the rest have built a new facility or moved to a new location since then. Some of the biggest churches 20 years ago are now empty shells—either closed or relocated. And, might I add, often great new churches exist where they once were.

The problem is that most churches thought their building was a permanent representation of their congregation.

We may need a better way. Even those who want to build impressive liturgical structures may need to consider whether or not this makes sense, particularly if we do not live in a French village that will be the same in 500 years.

Some of the biggest churches 20 years ago are now empty shells—either closed or relocated.

For example, just this week in Minneapolis, a Lutheran church closed. The [story explained](#).

Part of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Bethlehem thrived into the 1950s when as many as 1,800 people filled its pews. But it has struggled, like many urban churches, to hold onto its members. What began with the white flight of the 1960s was only exacerbated by the collapse of manufacturing in the central city, the recession and a growing trend in society away from organized religion, especially mainline Christian churches. In recent years, membership has dwindled to about 150 people, many of them elderly and shut-ins, according to Pastor Micah Wildauer, who split his time between Bethlehem and nearby Hope Lutheran Church. Most Sundays, attendance hovered around 50.

This church is not a mainline church, but an LCMS church, but either way the trend of relocation is clear. I don't know if this church declined—I do know that it has relocated. Yet its building did not. Now it is closing.

Perhaps churches should consider what business people call the "mall cycle." A new mall—or lifestyle centers, as they call them now—gets built in an area full of people. In 15 to 20 years, the people have moved farther out, so a new mall is built in that area, leaving the old mall vacant. It recently happened where I live in Tennessee. A large retail store moved 10 miles to be with the growth in the newer development.

Businesses recognize this (at least the smart ones do) and build accordingly. They understand that their building is temporary and will be replaced one day. The business wants to be where the people are, not necessarily where they have been for decades. They know the mall cycle is a reality for them. They know those buildings won't last forever.

That's not how a lot of pastors and leaders build churches, though. They build church facilities as if they'll be there for hundreds of years. They sink the majority of their budget into an enormous building that removes all flexibility from the church.

After population has shifted from their area, they are left unable to go where the people are. Instead, many feel trapped in an attractional ministry model because they are trying to draw in people who do not live near their building.

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Methodists and Baptists planted thousands of churches in areas like Tennessee and North Carolina. How did it happen? Churches, entire congregations, would move down from Pennsylvania and other northern areas to start new churches on the frontier. They had a mobility and flexibility that many churches lack today. Those modern churches cannot move because they planned as if building would be a permanent fixture.

I've written extensively (though, at times, begrudgingly) on [how churches should respond to neighborhood transition](#). Yet, at the end of the day, you have to ask—what do you do when the church (which is a who) and the building (which is a where) are no longer in the same place?

Some will say that the answer is house churches-- and I am an advocate of such churches. Yet, the facts just don't demonstrate that [house churches are making much of an impact](#), at least proportionally. So, for now, most will build buildings and they need to do so discerningly.

The Impact of Wrong Thinking

There are some long-term theological consequences from failing to think biblically when it comes to a church facility. When we glorify trendiness, we unite the message of Christ with faddish architecture, giving the impression that the unchanging gospel will one day become irrelevant.

When we view our building as our legacy—as the thing that will last—we tie the church, which Jesus founded and against which the gates of hell will not prevail, to a building, which will crumble and collapse in a matter of time.

Now, I mentioned several kinds of churches in the article-- big and small-- and some might say I am being critical of the big church or the more traditional/liturgical church. In both cases, that misses the point. These observations partly come from the pastors of those churches who wished they had built differently (and probably will next time). And, for that matter, trends show that [there will be more, not less, megachurches in years to come](#). I just think many will reconsider their building strategy (as will churches of all sizes).

I'll address more of the transcendent issues related to church architecture later, but for now: when church leaders allow a misplaced desire for trendiness or a mistaken view of their permanence to drive their conversations and decisions, they are likely making a mistake that will hinder their work well into the future.

When we view our building as our legacy, we tie the church to a building which will eventually crumble and collapse.

