

Part 3: Our Presbyterian Heritage

sermon for Milson Combined Church by Silvia Purdie, July 2015

I married into the Presbyterian Church.

Chris's great great great ...? grandparents came from Scotland and settled in Wellington, early in pioneer days, the 1850s. His parents are still in Wellington, and are 'stallwart' members and leaders in the church they joined when they got married, Wadestown Presbyterian. This church is very much like the one I grew up in, Waiwhetu Methodist, a classic white middle class suburban family church. Much like thousands of other churches, including ours, liberally scattered throughout the Western world.

So what makes the Presbyterian heritage distinctive? What might the 'Press-buttons' bring to the mix that makes up Milson Combined Church?

We're probably best known for being 'dour'. ... Happy Feet clip. We banned dancing, we banned alcohol, I'm sure they would have banned laughter if they could, back in the day.

I don't know too much about Scottish history, but I do know that the Church of Scotland is inexorably mixed up in it. I know that the Church of Scotland has seen its own civil wars and 'Disruptions', passionate debates and fiery battles over what the church is and where it should sit in society.

So when folk from Scotland came as settlers to New Zealand some were 'proper' Church of Scotland the establishment, much like the Church of England, who did everything "decently and in order" and liked their silver candlesticks. High church.

Not so the 'Wee Frees', a most feisty independent lot. The Free Church of Scotland believed that ministers should be paid by the local church, not be at the beck and call of the Laird, on his payroll like puppets. They were more charismatic and less traditional. More Calvinist, no stained glass windows or frippery. Keep It Simple. The Word was All! Their churches had high, high pulpits, right in the centre of the church ... 6 foot above contradiction!

These divisions didn't last too long out here in the Pacific so far from the old land, and in 1863 they combined to form the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. Except for the southerners. They kept their own separate Presbyterian church all the way until 1901 when they deigned to join with the northerners. But some of the old fights still remain, in new forms. I would say that the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand is the most diverse of all denominations in our country.

Apart from the fact that we keep having old arguments at General Assembly, here's what this looks like in practice:

About a quarter of Presbyterian Churches would describe themselves as Liberal. You've probably heard something about the furious debates that went on in the 1960s in the Presbyterian Church over a chap called Lloyd Geering. He was professor of the training school for ministers in the mid 60s, and openly challenged pretty much all of the fundamental beliefs of the church. He argued that the resurrection didn't happen, that God is more a symbol than a reality, that Jesus did not do any miracles ... rationalising the Christian faith in the name of being 'relevant' in our changing world. Geering famously was tried for heresy in 1967, but not convicted. There are still many Presbyterians who continue his teachings.

At the other extreme are many Presbyterians who would happily describe themselves as 'fundamentalist', holding fast to the fundamentals of the faith, reading the Bible literally and seeing issues in black and white. There's little that these two extremes can agree on about anything!

Most of the Presbyterian Church is somewhere in the middle – kind of traditional, orthodox, open about the complexity of ethical issues, trying to be fresh in our worship, inclusive in our practice, while also honouring our identity. I'd put myself in that mix somewhere.

Then there is the cultural diversity. The most successful missionary work in Samoa, Niue, and Rarotonga was done by missionaries from the Congregational Church, and when these groups came to New Zealand they joined the Presbyterian Church, so we have large churches from these communities, which brings a wonderful richness to our denomination. More recent migration has brought Presbyterians from Asia and southern Africa, so that now our largest churches are Korean, and in Auckland you'll hear plenty of Afrikaans accents in church.

Lastly, there is a growing diversity of worship styles. Once upon a time Presbyterian worship was all '4-hymn sandwich', just like you'd find in any Methodist church still today. But increasingly now worship is far more similar to what you'd find in a Pentecostal or Baptist church. And it is these churches who are larger and growing, while the more traditional ones are mostly aging and declining.

You are probably familiar with the traditional type of worship, so let me explain to you this thing called "Contemporary Worship". You need to know

because this is what you'll experience if you attend worship at most of the churches in Palmerston North, including St Albans Presbyterian. I know that for some of you your children and grandchildren go to these churches. It is based on some quite different convictions about worship than you are used to, and it helps to have some understanding about that.

The main difference between most of the churches in Palmerston North is the noise level – if you go to a loud one you might like to take ear plugs!

Contemporary Worship has two halves to a worship service: first, the 'worship', second the 'teaching'. Our services have more or less that basic structure too so you won't find that too weird.

Worship consists of songs, with band, singers with microphones, drums, maybe even brass – the full works, it's awesome, I love it. The purpose of the music is to bring people into a real encounter with God, so the songs flow from one to the next, songs repeat, and the emotion builds. They might start with something lively then progressively get softer and more intimate in the words. People are invited to move your body to get the most out of it... so dance to the lively songs, and open your hands, lift your arms up and out if you can in full praise and adoration, the whole body involved in the movement of worship. If you do move you can't but be moved. The music takes you to a place of connection, gratitude, awe and wonder. The lights are dim, the worship leaders are swept up in ecstasy, people around you have their eyes closed and their hands out. It's a beautiful moment. Then the leader will step forward and pray, the music swells one last time and gently dies away. Worship is over.

Time for notices, for hugs all round, meet and greet. Time to ask you for money and invite you to fill in a visitor's card.

Then make yourself comfortable, now the 2nd half.

In 'Contemporary Worship' no one comes forward to read the Bible. The person who is preaching will include some Bible reading in their sermon, usually projected onto the screen – but if you want to look like you fit in, remember to take your own Bible to church with you. Or these days the young folk get out their phones and look up the scriptures on that! Preaching is long, maybe 45 minutes, so you'd better be sitting comfortably. But no one will glare at you if you leave half way through. Actually, in a Presbyterian church you wouldn't get more than half an hour sermon, so count yourself lucky!

So what do you think about that?

Hands up if you have been to worship like that?

Tell us what you thought of it ... what did you like? Did anything concern you?

What questions might you ask about that style of worship?

As I said, I do love it. But I also have issues with it.

One of my issues is that it comes across so polished and slick. It is all pre-packaged, pre-rehearsed. Which I find odd given that the original passion for more modern worship came from the move of the Spirit to release people from formal structures of worship, to allow for spontaneity, like the early church, words of prophecy, speaking in tongues. I respect what Steve and the team at St Albans do, because they deliberately keep open space in the worship service – after the singing they have 5-10 minutes where people are invited to say what is on their heart to say. So in that way they're more Pentecostal than the Pentecostals!

Otherwise the temptation (and I do believe it is a sinful temptation) is to impose our own control on the worship service, to manipulate people into a particular emotional state (then ask them for money!) ... this is a dangerous game to play, controlling the Holy Spirit of God!

It is also an elevating of one emotional state over others. I have known many experiences of God, in deep silence, intellectual curiosity and the spark of ideas, the simple touch of another person. A spiritual ecstasy of praise is a wonderful experience but it's not the be-all and end-all of worship.

Another concern I have is that it is kind of the same from week to week. We don't use the Lectionary here as more traditional churches do, but we do honour the seasons of the church year: Pentecost, Advent, Christmas, Easter. The more 'contemporary' churches tend not to and that flattens worship out, in my opinion. They have their own themes, but they aim for the same experience each week. One of the great gifts of our traditional church calendar is that it leads you through a wide range of spiritual moods and experiences, highs and lows, reaching outward and reaching inward, ordinary time and feast days, longings and griefs and celebrations. I would hate the church to lose these – let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater! We also like to use symbols and colour to enhance worship. You won't get that in a Pentecostal church.

It bothers me too that most of our churches are so alike. No one is really pushing the boundaries of worship. No one is being creative or edgy, engaging with our culture in fresh ways. There's a sameness to it all which in another couple of decades will just look old and boring to a new generation.

Another concern I have about modern worship ... unless you are a good musician it is unlikely that you would have any role to play in worship. It has succumbed to professionalisation. Here at Milson we value everyone being involved, so we have different leaders and readers, we're pretty egalitarian, people do what they'd like to do. In most churches in town worship is something of a spectator sport, I'm afraid.

Finally, a big issue is around children in worship. This way of worshipping that I've described here has no place for children. They join in the fun music, then they're off, out to kids programme.

Recently I went to the national Presbyterian assessment weekend for candidates, and we got talking about whether children take Communion, and one of the candidates, from a big Pentecostal church, said that her children had never had Communion because they are always out at kids church. That makes me sad. How do we get to be family in the presence of God? Modern churches are split up along age lines and I don't like that.

All that sounds negative, and I don't want to be negative. I want to encourage you to go to these churches, experience what is great about them, but do so with your brain turned on and asking questions. Let that help you clarify what matters to you about worshiping God. Talk to your grandkids about it. Tell them how you know God, and what's good for you about what we do on a Sunday morning.

Don't be intimidated by a church just because it's big and successful.

So, most of that wasn't specifically about the Presbyterian Church. What are the questions that come out of that for us this morning?

What are the insights from scripture for us this morning?

At the heart of 'Contemporary Worship' is the decision to enter more fully at a more physical and emotional level into worship than what we normally do here at Milson. This is alien and scary at first. But it is very Biblical to dance in the praise of God. It is a feature of the Holy Spirit to create space in our hearts to feel the love of God, to know Jesus at more than an intellectual level. Despite all my reservations and criticisms, I respect the contemporary churches for being lively.

Is there anything that you'd like to incorporate into our worship from a more charismatic movement of God?

How about the opposite side of our Presbyterian heritage, the dourness, the obsession with rules and regulations, the need to do things 'decently and in order'.

Is this more biblical or less? Personally I relate to this side of the Presbyterian church the way one would treat a grouchy old uncle – politely. I work within this system, and I work hard at the tasks I have been given to do for the Presbytery. So I learn what rules I need to keep or even enforce, and what rules might be bent with a bit of sweet talking or simply not asking for permission!

From the PCANZ website:

The key message remains that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone; our understanding of God and of how we live and worship continues to be tested by our reading of Scripture. Our decisions are made by a hierarchy of Church courts rather than individual leaders, as a safe guard against the abuse of spiritual power. While the Reformation also represented a “reforming” of the faith against excesses of authority, a rejection of symbols that went too far, and an emphasis on sin that did not always do justice to the complexities of human life, it also introduced a confidence that God’s blessings are present in this life as well as in the life to come. While the Church is the interpreter of the Bible, the Reformation placed the Bible in authority over the Church. Study and education became more important, but the concept of being able to earn God’s favour was firmly rejected.