

Uneasy Rider ? The Challenge to a Ministry of Word and Sacrament in a Post-Christendom Missional Climate



Introduction.

The origins of this lecture are located in some of the work I have been doing in continuing education with Ministers in the last 18 months in Auckland and wider with leaders in the Northern and Kaimai Presbyteries. While attempting Doctor of Ministry studies, I have been coaching a group of seven Ministers in growing new leadership capacities for leading culture change in their congregations. The latter also represents a new initiative of KCML in piloting processes of ordained ministry development tied to the need of experienced Ministers to re-skill and re-frame their leadership. We are all aware of the challenging environments that congregations function in. The landscape in which churches operate is becoming more complex in which uncertainty and particular forms of rapid change are normalised. The Presbyterian footprint is an established one, but waning in post-denominational times and there is widespread realisation that many of our Presbyterian and CV congregations are faced with critical adjustments to their continuing viability and presence in their neighbourhoods and communities.

Of course that scenario is a troublesome one and the source of much of the energy for change. A tremendous amount of anxiety circulates around church decline and viability and the pressure for change. It is the hot potato that won't cool down. But it has at least brought something to our attention. The way in which we are the church in our society, and even the way we practice our faith is no longer available in the same way it was. The Church's external environment has become as it has for many institutions a fluid, unstable and confusing space to exist in. While historical change is a given, it appears we entered a particular kind of change in the latter part of the 20th century that is having radical ramifications for cultures, societies and nation states. For the Church, displaced from occupying the centre of Western culture, and having seen the Christian story lost from the public square, it is a mission context that we no longer know how to engage.

This introduction mentions the larger context because as we begin to drill down into our own dilemmas facing church leadership and congregational change, it is all too easy to concoct theories of what went wrong inside our church. We do not notice that there are much deeper contextual shifts taking place that shape church systems and people's imaginations. (For instance decline of membership in the Presbyterian Church that occurs from the late 1960's onwards has more to do with contraception and women moving into the workforce than it does with theological controversies.)

By acknowledging a changing context and the resultant pressures on both churches as organisations and on peoples mindsets, we are going to be fairer to church leaders who are caught up trying to make sense of this and form a response. Importantly we are also going to see that there is no fix. However we do like fixes. If we focus on discipleship, if we become a kids friendly church, if we restructure leadership into ministry teams, if we develop a vision and mission plan, if we survey the community to ascertain its needs, are all fixes.

While these may have intrinsic value, none of these are sufficient to describe or account for what is taking place and how we might respond. They are internal church solutions. They do not drill deep enough into the ways in which all churches and leaders operate in a context that is demanding a different way of framing where we are and what is happening. The approaches, capacities and skills we need are not going to be learnt while we labour under the misapprehension that we just need to get back on track, or just find a way to get the church to work better.

And this brings me to the picture which accompanies this lecture. While listening to me, you will have formed your own interpretations of this delightful picture and its title. This is a visual entre to what I am discovering as I relate to current ministers and their challenge of leading congregational change and adaptation.

As gifted and called people selected by the PCANZ and formerly trained by this institution, most ministers are not without the qualities and theological nous to navigate the basics of congregational leadership. Many have the kind of experience that enables them to be good pastoral practitioners, sensitive liturgists, practical preachers of scripture, and competent managers of community life. However it is evident many ministers struggle when it comes to the practices of leading systemic congregational change in a complex social environment. "To Make Christ Known" sounds so simply as a church mission statement. But for leaders it can seem a long way from this to the daily practices of the church. And for congregational members who also want to see the church living up to its calling, the church experience can seem a pale reflection of this. In sum, there is expectation that the church should be delivering more than it is. It should be more nurturing, more lively, more impacting the community, more evangelistic, more innovative, more receptive to children and young people, moreyou fill the space.

And it is these expectations that are the grist and mill for current ordained leadership. Because they are the ones on whom the responsibility for change is being lowered. They are the ones being called to lead a congregation with the expectation that they can do something to transform the situation. They are the ones, the denomination expects, will have the know-how and capacities to halt the numerical decline and restore or plant churches that are healthy, growing, vital centres of witness and influence in their communities. But the reality is that these leaders in many instances feel incapacitated, not able to perform to these expectations.

They are not without trying. They take study leave. They go to the seminars, conferences, read the books on effective leadership, and seek to work on personal growth at the urging of their

supervisor. But it seems they have entered a space where ministry in the way to which they are accustomed or trained is no longer sufficient. They feel more and more they do not know quite what to do is next, yet under more pressure than ever before to achieve results, to ride the bike harder.

Now you can probably already see this picture's drift for this lecture. I hope I am not being ungenerous to my colleagues in current ministry. But riding a role that seems to be increasingly fraught and full of complex expectation is an uncomfortable ride. There is great strain in ordained ministry at navigating and leading change, change which in congregations is inevitably going to involve conflict (require conflict). Given the current conditions in which we as churches are located, and given the challenging future, true leadership is going to be tackling tough realities and a hard ride. But let's be clear what is actually making it harder, where the real challenge lies.

Let's take a deeper reading of this challenge. I want to turn to the square wheel and the role of the imagination in the leadership ride.

What I want to argue is that current leader disablement and the challenge of leading change has to take into account the church imaginations at work. Change agency that does not recognise the role of church imaginations that act upon and shape the current mindsets and actions of leaders is blind. The practices of leadership are not neutral, as if the acquisition of new skills or theological insight or casting visions can transform ministers into effective agents of change. Ordained leaders are embedded in a systemic way of functioning, which is imaginative in character. And imaginations have a great deal to do with how we behave. As Juanita Brown suggests, "we live inside the images we hold of the worldwhat we view determines what we do".¹

Let me put it this way. The images that ministers have about the identity and purposes of the church are going to shape what they do. We all have our ideal picture of what we think the church should be like. But when you lead, it is the imaginations that church members and other leaders inhabit, about what the church is and should do, that are going to have the final say.

Catholic philosopher, Charles Taylor coins the term "social imagination" to refer to the ways people imagine their social existence. This includes how they relate to each other and the external environment, how transactions take place, the expectations and obligations, what role leaders play, and the deeper norms that underlie these expectations². This cannot be summed up in theories, or theological declarations. It is unstructured and unsolicited³. It is represented in symbols, stories and images, and it powerfully shapes actions and behaviour in a group.

We need to talk about the way both leaders and congregations imagine their social existence because it takes the conversation about what is happening to another level. Beneath and within beliefs about church, God and ordained ministry, is an operative imagination – a form of seeing, a lense that filters, shapes and motivates actions. It is the sources and effects of this vision that matters along with the practices that form and extend it.

I believe in our situation it is an inadequately formed imagination that is disabling the practices of church leadership. I would go so far as to say church imaginations are inadequately formed for the

¹ Juanita Brown, *The World Café* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler 2006). 24

² Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC : Duke University, 2004). 23

³ The social imaginary is "the largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation" Mark Lau Branson, "Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church," in *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). 95

post-Christendom challenges of being church in our society. It is this that gives leaders their square wheel and presents the primary challenge for leading missional change.

So where am I seeing this inadequate imagination impacting Presbyterian leadership, ministers of word and sacrament ? I have selected three particular ways in which this is playing out.

The disabling imagination formed from Presbyterian polity

In the first instance we must account for the Presbyterian theology of the Church and ministry, and how it has been handed down in practice. Historically, reformed theology defined the church as 'the called community of God's people where the Word is preached, the sacraments rightly administered and discipline is practiced'. Inside this ecclesiology lie key Reformed doctrines of revelation and election. Of concern is how God acts and reveals God's self in salvation. God's revelation and election takes place in Jesus Christ, who mediates salvation for the world, received, celebrated and represented through the church, which is Christ's body on earth. How the church actually receives and responds to Christ and his salvation is enacted in Word, Sacrament and Discipline.

So, Presbyterian ecclesiology includes the notion that "church" is a *place* where these acts are occurring, where God is speaking and being encountered through the means of grace, and where a godly people are being formed. This conception has consequences for how the church's ministry or practice is structured. To ensure that these acts of ministry - word, sacrament and discipline declare the Gospel of salvation and form the church truly, Presbyterianism defined ministry through a particular ordering of leadership. This was based on a pattern of eldership discerned in Scripture that provides both leadership of a community, but also the place for those set apart to a specifically equipped form of ministry leadership, the 'teaching elder' or minister of word and sacrament. The minister is, in effect, is charged with teaching and proclaiming through the Word of revelation and sacraments the news of God's grace. The elders' role is to nurture the fruit of that Word and grace in the lives of members⁴.

This formal polity grew out of the soil of 16th century Geneva and 18th century Scotland but is now planted in very different socio-cultural conditions. In practice, it has adapted and taken twists and turns that in different conditions create a number of disabling effects in the social imagination of churches.

The most subtle yet devastating of these stems from the formal belief that the visible 'church' is the site where the acts of God's revelation and salvation are encountered by God's people. "*Church can be said to be where God shows up*". Internal to this theology is the practical risk of over-identifying God with the activities of the church⁵. The church's agency as the site and guardian of revelation and salvation can re-allocate God's agency to the background. God's sovereignty is at risk of being replaced by the church's sovereignty. The church, its internal ordering, beliefs and functions becomes the subject of practical attention in ministry. What God might be doing in the world as agent transcendent to the church is not a primary issue theologically;⁶ it is not in view; it does not feature in the imagination. The consequence is that

⁴ Hence a Session of elders was historically charged with the responsibility of administering discipline in order to produce a godly society of believers. "As the Pastors and Doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the Seed of the Word, so the Elders should be careful in seeking the Fruit of the same in the people." 1578 Scottish Kirk's *Second Book of Discipline*

⁵ In this sense, what changed at the Reformation was the means of doing this, from Roman sacerdotalism to the mediation of the preached Word.

⁶ Theologically this leads to a weak articulation of the relationship between creation and redemption in much Reformed theology.

Reformed Christianity establishes the conditions for an overly instrumental notion of the church and its responsibilities. The true church is defined by a set of functions, (word, sacrament and discipline) that connect revelation and salvation. These are construed differently to Roman Christianity, but still share the characteristic that, these are located within itself. Effectively Reformed Christianity still internalises the great acts of salvation and makes itself solely responsible for a set of activities reflective of and implemented on behalf of God.

This privileging of the church's agency on behalf of God echoes in the categories used by Avery Dulles taxonomy *Models of the Church*⁷. This classic study of ecclesiology describes the way churches tend to occupy a particular imagination regarding themselves, one which characterises their behaviour more than other images. Presbyterian churches historically gravitate around the *kerygmatic* models of the Church as 'Herald' or the diaconal model of church as 'Servant'. In the former image, the church exists to be a herald of a message. The message of Good News of God, the *Word* must be declared and the activities of the church and its members are directed towards this function. In the image of church as 'Servant', the church is involved in actions of responding to human need and transforming society. Its functions, and those of its members, are directed to bringing social change. In both instances it is difficult for the church's image of itself not to be reduced to that of a functional instrument. What the church considers it needs to do on behalf of God (or perversely itself) become the starting point of both its identity and ministry⁸.

When an instrumental imagination is wedded to an inherited Presbyterian polity, the resulting consequences push church leadership into its current experience of disablement. The agency of the recognised leadership, namely elders and ministers takes shape in accordance with the activities or 'ministry' associated with the church's image of itself. Technically ministers of word and sacrament appear most closely attached to the 'kerygmatic' model of church, which turned them into pedagogues or teachers. Contemporary theological renderings have also seen proclaiming the Word as integral to the 'diaconal' model, often reinterpreted as 'proclamation by deed'. In both instances the role of minister is bound up and answerable to the church's *instrumentality*. The minister is framed as the one who puts into effect the functions that pertain to a church's image of what it should be doing for God. It is not a long step from this to the situation members of my cohort find themselves in, where they feel reduced in this imaginary to being the paid functionary who runs around doing the ministry of the church on its behalf. Church ministry is minister centric. 'Ministry' is what minister's do and no amount of noting on the newsletter that all members are ministers is going to change a deeply set instrumental ecclesiology. When elders claim that their role is to support the minister, the same imagination is in play.

This makes the role of ministers in adaptive missional change doubly hard, because they are required to place the work and meaning of ministry back onto members without simply reinforcing another form of instrumentality. A different kind of imagination of what the church is to *be*, not just *do* on behalf of God needs to accompany real change⁹.

The practice of Presbyterian polity is also problematic for church imaginations with regard to spiritual discernment and decision-making. A critical capacity for missional leadership is the ability

⁷ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, Expanded edition ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

⁸ Van Gelder points out that what the church is by nature is the better place to begin. The church does what it is. This way the position of God's agency in the creation and leading of the church's ministry is maintained. Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007). 17-18

⁹ What difference might a relational image of the Church have upon recognised leadership identities and practice? It is notable that finding examples of Avery Dulles *Community of Disciples* amongst Presbyterian Churches is much harder than those of *Herald* and *Servant*.

to nurture an environment of spiritual discernment. This comprises listening for, and finding the Spirit's signature in the concrete realities of everyday life and wrestling with the belief that God is still at work and authoring life in the intersections between communities, places and people¹⁰. The practice of spiritual discernment is at the heart of what it might mean to discover and enter into God's missional life as a church in particular places and times.

Formally, Reformed Christianity places a high value on the key practices that accompany the understanding and receiving of God's revelation amongst God's people. The ministry of word and sacrament, the 'teaching elder' in Presbyterian polity is effectively a ministry of 'refereeing' revelation to ensure that there is a proper attention to the Word of God. Traditionally, the ministry of the ruling elders and other courts is also a discernment structure centred on hearing and discerning God's will as decisions are made. However the formal operation of these practices creates a one-dimensional approach to discernment because in effect it has been formalised into Presbyterian structures. This diminishes the capacity for spiritual discernment to be learnt and located in more participative and occasional ways. The preached sermon, the meeting of elders or a committee, become the exclusive locations in which 'spiritual' wisdom is present. In many instances this formalisation has reached its zenith in the organisational frameworks that remove spiritual discernment altogether. Scripture and prayer are reduced to a means of blessing the room before decisions are made¹¹. Committees proliferate as decision making bodies, disconnected from a theology of interpreting God's will. The capacity of church members to grow in and engage together in communal spiritual discernment is not developed. It is not required. This only serves to create more conditions in which Ministers struggle to engage church members' intentions in acts of participation.

Churches and leaders practised in these inherited structures do not move easily to a multi-dimensional practice¹². Ministers and members find the safety of formal structures of discernment and decision-making inherently attractive and confirming. A majority vote can appear like a good way to disarm disputes and conflicts. Ministers can remain or appear in control so much more easily when they utilise formal structures. The preference of any system to avoid disequilibrium is strong. Less secure means of arbitrating and negotiating where God is present and what God's will might be in this situation are avoided.

However this difficulty pertains not only to structures and processes. An unexamined imagination is at work laced with theology about God, and how God acts, reveals and guides. Presbyterianism was honed in the emerging climate of modernity and unavoidably caught up in the desire for certainty and order¹³. Presbyterian theology has not traditionally been particularly hospitable to the role of the Holy Spirit outside well sanctioned tramlines: the Spirit is mediator of the Word, who is rational and reasoned. The idea that the Spirit of revelation might be disruptive or apparently unreasonable (and not immediately negotiable by rational examination) is frowned upon. That is not the kind of knowledge Presbyterians generally warm to.

¹⁰ Discovering God in the particular, not just some esoteric general way, and that God is the agent to bring about the Kingdom, not just waiting for us to sign on and do it ourselves are remarkably counter-intuitive, such is the platonic and stoic hold on church imaginations.

¹¹ Comment by Alan Roxburgh in class presentation, Vancouver 2011.

¹² It is not necessary to abandon the traditional structures of discerning God's will that are part of the tradition and which have stood the test of time. It is a matter of attending to under-developed capacities in the congregation, capacities that can unleash motivation and energy.

¹³ Given that Reformed Christianity was aligned to a number of new national states of Europe in the 17th and 18th century, not only intellectual but political justifications for certainty and order were being deposited in the theological imagination.

An imagination formed by an impoverished pneumatology has thus been guilty of denying some of the 'calling cards' of the Spirit's work; conflict, interruption, disruption and surprise¹⁴. Van Gelder in his work *The Ministry of the Missional Church*¹⁵ argues that it requires Spirit-led leaders and congregations to enter into transformed missional ways of being because it is the Spirit's particular office to bring about changed lives and redemptive ministry in the world¹⁶. This will mean that Spirit-led change is as likely to stem from interruption, disruption, conflict and surprise as through ordered examination of options, plans and the rational conclusions of debate. A multi-dimensional capacity of discernment requires an imagination that is open to the Spirit's work in a number of different modes and deriving from multiple sources; from the holy 'other' to that which is already glimpsed in the human image, from that which breaks into this age to that which is already revealed within God's created order.

The disabling imagination formed from denominationalism

Let us now turn to the way in which church imaginations were refracted through the experience of New Zealand settlement and 20th century denominationalism. We need to understand there are multiple and overlapping social stories and historical theologies at work that created a context and imaginations about what church and church leadership meant. When, because of social change, these shaping stories and theologies began to break up, the assumptions and frameworks continued to linger in the practices of congregations and ministers. This has contributed to the disabling effect. Many leaders and congregations are wrestling with the persistence of an ecclesiology in which the meanings embedded in its structures and practices no longer make sense¹⁷.

Scottish and English settlement of New Zealand in the 1850's through to the 1890's brought with it churches shaped by the histories of their home countries. Formed in the imagination of functional Christendom, settler churches acted as the spiritual and moral policemen of this new society, tempering the excesses and libertarianism of the new colony and advancing a wholesome and upright citizenship. This was nowhere more apparent than amongst Presbyterians whose Calvinist leanings to create a 'godly commonwealth' played out in many different ways. Presbyterians brought with them a desire to form religious and godly communities of settlers in the new land¹⁸ who would create a decent society.

The church and its members were thus the instruments of this godly action and responsible economic endeavour. Presbyterians can be traced in all the significant church led social movements between the 1870's and 1930's including Prohibition, Bible in Schools, votes for women and sabbath observance in the working week¹⁹. They were visible in business and politics,

¹⁴ Van Gelder explores the patterns of growth and development of the Church in Acts and notes that the leading of the Spirit was often introduced as a result of conflict, disruption, interruption and surprise. It is only in Acts 13-19 that we see intentional reasoning based on rational choices leading directly to growth. This of course confirms that the latter is not invalid, it just relativises our expectations. Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* 157-159

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This is not just a "religious" realisation. Gunton states that "the Spirit's peculiar office is to realise the true being of each created thing by bringing it, through Christ, into saving relation with God the Father". Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). 189

¹⁷ Commonly many leaders, congregations and the denomination itself attempts to re-form structures and embrace other models and ecclesiologies in an attempt to adapt to the social change that has occurred: to become relevant. On the other hand some advocate a re-engagement with the tradition to recover the lost meaning. But neither of these responses go deep enough.

¹⁸ Anglicans, Methodists and Catholics while also comprising settlers arrived first in New Zealand as missionary movements amongst heathen settlers and native Maori albeit with the opportunistic intention of establishing their religious stake-holding in the contested religious and political ground of Colonial New Zealand.

¹⁹ Based on conversations with Otago University Historian, Dr John Stenhouse

known for their sober, hard-working and honest ethics and compassionate interest in the poor and marginalised.

This worthy history reinforced an imagination highly instrumental in character. 'True religion' meant being agents of establishing and promoting God's Kingdom at the heart of society. Presbyterianism was on the whole immensely practical for society's benefit and church life and worship was the fount for this.

It was within this imagination that the traditional role and responsibilities of the ordained ministry formed. The minister was the figurehead. So what a minister did or didn't do, the church did or didn't do. What a minister believed or didn't believe the church believed or didn't believe²⁰. Publically the minister was representative of the church. They were godly, influential and learned leaders and as Presbyterians, venerated for their art of preaching and ability to hold an audience.

Fast forward at least 50 years, and the climate in which ministers operate is essentially post-Christian. Respect and identity for ministers as figure-heads of a relevant organisation in society is disappearing. Vestiges of this remain in more traditional and ethnic communities, but ministers find themselves in churches that no longer quite know what their purpose is, now that society looks elsewhere for guidance, human flourishing and even spiritual solace. Consequently ministers no longer represent that social purpose, and increasingly find themselves isolated, socially and vocationally. One effect of this is to be pushed further into a professionalization of their role. They become the 'credentialed' ones whose skills and routines look and sound like religious versions of other organised professionals, such as lawyers and doctors. Another is to embrace new CEO models of leadership that confirm the minister or pastor once more as someone heading an organisation making a social impact²¹. But tellingly, the most significant effect on leaders is simply to raise the stakes for what is happening inside the walls of the church. One's vocational identity and worth is attached to the internal functioning of the congregation and its apparent organisational success or otherwise. But instrumental church imagination in which social results are still the measure of meaning can burden leaders with crushing vulnerability. All of this further weakens their capacity to actually lead the kind of adaptive change necessary amongst a community of people. Change management, which is difficult in stable circumstances, becomes even more problematic in an atmosphere where a minister's vocational identity and personal needs are on the line²².

This set of historical shifts in which ministers' roles changed and a disabling leadership legacy emerged is also compounded by the impact of 20th century denominationalism and mainline decline.

Denominationalism emerged in the 19th century when historic church traditions were translated into new colonial surroundings. In these, they no longer had the automatic allegiance of their

²⁰ Dr John Stenhouse put me on to this with a comment that, even today, members of the general public attach their comprehension of the church to clergy. What clergy do and believe is held to be what the church believes and does.

²¹ *City Impact Church* in Auckland is a good example of this, with its massive billboards along the motorway showcasing the head Pastor and his wife inviting people to attend services of a corporate styled church that exists to make an "impact".

²² Gary Nelson suggests that in a Post-Christian climate where clergy feel irrelevant outside the walls of church, they run the danger of putting pressure on congregations to meet their needs for significance in a way that is emotionally and relationally unrealistic. Putting all the spiritual, emotional and physical expectation on one congregation in a constantly shifting context is ultimately disabling. Consequently leading change in which negotiated conflict is going to be inevitable, will be avoided even subconsciously, because the impact on the network of relationships is too costly. Gary V Nelson, *Borderland Churches* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2008). 65

former social or geographical constituencies²³. Consequently churches became social institutions, taking on many of the characteristics and practices of volunteer societies and effectively competing for a slice of the religious market²⁴. Based firstly on their tribal European origins, denominations could be identified by their particular 'one size fits all' version of themselves, in liturgy, architecture, music and governance. Then, from the 1940's onwards the application of organisational science to the existing Presbyterian Church entities, created corporation effects by streamlining practices, regulations and developing an ecclesial bureaucracy with head offices, national workers and national programs.

That denominationalism and the organisational science that shaped it deposited particular images and practices in churches and in church leaders' imaginations. Local congregations effectively became the branches of the larger denominational organisation. Ordained ministers' became head managers of the local franchise, vetted and educated centrally to ensure consistency in church ethos and theology. Depending on how power was distributed locally, Sessions or Board of Managers started to resemble local corporate boards. Parishners of churches became the supporters in funds and volunteer time, the ones who kept the local organisation and its programs ticking over. The high water-mark for New Zealand Presbyterianism of the mid to late 1960's with flourishing churches, extensive Sunday School and Bible Class movements, high intakes of training ministers, significant national programs of religious education, welfare and missionary endeavour demonstrated this approach to church was probably merited at the time.

But with broader cultural shifts and fragmentation in society from the 1970's, the loss of members, disappearance of denominational loyalties, declining resources and internal church fractures radically altered the pastoral landscape. With this unravelling, churches and ministers found themselves in a much more diffuse, unstable environment, with habits and elements of a denominational imagination that no longer fitted an evolving context. From the 1980's there were reactions to this. Denominations and leaders tried to halt the erosion by embracing new strategies focusing on church growth and church 'health'. These have only added to an ever diversifying set of images about what the church is for and what ministers or church leaders should be about. At the same time, new churches sprung up from the denominational debris, and reflecting a *pot-pouri* of ecclesial expectations and assumptions about 'successful' or "Spirit-filled" church and church leadership.

As a result we now have highly diverse images of the church. Within a denomination and the congregation, members and leaders no longer see the identity and purposes of the church in the same way. A complex set of expectations is at work. The ministers in my cohort find themselves in congregations where a historical presbyterian form, the waning organisational values of denominationalism, a voluntarist ethos, and religious consumerism, have all helped to write a script and shape imaginations they struggle to know what to do with. It is a climate in which the expectations become more intense and the options more ambiguous. "Be a great preacher and sensitive liturgist, be a chaplain and a friend. But above all grow this church because if it does not meet my needs, I may choose to go elsewhere"²⁵.

²³ Churches who might have once behaved as if members of a population or territory belonged to them and whom they could count on found themselves in much more fluid conditions in a new, rough and ready colony like New Zealand.

²⁴ NZ European settlement displayed this from its origins in the 1840's when Churches established their "beachheads" and sought to gain denominational traction and political power in the new and expanding colony. Competition between Catholic and Anglican settlement was evident in the North. The major thrust of Presbyterian settlement was organised back in Scotland in the late 1840's amongst the recent Free Church following the disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843. This went to the South where Anglican settlement had not penetrated.

²⁵ Nelson, *Borderland Churches*. 66

The disabling imagination formed from a disembodied spirituality

Finally we turn to consider the church imagination that has lost a sense of the church's existence in terms of distinct social and political practices. This impairs leadership and missional change. When leaders attempt to preach and enable a response to Christ that means being a people who share in the ongoing mission of God, something that requires embodiment, they do so into a headwind of disembodied, and de-materialised spirituality. A social and political 'otherness' as a people of God, what Gerhard Lohfink calls "the efficacious sign of the presence of God's salvation in the world"²⁶ is not common to the conception of mission. What it means to witness to the character of the gospel, *making Christ known* is much misunderstood and misapplied. Ministers preach and communicate frequently about mission and are expected to lead new initiatives. But to evoke concrete social practices in the congregation is a much more challenging task.

There are several related aspects of what Graham Ward (*The Politics of Discipleship*) labels the 'de-material' going on here. First of all, we live in cultural conditions where consumer capitalism, globalisation and post-secularity all feed a sense of reality that is increasingly dematerialised. Some also call this post-modernity and with it comes the rise of the virtual; the 'real' is increasingly fluid, superficial, and difficult to pin down and account for in a solid and substantial way²⁷. This de-material existence is further heightened by the attachment to cyberspace and the worlds created onscreen.²⁸ Likewise, the highly mobile and fast paced complexity of living. What these phenomena and the de-material represent in the imagination is the intensification of the human desire for freedom. This is translated in the desire to transcend the realities and limited state of things and exercise choice that is infinite and unbridled. Having left behind the basic survivor values in which the provision of food and physical security dominate, we moderns push the limits of our material creaturely-ness including those that still remain: the limitations of age and death.

Many aspects of the current state of religious life reflect this de-material transcendence²⁹ and mesh with a theological history in which Christian faith has been privatised and platonised. The roots of this belong in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when Eucharistic practice shifted "from a communal emphasis to a mode of devotion focused on the inner experience of the individual"³⁰ In this shift matters of the heart became the locus of experience of God and along with shifts in doctrines of salvation and eschatology in which the fate of the individual after death became paramount, the notion of *spiritualitas* began to reflect the growing distinctions being made between spirit and matter. The value of corporeal bodily life became increasingly disconnected from the life of the soul, giving the physical world and the human body a more negative status in what was considered an authentic spiritual life³¹. Through the Protestant reformation, this interiorising and individualising of faith consolidated further, intensified by Luther's theology of two discrete natures of human being, one spiritual and one bodily, juxtaposed. With the Enlightenment, this objectification was given even more strength.

²⁶ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community. The Social Dimension of Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). 146

²⁷ James K A Smith in the Foreword to Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009). 12

²⁸ Ward points to how consumer capitalism feeds a sense of the virtual in its continual drive and ability to recreate a reality that may reflect the infinite realisation of desire and freedom. We create fantasies in which we attempt to float free of the social, environmental and economic costs of production. We treat them as invisible. Globalisation and the internet underpin this even further. For instance in the transactions of money, the less we see of coins and notes that signify money as a transaction concerning actual objects, the more the material is transcended. Ibid. 99-106

²⁹ For example, the evolution of spirituality and religious expression from concrete constituted practices and awareness within organised religion to a much more free floating spiritual market of symbolic power and mystery. Ibid. 147-153

³⁰ Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008). 243

³¹ Ibid. 243

The effect of isolating the interior life of faith from the activity of material bodily existence in both personal and social realms is seen today in the struggle to form a truly embodied spirituality in the lives of congregants. People inhabit a contemporary piety that seems to consist in downloading God into an abstract interior experience which has no material relationship to place or people or time³². Liberal versions of theology and faith are caught in the same a-historical trap, substituting super-naturalised piety for universal principles and further abstraction. In both cases people are denied the means of forming them for a life in the specific material, bodily and social realities the Christian Gospel and 'new creation' assumes. Instead we inhabit an imagination of expressive individualism where the meeting of needs and self-actualisation drive another set of habits and practices. As Alan Roxburgh puts it "The God who encounters us in Jesus Christ has become the spiritual food court for the personal, private and inner needs of expressive individuals"³³.

An imagination that disembodies spirituality and faith disables the church from becoming a community living by a distinctly-shaped pattern of life³⁴. Privatised faith and an increasingly de-material sensibility perpetuate the myth that people exist as detached, unfettered, free 'selves', who can choose apart from communal, social and geographical ties³⁵. They do not need a church community to discipline them in a relationship with God and certain way of life. They do not need to be located in one place and time to discover the meaning of salvation. They do not need to question the habits and beliefs of a capitalist consumer narrative, or this self-actualising vision of life.

Ministers who underestimate the extent of this challenge have very little chance of leading the adaptive shifts required for a missional life³⁶. They can preach, teach mission principles, lead new forays into community facing ministry, transform local structures and engage people in passionate worship, but the question still remains: To what end? According to which scripting of reality? To what story, or imagination, is this answering? The 'God story' activated in Jesus Christ, located in specific social forms within history, and determinative for our social existence, is quite different to the one filled with the habits and identity from other social imaginations in our culture. This disconnection between the efforts and leadership in mission, and the wider social imagination operating is where Presbyterian ministers and congregations may be missing the point.

So how might we begin to respond to the challenge of disabling imaginations ?

The excursus has been a deconstructive one, describing a square wheel in the operations of ordained leadership of congregations, leaders who are expected to lead congregational change.

I have argued inadequate social imaginations, inhabited by leaders and members of churches are a significant impairment to the kind of change that leaders are expected to evoke in the current context of congregations. It disables leaders.

But it would be unhelpful to portray ministers simply as victims of disabling church imaginations and historical change. Leaders lead by facing the challenge of theological and ecclesial legacies, diverse and ambiguous expectations, people's misdirected desires and habits and their own need

³² God is not acting everywhere and at all times in some universally downloadable template or model or replicable experience, but rather in contexts in specific ways. This represents the scandal of particularity and is reflected in the historical experience of God's Election of Israel and of Christ as the fulfilment of this action.

³³ Stated in a lecture by Alan Roxburgh, 2010, New Zealand.

³⁴ Ward speaks of this as the the micro-practices of Christian action performed in every social and cultural engagement Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship*. 166

³⁵ Harvey, *Can These Bones Live*. 250

³⁶ "Consumerism is making disciples better than the church. We think that by people turning up for two hours on a Sunday to listen to a sermon and sing a few songs, we are forming disciple who will influence s culture and benefit society. Who are we kidding ?" *Bishop Graham Cray on consumer shaped citizenship*. Public lecture NZ July 2010.

for validation. Yes, maybe along the way we have lost a sense of what it really means to be the church for the times in which we live and that has made the task that much harder. But leaders are those that recognise the place we are in and ask the right sort of questions. Leaders are those that get on the balcony every now and then and frame the challenge that they are facing in order not to become chaplains to an inadequate imagination. And then leaders are those that take the initiative to act for a renewed/ reformed church imagination under the leading of the Spirit.

Shifting and shaping of imaginations is the key action that leaders will need to engage in if change is to be forthcoming from congregations. Unpacking this is more than this lecture can tackle. But in finishing I want to signal that a rounder front wheel, a different kind of church imagination, is not accessed simply by a better theology, or church self-understanding. There is a real danger of thinking that if we can improve a congregation's self-understanding, and get our concepts and theologies of the church right, it will give us the means to unlock change and shape church differently.

For ministers, the traditional bread and butter practice of preaching and teaching congregations contains the possibility that we can cast and evoke what Walter Bruggeman calls the alternative imagination or God's counter script. But even here ministers of word and sacrament are tempted to trust too much in the power of their articulation, their theological rendering of the problem or their exhortations.

Critically we must address church social imaginations through the cultivation of alternative or revised habits, behaviours and practices. Practices and behaviour actually shape what we can imagine and imagination in turn shapes and drives behaviour and practice. Being formed in practices that disrupt imaginative boundaries will require leaders and congregations to re-examine codified practices and imbedded habits: a reflective praxis. Ministers of word and sacrament will need to reframe their own role as they consider to what end their practices and habits are leading a congregation. Do their actions actually contribute to formation, community conversation and opening up new forms of discernment? Does Pastoral care shape and socialise people to live as a community of the Gospel, or does it simply re-inforce expressive individualism? Do community outreach initiatives actually allow for transforming participation in God's agency or do they reinforce an instrumental works centred church agency? Does Christian education nurture people in a patterned way of life that dethrones the powers, frees from cultural captivities, generates courageous action or does it suggest an accommodation to disembodied spiritualities? Do the actions at worship sign and dwell in the truth of a world reconstituted in the resurrection of Christ or are they habituating us to a world of fears, social fragments and continued abstraction. Does our church governance practice bring forth a fruitful priest-hood of all believers or does it further entrench a Protestant sacerdotalism?

The social imagination of many churches assumes it knows what a Presbyterian form of practical ministry consists of, or simply any church practice consists of, but in a post-Christian missional climate, we know this is in trouble. Re-inhabiting some much older church practices such as agape table fellowship, radical acts of generosity, pacificism, healing, and unconditional hospitality to the stranger may once again be fitting for a time such as this³⁷. Re-visiting both ours and others traditions where covenant relationships, catechumenal faith development, lectio reading of Scripture and Celtic or Daily Offices, which have formed Christian imaginations, may also warrant normalising again.

³⁷ See for instance, Lohfink, *Jesus and Community. The Social Dimension of Faith*

Finally of course, leaders can only lead out of their willingness to inhabit the practices of a different imagination themselves. It will still be uneasy riding and the front wheel will never be perfectly round this side of the eschaton, but God's preferred future invites us to a journey living inside the ride that Christ makes possible. In the end it is participating in this that gives ordained Ministry its strength to adapt and lead congregations in change.

Mark Johnston. 7/2/12 Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership

Branson, Mark Lau. "Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church." In *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry*, edited by Craig Van Gelder, 94-125. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.

Brown, Juanita *The World Café* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler 2006.

Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church*. Expanded edition ed. New York: Doubleday, 2002.

Gunton, Colin. *The One, the Three, and the Many*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Harvey, Barry. *Can These Bones Live*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008.

Lohfink, Gerhard. *Jesus and Community. The Social Dimension of Faith* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

Nelson, Gary V. *Borderland Churches*. St Louis: Chalice Press, 2008.

Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries* Durham, NC : Duke University, 2004.

Van Gelder, Craig. *The Ministry of the Missional Church* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007.

Ward, Graham. *The Politics of Discipleship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009.