**Study Leave Report 2016**

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**Objectives and Key Learnings**

My first objective for Study Leave was to be better informed for my preaching and teaching responsibilities at St Luke’s, Remuera.

I was particularly enthused in my reading by the writings of Richard Kearney and John Caputo in what they call weak theology.

Kearney talks about anatheism - returning to God after God. To do so, following Heidegger, we must deconstruct the abstract God of metaphysics if we are to discover a different God, ‘the presence of the sacred in the now’. Kearney identifies the importance of imagination, humour, commitment and discernment on this journey. Anatheism is a way of listening, of being attuned. ‘Theo-poetics’ [poetically dreaming into God] is needed more than theo-logia [thinking our way to God]. The sacred [God] is there whenever a person suspends her certainty about a familiar God and opens the door to a stranger.

John Caputo purposely writes God with a small ‘g’. Weak theology is about the folly of God, not the strength of God. Caputo says god does not exist, but insists. This insistence is the deep down call to be part of the healing of the world. This insistence haunts us, it questions the taken-for-granted, and it seeks fresh embodiment.

In the Bible the strong metaphors for God dominate e.g. king, lord, and father. But the weak metaphors are also there, e.g. an anxious fretting woman sweeping the room [Lu 15:8-10], and – significantly – the metaphor of a criminal ‘Son of God’ hanging on a cross. The passage from Philippians 2, where Paul describes God/god’s self-emptying [and ongoing self-emptying] in Jesus is a critical text for weak theologians.

Weak theologians, following Tillich, assume that God/god is not a being. The discussion of God as a being is where most of the theism vs atheism debate is. But weak theologians want to move past this debate to explore what ‘the ground’ [Tillich], the ‘beyond’ [Eckhart], or the ‘call’ [Caputo] might mean and how it might impact on how we live.

My full reading list is in the appendix to this report.

I lived in the Boston area for approximately two months. I attended a conference at the Episcopal Divinity School. I met with a number of teachers and writers informally – including Andrew McGowan [now teaching at Yale Divinity School], Cameron Partridge [chaplain and teacher at Boston University], and Danielle Tumminio [now teaching at the Seminary of the Southwest]. Unfortunately some academics I hoped to meet were unavailable or didn’t return my calls.

I also spent time with the progressive author Frank Schaeffer. When I was in London, visiting a number of clergy and churches, I also met with Savi Hensen one of the staff writers for the large Christian website *Ekklesia*.

My second objective was regarding liturgy, and in particular how our commitments to and understandings about social justice and service can be expressed and celebrated in worship. I visited 13 churches and faith communities, mainly in Boston but also in New York City and London, and learnt a lot about their liturgical life and how they integrate their political/social commitments in their worship.

One church I visited often was Ol’ South, the most vibrant and largest Congregational [UCC] Church in Boston. It has a long and proud tradition of inclusivity. Issues that were to the fore during my study leave were homelessness, race [the *Black Lives Matter* movement], transgender rights, and environment [‘resist the pipeline’ – the pipeline proposed to bring fracked gas into Boston].

The Senior Minister, Nancy, says the purpose of worship is to radicalize, change, and form people into followers of Jesus. Everyone in the congregation is encouraged in the words of their liturgies to not only understand themselves as participants but as leaders in bringing about a more just, Jesus-centred world.

The informal worship services [9 am Sunday and Thursday night] begin with a passing of the peace, which is an affirmation of each person present regardless of race, gender, or socio-economic status. Then there is a naming of the ‘ikons’, those things through which we can experience God, like flowers, colour, art, music and each other. This is followed by silence; and then a reflection on our purpose as disciples of Jesus. These informal services usually include a simple communion – linking participants with food, sustenance, faith, and once again purpose. There was often a sense of playfulness in the liturgical leadership, inviting laughter and building community.

Worship was intentionally designed and led to express what the dream of the justice of God might look like [the future in the now] – namely joyous celebration, inclusion of all, and people being fed and nurtured. Worship embodied the dream, what Christians believe the Kin-dom of God will look like. While there was articulation of purpose, encouragement to work for social change, and programmes to make the justice dream more of a reality, the worship was a celebration of the goal lived now.

My third objective was to think about how the structure and nurture of St Luke’s congregational life could be enhanced through our justice and service commitments. I met with a number of ministers in the USA and London committed to a similar justice vision to St Luke’s. I learnt that justice engagement is something that arises contextually both in terms of the broader community and in terms of the resources, history, and interests of the local elders and congregation. The question for us at St Luke’s is how we stand against some of the cultural currents that flow through our neighbourhood and city [like individualism and parochialism] and offer a different Jesus inspired vision.

Immanuel is a Presbyterian Church close to the centre of Anchorage, Alaska, with about 50 people attending on Sunday which I visited on route to Boston. Immanuel is known ‘the liberal Presbyterian Church’ and has been very active in promoting LGBT rights. When PCUSA officially changed to be pro-LGBT the vision of Immanuel suffered.

To quote Ellen their minister, they are now ‘flying the plane as they build it’. The three parts they are working on is firstly that parishioners are not customers but participants, secondly that Christianity is a counter-cultural movement that doesn’t use violence in order to ‘win’ [contra the pervasive redemptive violence myth], and thirdly that the church does not exist primarily to ‘help the needy’ but primarily to hold out a different vision for how life might be for all [which includes caring for the needy]. These parts serve as the platform underneath this church’s current involvement in addressing homelessness and gun violence.

St Luke’s, under the leadership of my predecessor, has been very involved in working for LGBT rights. In the USA, as society and many churches have become more knowledgeable about sexual identity and gender and inclusive in their practices, the political focus has shifted to the rights of transgender people. This issue is now starting to gain more prominence in New Zealand.

There are a number of ministers in the USA who are transgender and are public about it. There is also still a great deal of misunderstanding. The presenting issue currently is bathrooms. Some states, particularly in the South, have said that the sexual identity listed on one’s birth certificate is the only bathroom one can use. So for example a bearded man who has transitioned from being a woman would only be permitted to use the women’s bathroom in these states.

I met with Cameron who has transitioned female to male. There are only a few ‘out’ transgender ministers in Massachusetts. He is very involved in campaigning for transgender rights. Trans people are 4 times more likely to be in poverty, and twice as likely to be unemployed. When trans people come out, half lose their jobs. They know what it is like to be on the edge.

St Luke’s needs to position itself as a safe and helpful place for trans people. We need to do this by educating ourselves about both the science and the history of oppression, and then supporting various trans causes.

My fourth objective was to observe how leadership is exercised in churches and how that might be relevant to St Luke’s. I have come away with a fresh appreciation of the importance of the leadership showing hospitality and kindness to all, and to letting that ethos permeate the church.

I had the opportunity for the first time since becoming a Presbyterian to visit other Presbyterian and Congregational churches, to observe their ministers in leadership and worship, and then to sit and question those ministers about why they do what they do and what problems/opportunities they face. This was probably the richest learning I had on my study leave.

The church closest to where we were living in Boston was Groton Congregational Church [UCC]. They are more theologically conservative (middle range in their denomination) than St Luke’s. They were incredibly hospitable to me. Even given my obviously different theological views they invited me to every meeting they had, sought my advice on many matters, enjoyed discussing our theological differences, and invited me once to preach. The core of the hospitality was the relaxed nature and personnel in the Parish Office. Even in their busy times the visitor/stranger (me or anyone else) had priority. This hospitality communicates far more powerfully than ideas about God or Jesus.

I probably spent the most time in Boston at the Church of the Covenant, the main downtown joint Presbyterian & Congregational church. It is a gorgeous large old building that now only has about 100 people worshipping each Sunday. It has the mantle of being ‘the social justice parish’, but now with a diminished congregation a lot of the responsibility for programmes and initiatives rest with its two clergy. It has a great location, big building, big expectations from the past, and an eclectic dwindling congregation.

Their clergy, Mark and Julie, are trying to help the congregation prioritize social justice issues rather than ‘flying the flag’ about everything whilst trying to maintain some of their better programmes [like their racial justice training course and their sister church relationship with a parish in Western Nicaragua], be true to their own passions [climate change and LGBT rights], and lead/support the congregation in its pastoral and social life. I think this is exhausting them; and if that exhaustion shows I wonder what message it’s sending to newcomers. The Groton UCC church with fewer expectations and a stronger culture of kindness seemed to me to be much more inviting.

One of the small churches I visited was First Presbyterian Church (FPC) in a run-down part of Waltham. There are a large number of homeless people in the neighbourhood, including many veterans, and services for them are deficient. In the church basement is a soup kitchen, run by the Salvation Army, and caters for about 50 people. There are about 16 people in the morning congregation at FPC, and two other congregations use the building [Puerto Rican and a 7th Day Adventist].

The minister of FPC, Patti, is retired from full-time ministry. Patti, in addition to leading the Sunday Service, sees her role as offering a hospitable presence to all who come into the building. Initiatives that happen in the church aren’t really initiatives of the FPC congregation, but partnerships with groups like AA, the Sallies, or with other churches. Her role is to sit, encourage, be kind, and listen – rather than plan and run programmes and emanate busyness.

My fifth objective was to reflect on how justice and service projects are initiated and sustained. I discovered that most churches got involved in projects through ‘what came in the door’ – either through parishioners and elders passions and interests or through crises in people’s lives e.g. guns, poverty/homelessness, LGBT rights, etc.

The most impressive organisation I came across was the Greater Boston Inter-Faith Council [GBIFC]*,* not an interfaith programme like we run at St Luke’s, but a community organisation and empowerment programme based on Sol Alinksy’s methodology. In short it works like this: the faith communities in a neighbourhood encourage everyone in that neighbourhood to gather together and identify what issues in the community disturb them. Those groups then do two things: brainstorm solutions and ask elected officials what their solutions are. The congregation at 1st Church Cambridge (UCC) has given two days per week of Dan’s, their senior minister, time to GBIFC. Dan preaches in his church about once a month. Although this commitment by 1st Church is impressive, again it is contextual, marrying Dan’s interests with congregational and community resources and need.

One of the big and ongoing issues in the USA is gun control. GBIFC is lobbying to make guns safer. There is now the technology to produce a gun that will only work if it identifies the palm-print of the owner. These are called ‘smart guns’. 40% of guns are bought by government and state agencies. So GBIFC is signing on major city officials (like police chiefs) to tell armament suppliers they will only buy guns like this.

Although most churches I visited in Boston and London were involved in social justice and service programmes many ministers I met were overwhelmed by the number of social issues and the need/demand to respond to them all, whether they have the resources to do so or not. It seems many progressive congregations overstretch themselves, and feel guilty for doing too little. The learning I came away with is to focus, to choose one or two or maybe even three issues or projects – ones that the congregation not just the minister have energy for – and put the others on the back shelf for a while.

I also visited a church in London that has lost sight of Jesus. The United Reform Church in Bromley-By-Bow is the home of a very large and active social service centre with many paid staff and many areas of social engagement. The Centre has been a leader in social entrepreneurship, innovative and holistic practices. The Church itself is very small - about five people come on a Sunday. The Church and Centre, while sharing physical space have lost connection with each other.

I think this is a salutary story that could easily be replicated in Auckland as social needs and organisations to meet those needs grow, and church communities that host such organisations decline.

My sixth objective was to reflect on future partnerships between St Luke’s and other organisations – including Presbytery – where a similar passion exists around particular issues.

One of the best examples of churches cooperating together was Common Cathedral, a ministry among and with the homeless in central Boston. On Sundays they run a church service in Boston Common. Local churches are on a roster to provide lunch for those attending. Then during the week they run Common Art.

The goal of the organization is not primarily to meet physical needs but to create sacred community. Organizationally the group owns no buildings. They rent office space for their six paid staff. Then for gatherings like Common Art churches let them use their space.

I was very impressed by the cooperation between Council and church groups, and the atmosphere of acceptance and community they have been able to create. Their goals include providing pastoral care, affirmation, and support structures for a caring community. They also keep churches informed on homelessness issues. The clergy leaders I met, like Laura, were young women who offered a gentle hospitable and caring presence. In Auckland we seem to have largely left homelessness issues to church social service organisations.

Although Common Cathedral and GBIFC are fantastic organisations unfortunately, all too often, that one church didn’t know the struggles and hopes of another church (often of the same denomination) just down the road! Financially and people-rich churches seemed reticent to engage with the mission of a smaller church, even in the same Presbytery and neighbourhood. The days when Presbytery was the mission engine of the Church seem to be a distant memory.

Probably the worst example of this I found in New York City. There I visited Trinity Presbyterian in Hell’s Kitchen. It’s a church with little money. They however support a number of local community groups like AA and food pantries. Trinity’s income stream was/is a five-storey apartment block next door to the church. Unfortunately though they had had an electrical fire which damaged the whole of the interior – and the insurance money only covered so much. So, they no longer have a minister because they can’t afford or house him/her, and their congregation has dwindled to 16 people. They have so far done up the first floor, but they don’t have an income stream from rental yet.

As an outsider I don’t understand why the big wealthy church [5th Avenue Presbyterian], just 15 minutes’ walk away, can’t help Trinity get its income stream back on track. Maybe there are personalities in the way; maybe the poorer church doesn’t want to be beholden to the richer church… But it is sad when a one-off injection of capital could get them up and functioning again.

My seventh and last objective was to be personally refreshed. I visited, in the manner of a pilgrim, a number of ‘holy’ sites in the USA and especially in Europe. These included Walden Pond, the 911 memorial, Amiens Cathedral [and walking the labyrinth], Passchendaele and other WWI sites in Belgium, Notre Dame in Paris, Chartres Cathedral, the Sagrada Familia [Barcelona], the Alhambra [Granada], St Peter’s [Rome], and the Aeropagus [Athens]. My joy has been to discover afresh poetry as a means to convey feelings and insights.

In summary here are some of my key learnings:

1. Good hospitality shapes and creates good theology (if we let it).
2. ‘Weak’ theology is a non-triumphal way of imagining god, and energizing us for mission.
3. Liturgy is about creating the future vision in ritual.
4. In its liturgies St Luke’s has a lot to offer liberal/progressive churches in NZ and overseas.
5. One of the things secular people value is spiritual spaces, and many of our churches are such spaces.
6. One church alone cannot do everything needed to save the world. We need friends, and networks.
7. There are a lot of clergy in ministry who are exhausted.
8. Deciding social change projects will depend on our context, resources, and passions. We need to choose a manageable project[s], be content with it, do it with others, and do it well.
9. Presbyterian and Congregational ministers are a varied bunch, with varied practices, and a variety of theology and skills. Uniformity is a not a denominational value held dear.

**Appendix:**

Full Reading List:

*Acts and Christian Beginnings* ed. Dennis Smith and Joseph Tyson 2013

Karen Armstrong *St Paul: The Apostle We Love to Hate* 2015

John Caputo *How to Read Kierkegaard* 2007

John Caputo *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* 2007

John Caputo *The Folly of God* 2016

David Galston *Embracing the Human Jesus* 2012

David Galston *God’s Human Future* 2016

Thich Nhat Hanh *Living Buddha Living Christ* 2007

John O’Donohue *To Bless the Space Between Us* 2008

Patricia Budd Kepler *Button Reflections* 2015

Murray Rae *Kierkegaard and Theology* 2010

Peter Rollins *How [Not] to Speak of God* 2006

Frank Schaeffer *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God* 2014