

Concrete, Candles and Communion

How a faith community changed through a dialogue of difference.

Sherri Weinberg

It is a privilege to be here. I pay tribute to the Gadigal Clan of the Eora Nation. This is magnificent land indeed.

THE GREETING: tena koto; tena koto; tene koto katoa.

I bring greetings from the lovely land and people of Aotearoa New Zealand. My name is Sherri Weinberg. I am from Devonport, a beautiful part of Auckland's North Shore. I am an ordained minister currently serving the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand at St Paul's Presbyterian Church in Devonport. It is an honour and privilege to have been invited to tell the story of St Paul's as we have journeyed from a point of closure to becoming a viable, effective and growing church whose renewal is based upon the introduction, philosophy and practice of progressive religion and interfaith principles. This is a practical presentation that invites you to experience the reality of change in a church, the implications and responses from the people and the presbytery.

My thanks to Greg Jenks, Rex Hunt, Jonathon Rea, and the rest of the organizing team for the invitation to share our story and the hope we have for our future, at the 2007 Common Dreams Conference.

INTRODUCTION:

A story: A small child stood with his mother watching a gifted sculptor take up tools to begin work on a large block of stone. As work progressed and the artist coaxed lovely shape and form from the block of stone the little child turned to his mother and asked, "Mummy, how did she know that statue was in there?"

Six years ago St Paul's of Devonport was on the point of closure.

BACKGROUND:

The church:

The Presbyterian Church was established in Devonport on Auckland's North Shore in 1866. St Paul's was the "mother" church in the area from whom many other churches on the North Shore were birthed. The present church was built on the slopes of Mt Victoria (Wikitoria in Maori) and opened in 1916. It is a lovely "cottage" church which seats approx. 250 people, has a sloping floor, perfect acoustics, an original Croft organ and a magnificent stained glass window imported from England. It is listed as an historic place with a Category A listing which means it is protected under the historic places act.

The cemetery:

The surrounding cemetery is much older. The land upon which the church was built had been gifted to the church by the local council in 1850 as burial grounds which were gazetted closed in the 1890's. Significantly, it is the final resting place of many of Devonport's earliest settlers. Over the years the cemetery has suffered extreme desecration and vandalism.

Noxious trees, scrub, blackberry, and weeds attested to the neglect, generated in part by the old belief that the dead are buried, gone and ‘forgotten’ and it is the living that is important. Fortunately we have experienced a radical swing away from this attitude in the 20th century as more and more of us search for our genealogical roots. We must acknowledge that it was, and continues to be, fashionable to turn old cemeteries into “lawn cemeteries”.

The cemetery is an archeological site and is bordered by a pre European stone wall.

What to do with the cemetery became a point of conflict both within the church and in the community. Neighbours became watchdogs resulting in deep distrust and suspicion, further entrenching negative attitudes towards the church.

There are approximately 130 burial sites. 63 are identifiable but all needed restoration work.

There’s a certain irony about resurrecting a graveyard to resurrect a church.

The church and the cemetery are situated beautifully, providing a gateway into Devonport village.

RECENT PAST:

Some of you will be familiar with the following scenario:

Consistently falling numbers of attendees and communicant members over a period of years had resulted in a decrease in personnel to fulfill normal church ‘duties’. The flow on effect of the falling roles was a steady reduction in income through the weekly offering, the churches main source of funding. Naturally, this increased financial constraints and put pressure on the ability of the church to meet the costs of ordained ministry, daily operating costs and ongoing maintenance.

Because of the precarious financial position of the parish, the incumbent minister realized his tenure was in jeopardy and severed the pastoral tie between himself and the parish.

The long vacancy that followed his departure compounded the growing fear of closure. Power, control and dominance issues within the Session and Board of Managers became more and more overt as the vacancy extended. Although several new initiatives were trialed, they were largely unsuccessful and did not halt the downward spiral of St Paul’s. The Session and Board of Managers became more and more tired and dispirited.

The Presbytery of North Shore were already involved with the parish through the Board of Nomination. However, recognising the necessity for change at a deeper level, Presbytery made the decision to provide additional funding for a two year period to support *one last chance* calling upon donations from the 14 parishes that make up Presbytery. 12 parishes responded.

THE BRIEF:

Along with the funding assistance from Presbytery, the parish committed all financial resources so that a full-time stipended ministry was possible for an initial period of two years, to explore future direction and ministry potential for St Paul’s. Advertised as “Transitional Ministry” (IIM in Australia) for an ordained minister with knowledge and experience of change processes, this was to be a new venture. What the new venture was was unclear. It was incumbent upon the ‘transitional minister’ to develop a new ministry that would breathe

new life into the church and resurrect it. Should this new 'venture' fail, Presbytery would close St Paul's.

Although advertised as a 'transitional ministry' this was not a fixed term appointment in the normal TM way. Should the new venture succeed the ministry was able to be continued.

Inherent in the brief was the trust the people of St Paul's, and the Presbytery, were investing in the incoming minister.

Response to the advisement.

I answered the advertisement because the challenge of resurrecting a church appealed to me and I believed my experience, training and ability could be appropriately used in this circumstance.

As a citizen of Aotearoa New Zealand I honour and connect with the Spirit of the Land and respect the Tangata Whenua. I am a senior minister in the PCANZ having served the church for 25 years, in both a lay and an ordained capacity.

The work of Robert Funk and the Westar Institution had a big impact on the direction of my ministry when, in the 1980's the Bob Funk and the Westar Institute brought the Jesus Seminar Road Show to Aotearoa NZ. I was introduced to a new and challenging perspective of religious thought, the life and teachings of Jesus and how the "Jesus message" still had the potential to challenge the institutionalism of the church in the 21 century. It was a challenge I took seriously and continue to base my ministry upon with the result that change management in the church became my passion.

I have a MA in Religious Studies through Victoria University. Jim Veitch, Fellow of the Westar Institute was my supervisor.

I am a practical visionary and intentionally exercise my gift of intuition:
I am a Qualified TM (Transitional Minister or Intentional Interim Ministry as it is known in Australia) practitioner and have also gained qualifications in such change management processes as ADR (Alternative Disputes Resolution); LEADR (Lawyers engaged in alternative disputes resolution) and mediation processes

When I applied for the position I recognised the importance of being very clear about my radical theological stance and that I ministered in an open and inclusive way which seemed to match the Statement of Intent of St Paul's which was open and inclusive.

Foundation for and reality of change:

Throughout the interview processes it became clear that my experience and the challenge of St Paul's could be compatible. Recognising that there was a lot of work to do to stop the current downward slide and reverse the trends it was important for the Board of Nomination and the parish to know there were no quick-fixes, shortcuts nor guarantees of success.

Clearly, there was an urgent need for change at St Paul's and there seemed to be a willingness amongst the congregation that radical ministry would be accepted and change process be implemented. As far as I was aware the whole community agreed that change was inevitable and they were accepting of the necessity for "a new thing" to be instituted. It soon became apparent that the great distance between knowing change was needed, and actually

implementing and carrying out change, was insurmountable for some and congregational numbers reduced even further.

By necessity and keeping faith with the 'contract' the first year was one of rapid change. It was a time of great insecurity for the parish. Such leaps of faith are almost unsustainable for long periods and within a short period of time I had faced a series of challenges from the 'gatekeepers' which were unpleasant and destructive. They became very resentful and resisted many of the suggested initiatives claiming I was interfering. *We have never done it that way before* did not translate into *let's give it a try* but rather *we have never done it that way before, we are not going to start no and look out if you try!* Harmony and unity became fragmented and people took 'sides'.

Fortunately, others recognised the importance and necessity of moving forward. Within eighteen months the impact of "breaking the taboos" was being felt. As the wider community heard what was happening at St Paul's they slowly became involved with the result that resignations were being balanced by the influx of new people, many of whom were well educated professionals who appreciated the open, accepting stance.

Impact of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand decisions about leadership: During the period of 2004 and 2006 the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand explored and subsequently ratified restraints upon leadership passing recommendations into church law, that people in defacto relationships or who were in gay or lesbian relationships were barred from exercising any form of leadership with the Presbyterian Church. Although St Paul's agreed not to adhere to this ruling, many new members of St Paul's left, unwilling to be associated with a church body who could impose such draconian laws.

Presbytery: Compounding the issues within the Parish was the attitude of Presbytery. Although the interview process was professionally done, it quickly became clear that Presbytery did not understand the difference between a pastoral ministry and a transitional ministry and this confusion was translated to the Parish. The lack of clarity around roles and expectations impacted upon the ministry and caused confusion for both myself and the Parish.

BREAKING THE TABOOS:

Every church has its taboos both local and national. Those 'taboos' often create a stranglehold that stifles change. Exploring, questioning and putting aside those aspects of church life and structure that were no longer relevant in the church was very necessary and very threatening. Many of those who had committed their support found they could not keep that promise and left thereby creating the freedom to engage in conversations around change at a deep and profound level.

In particular, those conversations that took place around the difference between perceived value and real value of the past; traditions that were purely habit and no longer any value to the work of the church and those that needed to be retained, were an extremely important aspect of empowering the faith community if it was to take ownership of the changes. Finding a healthy relationship between past and the present for the future became one of the primary topics for conversation.

THE STARTING POINT:

The Statement of Intent has been instituted in 1994

St Paul's is an open and inclusive congregation where all people can come together to focus on Jesus and His life and teaching. How we work that out in our own lives, and how we express that is the form of beliefs, is left to the people themselves. Anyone may become involved in the life of our congregation at whatever level they feel is right for them

The Aim arose out of the Statement of Intent:

To: welcome diversity & honour difference

Based on these focal statements the following conversations have taken place over the past 5 years and they continue:

THE CONVERSATIONS:

Exploring our emerging identity:

- Who we are as a Presbyterian Church within the context of Aotearoa New Zealand?
- How to acknowledge the tangata whenua and retain our integrity as an institution that has different cultural roots?
- How to honour our ancestors in the faith and restore faith with them?
- How to experience, respect and honour ourselves and each other as uniquely and individually sacred
- How to come together as individuals with the freedom to celebrate the sacredness of self and build community honouring the rich diversity we hold collectively?
- Identifying the needs of the wider community and seeking ways to meet those needs.
- How to go beyond discussion and meetings and 'walk the talk'
- How to measure outcomes.

There always needs to be a starting place for conversations around change and because this is a church, by necessity the starting point was our understanding of who and what Jesus was. That meant exploring what was identified through conversation as a "Sunday School" image of Jesus as lord and saviour: being introduced to a different way of thinking about Jesus as a man of his time with a vital and profound message for his listeners: how that message continues to be important in the 21 century, and what impact taking the message seriously at St Paul's could have.

Through study and conversation the community gradually moved from "*the man to the message*". Using the work of the Jesus Seminar, the Jesus stories were retold using modern scholarship and interpretation and by using modern teaching materials. This in turn assisted with the questions of relevancy of scripture as it became clear there was a place for scripture when the teachings of Jesus were viewed from all perspectives and not just a theological one. Lively conversations around the historical perspective, the social scientific perspective, and a justice perspective in the ancient Mediterranean took place. An awareness of the impact upon the Western world in the 21st century emerged. Gradually, St Paul's began to ask how the teachings of Jesus could be applied in our society and what would that "look like".

Through an open process of conversation, the community gradually saw the difference between exclusivity and inclusivity. The Statement of Intent and our Aim began to take on fuller meaning

As the community gained a deeper understanding of what being exclusive and becoming inclusive actually meant the view that only Christian Church had the ‘truth’ and was the caretaker of one true faith through salvation by grace became redundant. In its place there was a growing openness to:

- develop an understanding of interfaith practice, and integrate interfaith principles;
- accept all people including people with disabilities regardless of the disability.
- learn what others have to teach us.
- intentionally oppose the churches ruling barring gay and lesbian people, and people living in de facto, from leadership.
- be as open and as transparent as possible.
- not play “old boys network’ games.
- challenge injustice whenever we could
- actively promote peace

From sacrosanct to sacred:

Exploring different ways of celebrating life, we discovered a deeper richer meaning of the sacred and use symbols as metaphor; symbols that were rich with meaning for the worshipping community, for example - candles celebrating the warmth of community and used every Sunday in a range of ways including the ancient religious pagan ways of acknowledging earth, water, fire, air. A renowned artist allows us free use of his art as we seek to give practical expression to faith and the sacred. Many other medium are used to enhance and tell alternative stories.

The liturgy for communion is much more flexible and at times spontaneous, and involves the community serving each other as we gather around the communion table to share the bread and wine – (which one of our autistic members calls “the cup of love and the bread of life”) intentionally honouring and respecting ‘being’ in communion, together.

As the community of St Paul’s journeyed from being **concrete** and inflexible, bound by rules, regulations, creeds and doctrines, the importance of our founding documents, the relevancy of them for past faith communities, how those communities developed structures that shaped and formed the foundation of the church, became clear. While we understood the importance and value of the founding documents of the Presbyterian Church for the past, we also recognised the church had changed and there was an urgent need for modern interpretation and implementation.

Learning to celebrate and respect our founding documents for what they were, the community were able to recognise the importance of not to be bound by them any longer. The consequences were very challenging and, at time, difficult to sustain, particularly as St Paul’s came under the spotlight of Presbytery more and more.

An emerging management structure saw the collapse of the Session and Board of Managers collapsed. For a period of 18 months 3 elders, treasurer and the minister ‘held the space’ and waited as more people became involved in the church. Decisions were made involving the entire faith community, which caused serious problems for Presbytery and eventually saw the institution of a Commission after two ‘visitations’.

As old structures were examined the dominance of the patriarchal structure became more and more apparent and alternative processes were explored. To find a way into new and appropriate processes we looked to indigenous processes for guidance and explored how

Maori processed decision making on the Marae; how decisions were made by the Aboriginal people of Australia; how the Circle process worked for First Nations people in North American, and we discovered that each process used a 'consensus' approach after listening carefully and respecting individual input. The book "The Circle Process" written by Peter Lawson was introduced to the new management team as a possible way forward with the happy result that St Paul's adopted a new process. Recognising the importance of redefining terms we named it a "Support Circle" and only use the term 'Church Council' when dealing with Presbytery.

Buildings as resources: because the financial situation at St Paul's was so precarious it was important to change our thinking about how ministry was funded. As a radical departure from what had been the norm, that the Sunday offering totally supported ministry, we advertised our halls and rooms, including the ministers vestry and the choir room, (both no longer used for their original purpose) for hire. Within a short time the entire 'plant' was generating an income stream that provided the base income, supplemented by the Sunday offering.

To understand the church and other buildings as a community resource is important if the community is to feel welcome to avail themselves of them. The following groups are currently using the halls on a long term basis: the Siedo Karate Club; two dance groups; two artists; an elderly day care called The Centre for Mutual Aid. Alongside long term hire, the church and buildings are used on a more casual basis to celebrate sacred occasions such as funerals, weddings, concerts, meditation, seasonal celebrations, interfaith gatherings; to provide space for support groups, counseling rooms, viewing rooms, family court interviews with the Justice Department and so on. The church is open and accessible on a daily basis. Sacred music generates an ambience that is both welcoming and peaceful. A visitors book attests to the large number of people from all over the world who visit and rest awhile. We have hosted celebrations for 25 years of Devonport and 20 years of Aotearoa NZ being Nuclear Free. The Devonport Civil Defense Welfare Centre was opened by the Prime Minister, Helen Clark, in 2005 and continues to provide Civil Defense facilities. We too often limit our resources by being unable to imagine alternative uses for them or by being overly protective.

Restoration of the cemetery: Significantly, it has been the restoration of the cemetery that has changed the energy within the church and has raised the public profile of the church within the community. That the church and surrounding grounds are the unofficial entranceway to Devonport village, the public has become very aware of the significance of the cemetery to Devonport itself. This has resulted in a groundswell of support and involvement from the wider community who have become involved with the faith community and, together, have raised significant funds for the project and assisted with the physical labour.

As the restoration work has commenced we are acutely aware that we are honouring our ancestors both within the community of faith and in the wider community of Devonport. In an indefinable way the spiritual energy of the place has been rebalanced.

The project has also been vitally important in that the church has regained the trust of faith of the wider community, lost through the dissent and disputes of the past. Past bad publicity has been overcome and there is now a 'park' for families and a path to the summit of Mt Victoria (Wicitoria) freely used by members of the community.

The restoration project has been ‘mapped’ and the information and data that has been gathered now provides a significant genealogical resource for people seeking information about their ancestors to the extent that enquires are received from all over Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia.

The impression of the church in the community is now one of constant activity and change rather than just a Sunday destination. Open doors, open minds, and open hearts.

IMPACT OF INTENTIONAL RADICAL CHANGE:

Engaging in open, transparent conversation is a 2 edged sword.

It opens up alternatives therefore creating a sense of hope and excitement and requires a willingness to explore new initiatives that is not limited by doubt nor distrust.

It requires the ability to “hold the space” and waiting for appropriate initiatives to emerge through conversation, listening to each other and the wider community, and being open to learn rather than imposing what is thought to be the right thing.

It requires acceptance of possible failure and learning from mistakes made rather than being critical and damning. Celebrating successes is a great way to balance failure and those celebrations take place in the form of outings, community dinners and having fun together. As the community celebrates and learns from its mistake, gradually a foundation of trust is growing particularly when each person knows they can step outside their comfort zones without criticism or judgment knowing that their individual skills, ability and life’s experience are valued and welcomed.

It requires the ability to be opened to being surprised and an awareness of timing – knowing when the time to let go of that which is no longer appropriate or effective, and when to retain that which has possibility or is ‘putting out green shoots’.

It’s being willing to spend time and interact with non-traditional belief sets or thought processes and recognise their relevance in today’s society and also to recognise when niche groups are being inappropriate and having the confidence to deal with them in a unified, mature way.

Perhaps the most important aspect of intentional radical change is having the willingness and ability to nurture and hold each other through the challenging time when adversity seems to prevail. A unified community is a very strong community.

Conversely intentional radical change challenges closely held views and can cause or trigger deep pain and/or bewilderment: feelings of insecurity and devaluation: a sense of betrayal and resentment: cliques and ill feeling: a depth of lament not normally experienced as traditional religious practice is challenged and, in some cases, set aside.

To manage the ‘trauma’ of change it is important for that the practitioner be well trained and qualified in the understanding of grief and change. It requires deep compassion and an in-depth knowledge of grief processes as it is important to assist people through this time of loss which invariably triggers past losses, both big and small. It requires patience and the ability to allow time for people to work through their pain and grief and come to a place of acceptance in their own time. Too often we want to rush this uncomfortable process which is not helpful and can be destructive in the long term.

CONCLUSION:

While there is an incredible freedom for a faith community to be gained by daring to enter into dialogues of difference necessary for change, it has to be recognised that that freedom comes at a significant cost. To be able to engage at a deep level about issues of faith, spirituality and the sacred is wonderfully validating and liberating and at the same time deeply troubling. To hear the profound wisdom in the teachings of Jesus and know they contain a key to social justice and reform is ignored at peril. To honour and respect the value and importance of other faith traditions offers the challenge and opportunity to enter into a deepening understanding of the sacredness of life in all its forms.

On a personal note...it has been necessary for me to be willing to go the extra distance and to take up further accountability when parishioners have chosen to exit and to be diligently faithful on holding the space so that the new ventures could emerge. This has been a time that has been both exhilarating and exhausting, and, at times has led me to despair for the future of the church, even in the midst of great joy. I have been tested to the maximum of my experience and knowledge and learned far more than I ever expected to.

The lovely shape and form of the church is beginning to emerge from the concrete of the past.

A story: A small child stood with his mother watching a gifted sculptor take up tools to begin work on a large block of stone. As work progressed and the artist coaxed lovely shape and form from the block of stone the little child turned to his mother and asked, "Mummy, how did she know that statue was in there?"

What shape and form is waiting to be coaxed into being in your sacred space?

I hope that some of the things I have shared will be of assistance to you on your journey of discovery.