

Study Leave Report from Alan Judge - Nov 2009

Over the last 10 months, March to October this year, I have taken a period of Study leave focused around this aim:

'To explore perspectives on church leadership and relevant mission in the New Zealand Context at the beginning of the 21st Century'

The Study leave was 2 days a month plus the whole of July. I am grateful to my Parish Council who has allowed me this time and the St David's lay preachers and my wife Rachel, who have offered their own time to release me from normal parish commitments, allowing me to engage in this learning time.

The original plan to take seven Sundays off was trimmed to 6, when I took annual leave to attend a Hawke's Bay Wedding. The practicalities of engaging in Study leave while still in the parish has led to a number of frustrations and I would encourage other ministers taking Study Leave to get completely away for the duration of this study leave time.

Part of the Study leave was Sunday visits to other churches. I've visited a number of churches during the year to observe and reflect on their style and approach to mission and ministry. Most were part of the Kids Friendly network within the PCANZ. Here are a few observations:

- I noticed some very positive signs of ministry integrated with mission to communities. Churches are becoming much more responsive to their communities and engaging in some very intentional activities that bring congregations and communities together.
- The Kids Friendly approach is having a significant impact on the churches I visited. Samuel {aged 7} came to many of these services and was well cared for and offered stimulating Christian education.
- I was surprised to find a number of churches with strong kids ministry made no attempt to offer child focused times in worship services. One church had teas and coffees for adults, but nothing for kids to drink.
- Worship teams and bands were common in the churches I visited. Sometimes these connected well with congregations, but a few showed signs of tensions within worship teams and between them and their people.

- Preaching was at a consistently high standard and spoke strongly into people's everyday experience. There was a very wide range of preaching styles used, but all included real connections with the life experiences of their people and a strong theme was the expectation that God would use us to make our communities better places.
- Most churches had name tags for their people, but only in one church was a name tag offered to me. Several of the churches were quite 'clicky' among their regulars and made little attempt to speak to the obvious visitor. The most friendly and welcoming church was in Waiareka - Weston, Oamaru.
- There is a strong sense in these churches that they are on a journey and engaged in a mission that they share. Upfront leadership is being shared and teams of people exist to welcome visitors and offer prayer ministry. My overall impression of these churches is that they engage in worship with natural enthusiasm and are touching their communities in fresh and creative ways.

The central element of my study leave was a course called *Missional Church Leadership* held monthly at Laidlaw College in ChCh. This course proved to be very stimulating on a number of levels. We discovered together a range of perspectives on being 'missional' in our NZ context. The style was more workshop rather than lecture; involving high levels of participation and stimulating dialogue.

A model of leadership that is less directive was explored in a variety of ways. We talked about the key leader not arriving in a congregation with a predetermined 'agenda'. Leadership is more about assisting a group of parish leaders to discover their own calling to mission. The leaders role is to help people reflect on their context and ask themselves questions about who they are and what missional roles God was calling them into.

We practiced an approach called "Dwelling in the Word" where a group meets around a passage of scripture listening to the text both individually and in twos and as a whole group - and out of this exploring the "Word" together new perspectives on mission develop. I realised that I could not remember any time in 30 years of involvement with church leadership, where we had stopped and listened to the word of God together beyond individuals offering devotions.

Another aspect of leadership in the new missional environment is approaches to change and how organisations cope with change. There are a number of 'models' that we were introduced to that attempt to describe how individuals within organisations promote or resist innovation. One of the more interesting relates to a regularly observed lifecycle of churches involving emerging, performing and reactive phases over a 50 year period, where different kinds of leadership are needed to respond to the challenges congregations face in each phase.

An important part of the course involved exploring some techniques for listening to our communities. I used some of these in an assignment which explored the character of the Allenton community which I found really helpful. Later we did some class work, using a dialogue model where I presented "my community" to the small group and they helped me to reflect on it through 'fresh eyes'. I was involved in the same process when two other class members presented their community setting.

The course was a truly interactive experience which involved 3 hours together a month, significant readings and an online dialogue around our reflections on the readings. At the end of the course our tutor Rev Steve Taylor {a Baptist minister} announced his appointment to a teaching position with the Uniting Church of Australia {Director of Missiology}.

A key phrase used regularly was this "The future of God is among the people of God". That Christian people gathered in community around 'The Word' actively listening to the new missional directions God is offering us is where the future lies for Church.

An image we regularly returned to was of sitting around tables. People gatherings in homes and cafes where we listen and talk and share the heart of Jesus.

The Emerging Church Movement

Another aspect of my Study leave involved reading a few books in addition to the extensive reading list of the Laidlaw College course. One was an evaluation of a movement known as "The Emerging Church" - the term is used quite widely in the western church over the last 10 years and I imagine most Presbytery members will have come across it. Essential it is an attempt to connect with people in new ways alongside the more normal type of church services. Examples you may have come across

include: Messy Church, Café type services, various Alt worship experiences - we've experimented along these lines each year at St David's.

What was news to me was that these 'on the fringe' church developments have now become a whole movement within the church at large with books, conferences, identifiable leadership and involving significant theological dialogue and even debate. The book I was reading identified some serious philosophical and theological issues that need to be addressed as the Alt worship experiments emerge into a movement.

Some of the issues are the more familiar debates between evangelical and liberal perspectives related to the validity of truth claims, antifoundationalism, views on biblical authority, and the capacity to have theological discussion without some common starting points.

In addition there are issues related to those significant cultural changes we associate with sociological terms like 'postmodernity'. Then there are issues related to ecclesiology [the nature of the church] like how do we cope with the fragmentation of the Christian community as multiple short term experiments become the more common expressions of Christianity and where does leadership fit in a liquid and continuously recreating style of Christian community.

The opportunity to pause to read and learn and explore fresh missional directions has been challenging and intriguing. It has been intellectually demanding and a timely reminder that the church is changing around us and some excellent new forms of Christian life are emerging. In every generation God gives us the capacity to move forward to face the challenges of our changing environment. Yet there are some fundamental characteristics at the heart of the gospel that anchor us to Jesus and the people of Jesus down through the ages.

I conclude by noting 5 key learning's from my study leave experiences:

1. The significance of parish leaders listening very intentionally to our communities as we prepare for a deeper mission engagement between congregations and community.
 - a. How well do we know the communities we are called to serve?
 - b. What are the key characteristics that shape our localities.
 - c. Do we know what the major changes are?

2. The insight of encouraging Parish Councils to read the Bible together {meeting around the Word} as they discern the fresh mission directions God is leading the church to explore.
3. The challenge to live with the real tension between biblical Christian thought and the philosophical changes associated with trends in post-modern thought.
4. Issues related to leadership that avoids the extremes of CEO style church leadership or the leadership vacuum which allows gospel values to be buried by concerns about maintaining the church. The third way is to develop missional leadership in our congregations where we share together in engaging with our community and 'The Word' with innovation and confidence.
5. The critical importance of building Christian communities that express the lifestyle Jesus modelled in a context shaped by the social & cultural trends of the early 21st century. This means being church communities that are true to gospel values, but honest about the social climate we live and breathe.

These are both exciting and challenging days for the people of Jesus. Amidst all the changes we are called to embrace the mission of the people of Jesus. We are called to be faithful to the one who calls us to bring peace at every table where we sit.

Alan Judge
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