

## Knox Church and James Matheson.

Knox Church in the 1950's was a microcosm of the surging church life of the time, when everything was "going like a train". (A.D. Horwell) Church Extension boomed in the new suburbs, as part of the New Life Movement. Some sixty new parishes were established during the decade. Some remarkable Presbyterian preachers up and down the land open up new horizons of theology, social justice, ecumenism, and as Allan Davidson has pointed out, dynamic laypeople cut through the old clerical autocracy.<sup>1</sup> Schools trained ministers and elders in visitation evangelism. The Bible Class movement boomed. Women's claims for leadership roles were slowly being recognized by the mid-1950's.

Jim Matheson, then, this is my thesis in advance, did not wave some magic wand of renewal during his decade at Knox Church, 1951-1960. His contribution was substantial and indeed remarkable but he also surfed the waves of a buoyant church life in Otago and Southland, which sent hundreds of young people to train as nurses and students in Dunedin. He inherited a congregation which in 1951 was strong, had a good conceit of itself, and was exceptional in its provision of staff, with deaconess, nurse, organist, secretary as well as two ministers and its own missionary. In its AGM of 1948 it was described as the biggest congregation of the Presbyterian Church in NZ and it was regarded as fitting that it should also have in David Herron the best minister. The 'ruggedness and toughness' of his addresses was noted.<sup>2</sup> The Rev Dr David Herron CBE, had played a magisterial role as Moderator of the Church, as Chancellor of Otago University and had been awarded an honorary Doctorate by St Andrew University.<sup>3</sup> The four month visiting ministry of Leonard Small in 1950, with its genial preaching, had packed out the church (and emptied others).<sup>4</sup> Lay leadership and organizational life was strong, with a Session packed with business leaders and professionals; attendance at quarterly communions could be as high as 670. Each of its 32 districts had an elder, deacon and lady visitor.<sup>5</sup> A feature of the church was its

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<sup>1</sup> "1931-1960: Depression, War, New Life", in *Presbyterians in Aotearoa 1840-1990*, ed. Dennis McEldowney (Wellington, 1990), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Knox Newsletter, June 1946: Session Minutes, September 1955.

<sup>3</sup> He had a strong social consciousness, alerting the congregation, for example, to the Baillie Report to the Church of Scotland on God's Will for Church and Nation; he warmly commended the visit of Martin Niemöller; Newsletter, June 1949; in his farewell address in March 1950 he pled for more understanding between the nations if war was to be averted. Evening Star 17/3/50.

<sup>4</sup> In the final weeks of his time overflow accommodation had to be arranged in the Youth Building; the congregation had hoped to attract Leonard Small to be its permanent minister; no New Zealand or Australian ministers were found suitable; it empowered a Scottish Commission of Small, Professor John Baillie, and Rev Dr Archie Craig, a redoubtable trio with complete powers, and they recommended Matheson to the congregation; the Session was thoughtfully aware of its responsibility in bringing him and his family 13,000 miles across the world. AGM, 29.8.1951.

strong student membership.<sup>6</sup> In 1950 a New Life campaign had been launched, involving a systematic visitation of the parish area.

Yet by the 1950's the challenges to a largely traditional Presbyterianism, with its focus on the secondary virtues of loyalty and character and self-discipline, were already becoming evident. Jim Matheson's achievement was to read these challenges and to meet many of them. He was a team worker, aware that the engine of a parish lay in its lay leadership, both of men and, increasingly, of women.<sup>7</sup> Newsletters began to appear monthly, not quarterly in 1953, with a focus on coming events. Interestingly Knox had been already been ahead of the game on communication media, films having already been shown in church in 1948 during the visit of George Macleod, the Founder of the Iona Community.

The new minister had high expectations of the elders; parish visitation as part of the New Life Movement required careful preparation and prayer, earnestness as well as breadth.<sup>8</sup> The importance of the training of elders and youth workers was frequently highlighted. Elders' retreats were held, Session meetings lasted longer, and the suggestion of the New Life school held for Knox and St Andrews church members that there be less emphasis on routine business and more on spiritual issues was noted and acted upon. The deplorable state of much of the housing on the flat was repeatedly discussed in Session.<sup>9</sup> Matheson worked well with his gifted ministerial associates: Ken Orange, Ian Dixon, Alan Quigley, Sister Gladys. Above all his was a teaching ministry, alert to the theological and social questions of the time, characterized by a warm humanity and a quite unusual articulacy.<sup>10</sup> J.D. Salmund, a key figure in the congregation's youth work, and representative of the best of traditional Presbyterianism, commented on the new minister's "rare spiritual insight."<sup>11</sup> He was very at ease with young people, having had unusual success with them in his previous parish in Blackhall, Edinburgh. He was relatively young himself, energetic and well-organised. People responded to his straight talking and his pastoral skills. He informed the congregation at an early stage of his thirteen (!) priorities for "the minister's stewardship of time", partly as a response to expectations that

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<sup>6</sup> Its membership in June 1950 was 1008; Knox College, Carrington, Studholme, St Margaret's and the Nurses' Home all sent strong contingents to the church; in the Second World War 14 members of the congregation had died, including David Herron's son, Robert; 110 members or associates were on active service.

<sup>7</sup> Ms Vera Hayward, President of the NZ Educational Institute, was one of many outstanding women; however a vote on admitting women as elders was so narrowly won (128 to 122) that the Session decided against this in 1958; AGM 1958 Session initially, too Sister Gladys was permitted to be present at Session but without speaking rights.

<sup>8</sup> There are repeated references to the crucial value of elders, deacons and lady visitors going into people's homes and relating to them there; retreats and elders' schools were held; many younger elders and deacons were appointed; Session 20.8.58.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. AGM September 1952.

<sup>10</sup> Within a few months the high regard in which he was held as a spiritual leader being voiced in newsletters.

<sup>11</sup> AGM September 1952; Salmund was General Superintendent of Sunday School and Bible Classes; 120 attended Sunday School, most of whose parents were not churchgoers.

congregational members might have been regularly visited more often. It is a scary list. His priorities were clear; pastoral emergencies, preparation time for teaching and preaching, space for personal prayer and study.<sup>12</sup>

He could not be easily labelled or pigeon-holed theologically. The quality of worship was often remarked upon, and certainly new attention was given to the Christian Year, with innovations such as the celebration of Holy Week and Christmas Eve services.<sup>13</sup> Yet he was no fussy liturgist. The sermon remained central. He agreed with the organist, Roy Spackman, that congregational singing, not the choir, had the priority. There was an excitement about worship at Knox. He himself described it as “always exhilarating,”<sup>14</sup> as drama, an action in which all powers of the mind and spirit were involved. Participation meant commitment. He liked to talk of the ancient Celtic custom that those to be baptized stood on one side of the stream; to join the people of God they then had to wade through the water.<sup>15</sup> He was vividly aware, though, that contemporary society saw no point in worship. Paganism was wiser than we are in that respect, he commented. Worship went beyond words. Stillness, contemplation reminded us that words run out on us, that mystery has the last word, that there is an infinity that cannot be said of God.<sup>16</sup>

Theologically he was well read, and he saw himself as a mediator of good scholarship. He always was short of time (and money) for reading; but took advantage of the reasonably priced books from the SCM Press, and drew in New Zealand on his previous study; he relates that his landlady in remote little Castletown, away up in Caithness, his first congregation, was astonished that he spent time not only preparing on sermons and meetings (studying) but deepening his knowledge of bible and theology: “Are ye studyan’ or are ye learnan, she would enquire”, as she brought in his tea and biscuits?,<sup>17</sup> Though he had no time at all for fundamentalism, or for overt proselytizing, he retained his evangelical roots. He

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<sup>12</sup> They are illuminating:

1. To be available at any time when someone, whether a member or not, urgently asks for help.
2. To set aside time, morning and evening, for prayer and Bible reading.
3. To prepare for Sunday services.
4. Where parents ask for Baptism for children, visit in home at least twice beforehand for instruction and once after.
5. Conduct a communicants’ class once yearly- weekly meetings two months before first communion and one month after.
- AGM 1959.
6. Christian Marriage – interview couples several times before and attend wedding breakfast.
7. Funerals – visit the home at once and daily until day of funeral and at least once after.
8. Visit local hospitals weekly.
9. Visit housebound elderly and invalid at least four times a year.
10. House visits to all members and adherents and others in area as time is available.
11. Maintain study time for theological reading.
12. In addition: School RE classes. Session Meetings, Presbytery meetings and committees, Assembly committees, ecumenical bodies, weekly vestry hour.
13. The unlucky number – Monday off if possible.

<sup>13</sup> The first was held in December 1952.

<sup>14</sup> AGM 1960.

<sup>15</sup> Sister Gladys reported to the September meeting of Kirk Session that over the past 10 years there had been 279 baptisms, an average of one every second Sunday.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. his booklet: *Let us Pray*. Presbyterian Bookroom, 1955.

<sup>17</sup> *Facing Two Ways*. Some thoughts on the Parish Ministry. (Unpublished; c. 1982?)

believed in the Virgin Birth, a bodily resurrection, the Second Coming. To my youthful disgust he even gave his support to the Billy Graham campaign. One might say he was traditional enough to take people with him in a broad church direction, responsive to new trends in the arts and in society. For example the church hosted a performance of JB, a play on the biblical character Job, in July 1960.

His experience during the War and in prison camp of living alongside ordinary folk was fundamental, as was the engagement with the Iona Community. Though a gifted soccer player he was inveigled when a chaplain for the Seaforths into playing rugby and did so with such verve that he cracked an opponent's ribs in a sliding tackle was known thereafter in the Regiment as Tiger Matheson. He was impatient with churchiness and a narrow denominationalism. Towards the end of his life he commented: "I have found as a pastor an almost complete lack of interest among Church members in ... doctrinal differences, and went on to suggest that it "would be good if Protestants and Catholics went out together to invite people to church."<sup>18</sup> A constant note during the time at Knox is his encouragement of the congregation to review current practice, to look beyond the church doors, to be attentive to marginal members.<sup>19</sup> Session felt increasingly free to ask questions such as "what is wrong with Knox Church."<sup>20</sup> He was open-minded theologically, but he was no liberal, and never trendy. He took his time about moving away from the King James Bible. He lived in and by the biblical testimony, that of his beloved Hebrew psalms and prophets, of the Gospels and Paul, as interpreted through a historico-critical perspective. Ask all your questions, he used to say, and pursue them to the grim end, and then question your questions.

It is not clear how much of the growing interest in Stewardship in the congregation was of his doing, or stemmed from the New Life Movement, but by the end of 1957 he had become aware that it was more than a technique to raise money; it had crucial evangelistic and theological dimensions. His sermon on 17 November explained how the campaign worked, highlighted the key role of lay people, and the pervasiveness of the movement throughout the church in New Zealand and overseas. In rather daring language he argued that like Christ "we are called...to empty ourselves, and so become co-workers with God." Up to now most church members have only gone "through the motions of sharing in God's redemption." Stewardship would bring about a "revolution" in this. The usual objections to the need for a common meal, or to being pressed into the straitjacket of an imposed programme, were succinctly met, all with a touch of humour. He was not over the top. The campaign, he suggested, might well reveal more problems than it solved.<sup>21</sup> It is probably not too much to claim

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>19</sup> At the 1956 AGM he suggests, for example, that members should ask whether some things are unnecessary, whether the balance between practical and devotional involvement is right, whether a prayerful and critical review could make current evangelism more imaginative and creative; under the guidance of Dr Knight, who had spent time in Budapest and spoke Hungarian, there was considerable hospitality to Hungarian refugees.

<sup>20</sup> Session August 1957.

<sup>21</sup> Newsletter December 1957.

that together with the Centenary Project the response to stewardship dominated the final years of his ministry.

Undoubtedly the campaign was a roaring success, in every respect, financially, organizationally, spiritually.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, too, it was only possibly because of its inspired lay leadership and the outpouring of “illustrious energy” by countless people. Reading the records one is reminded again and again of the differences between the culture of the 1950’s and that of today. It is hard to put into words. There was a pervasive ethos of corporate responsibility, an “unclutteredness” of life at singular variance with today’s multiple distractions, not to mention a degree of almost ascetic discipline, though this was already beginning to provoke revolt. I’m tempted to label it a more innocent, though certainly not a simpler world.

As minister he could rely on this ethic of reliability, delegate all the practical arrangements for the stewardship campaign to others while setting the parameters and offering encouragement and a theological perspective. By June 1958 he was talking of “a new beginning in the life of our congregation.” The campaign had remarkably educational, pastoral, social and organizational spin-offs; following it no less than 110 people expressed a desire for instruction to become communicant members.<sup>23</sup> There is a curious irony that its very success persuaded him two years later to leave New Zealand for Scotland to promote stewardship there.<sup>24</sup>

The Centenary Project was initially his baby, but in the end it was enthusiastically embraced by the congregation as a visionary plan, and £10,000 pounds were already in hand by September 1960. Coming from the beautiful St Columba’s Church in Blackhall, whose architect, McGregor Chalmers, modelled it on Iona Abbey, it had been hard for him to relate to what was basically a preaching auditorium when he arrived.<sup>25</sup> The front of the church was dominated by serried ranks of organ pipes, in front of which stood the central pulpit and the organ console. There was no central aisle, access for communion, marriages and funerals was difficult. The plans vastly improved the appearance of the church, freeing up the northern window, and restoring, as the architect said, the harmony of exterior and interior. Matheson’s primary concern, however, was not the beauty of the building but enhancing “mystery and meaning”, so that the building was no longer centred on a preacher in “splendid isolation but a company called together by Christ, gathered round the Table which is the symbol of his sacrifice, responding to his unspeakable gift.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The Deacons’ court reported in May 1958 that the dinner for more than a thousand people in the Town Hall had been splendid; the visiting of homes, master-minded by Dr Ross, had been excellent; free-will envelope giving had increased 100%; and there were floods of offers to help in every part of the church’s work.

<sup>23</sup> Newsletter, June 1958.

<sup>24</sup> It is not entirely clear why he did leave. The strong advocacy of his friend, Dr George Knight, played a role, as did the ties of family in Scotland, particularly perhaps for his wife Janet. It is probably true that though they through themselves into the life of the church, fell in love with Central Otago, and made countless friends, that they never felt themselves to be New Zealanders. There had been

<sup>25</sup> As a 13 year old I accompanied him on his first visit to the church and registered his shock, though he never voiced his disappointment.

<sup>26</sup> AGM 1960; interestingly the original instructions to the architect suggested that the choir be in the back gallery, since in Presbyterian worship the emphasis is on the congregation and not on choral singing. Deacon’s Court February 1959.

He understood the 1950's as a time of transformation, in society as well as in Presbyterianism and the wider Church. The Centenary was happening when "great things are afoot in the Church as a whole. The Bible is coming into its own again. The place of the Laity is being discovered. There is an impelling conscience about Unity." For him Knox had always been more than a denominational church. While proud of its Presbyterian tradition, it had "given its entire loyalty only to the Lord whose Church is Universal." He saw the future of the church in this context with a three-fold focus on the parish, the University and its colleges, and on the city.<sup>27</sup> The services, both in the mornings and the evenings, pulled in whole platoons of students from the colleges and the Nurses' Home, but the lucidity of his sermons and the coherence and dignity of his liturgies did not come easily. He spent an average of eight hours on preparing each service. He worked very hard with the text, relating it to its context, to its place in Scripture and theology as a whole, and only then wrestled with it hermeneutically. This became a Knox tradition. Neil Churcher and David Grant were notable examples. His communication skills were formidable. He loved the poetry of Browning, Eliot and others and though his sermons were carefully structured, they had a narrative rather than a logical lucidity. He told a good story, and could move peoples to laughter and tears. His sermons took the congregation with him, and sometimes into quite profound depths, as in his series on the Beatitudes. He came from a long line of ministers, and had a high, almost severe sense of the office or calling of the minister; and though his relaxed presence inspired great loyalty, he acted and spoke as one under authority. When only five elders turned up for the ordination of Sister Gladys, he rebuked his distinguished Session in no uncertain terms; this lamentably poor turnout was unworthy of them.<sup>28</sup> He nudged the congregation away from an individualistic ethic, often focusing in the past, as in traditional Presbyterianism, on opposition to drinking and gambling, to a broader social and political consciousness. He had no hesitation about condemning the Suez War or taking up then unpopular causes, such as peace with Communist China, or the condemnation of nuclear weapons. He was regarded by some, within and beyond the congregation, as politically suspect, a fellow-traveller. In 1957 his evidence in support of nuclear pacifism to Parliament's Petitions Committee, made quite a stir. Yet 1958 saw a huge inflow of new members. Knox became a nursery for many future church leaders and moderators, and for outstanding lay leaders.<sup>29</sup> A Presbytery Visitation noted the vigour of the organizations, the role of women in pastoral care, the large number of new communicants, the important ministry to nurses and students, and the value of the minister's sermons and counseling to a much wider circle.<sup>30</sup> Knox sponsored the new congregation at Waldronville, which eventually joined up with Green Island. The August Communion had an attendance of 724, but while statistics tell part of the story, it is less easy to evaluate the influence of his teaching, preaching, pastoral work and prophetic ministry on individuals. He was aware that the Gospel will never be popular, that true commitment is always restricted to a minority. Oral testimony suggests, though, that the experience of being at Knox

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<sup>27</sup> *Knox Church Dunedin 1860-1960. A centenary survey*, 3

<sup>28</sup> The "lamentably poor" representation was "unworthy" of the Kirk Session: Session 26 November 1952.

<sup>29</sup> More than 60 joined for the March 1958 Communion service, including George Petersen, Robin Lane, Doug Grierson, Doug Wedde, Jill Stringer, Marggaret Moore, Ruth McNeur, and in June the future Moderator, Neil Churcher.

<sup>30</sup> Session October 1959.

transformed the lives of many on a permanent basis. When a collection of his sermons, *Do you believe this*” was published at the suggestion of Sister Nora Calvert the 1500 copies were an instant sell-out.<sup>31</sup>

The Youth Fellowship which met after evening worship regularly attracted 60-80 people, and offered a forum for quite radical thought and action. Together with the usual talks and worship and socials, and camps on St Martin Island, its members drew up a blueprint for transforming New Zealand political, social and educational policies! On the other hand despite a succession of reviews and changes in leadership there continued to be problems with ‘leakage’ from Sunday School and Bible Class. It was occasionally suggested that the Session was disinterested in youth work.<sup>32</sup> It is more likely that teaching materials and methods were no longer adequate.

His networks were extensive. He chaired the international relations committee of Assembly and contributed a regular (anonymous) column to the *Outlook* on foreign affairs. When the Prime Minister, Mr Nash, visited Dunedin he would drop by the manse. His friendship with Norman Perry and Alan Brash alerted him to Maori and Asian issues. He chaired the Dunedin Branch of CND. He founded, with the Anglican Dean, Walter Hurst, the St Martin Island Community, seeing the need to offer the city a different sort of spiritual stimulation. His long-standing interest in pastoral counselling meant that he was in considerable demand well outside the congregation. An article in *Landfall*, published after his departure, but commissioned and written before it, made trenchant comments about the shallowness of New Zealand society. It caused hurt and bewilderment and numerous letters to the paper. It indicated the sharp edge to his thinking. New Zealanders were the best of good fellows but were intellectually shallow, and ill equipped for the ordinary business of living. Even regular church members had little depth of conviction, still less any intellectual grasp of their faith.<sup>33</sup> He talked elsewhere, too, of the “lack of any recognized form in the art of living” among Kiwis, and of the ‘cosy resignation’ of most Dunedinites, their lives bounded by work and sport and home.<sup>34</sup> This acerbic note was a surprise to those who only knew him in a pastoral capacity.

Initially the manse family was housed at 10 Pitt St, an attractive two storey wooden home just across the road from the church, and then moved up to 3 Pitt St, a more modern and warmer house. Although Knox paid its minister more than the minimum stipend its demands, including that of hospitality, were also greater. Money was always tight. In his unpublished writing, *Facing Two Ways*, he comments that it was not easy to run a household and family, finance the car and save for a retirement house, on a minister’s salary. The strictest budgeting and financial discipline were required.<sup>35</sup> With the birth of David, there were now five children. All attended state schools, with Peter going on to university, and Pat to nursing. At the centre of the hospitable home was the largely unsung ministry of Janet (Nettie) Matheson. She was in some ways a traditional minister’s wife, President of the Women’s Fellowship, loyal to a fault, with scant time for herself. She had to scrimp and save, and keep a growing family fed. Her pancakes, scones and ginger biscuits never lasted long.

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<sup>31</sup> Deacon’s Court 8.3.61.

<sup>32</sup> Session August 1957; no doubt it was a sign of the times, and of the inadequacy of previous teaching materials and methods.

<sup>33</sup> ODT 15.7.61

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Fraser Harbutt, ODT 15.10.60.

<sup>35</sup> *Facing Two Ways*, 33.

Initially she also had to cope with a very painful leg, stemming from poor diagnosis in Edinburgh. Without her warmth and support her husband could not have functioned as he did. Their love for one another was palpable, and provided a secure foundation for the whole family. Nettie had her own circle of friends, and thought her own critical thoughts about church and theology. She and her oldest daughter, Patricia, could be scathing about too much male talk about politics and soccer, or about guests who overstayed their welcome. Meals began with grace, and there were family prayers, though I remember little of them. It was a happy family life. Christmas and New Year were special, and long summer holidays in January, often at Arthur's Point, near Queenstown, bonded the family.

People were desolated when he decided in 1960 to return to Scotland, and he himself was overwhelmed by the expressions of goodwill and regret. Mr McKinnon, the Session Clerk, talked of a ministry which had been an inspiration to all.<sup>36</sup> The centenary booklet, probably by Dr Angus Ross, described him as an "outstanding pulpit teacher... clear in his analysis and presentation of theological questions" and compared him to Dr Herron in his concern for social justice, Tulloch Yuille in his appeal as a preacher, Professor Davies in his scholarship and his spiritual qualities, Professor Hewitson in his priority for mission, and Dr Stuart in his "genial relations with his parishioners." He had alerted the congregation fearlessly to the dangers of nuclear war and racial discrimination.<sup>37</sup>

His influence, more than fifty years later, is still felt. The renovation of the interior of the Church, which became the Centenary Project, has been liberating for worship. Since his time the church has stood open for visitors. His advocacy of a new fleet of halls, initially rejected, is long since reality. They include a Matheson Room. A whole generation of students and nurses, including countless future ministers, was inspired by his ministry. Knox Church has remained, under a succession of remarkable ministers, open to ecumenism and scholarship, concerned with social justice, and proud of its fine music and structured liturgy. His initiatives helped to ease people away from a rather moralistic and respectable Presbyterianism. Professor Alec Cheyne of New College, Edinburgh, identified a bipolarity within Church of Scotland members; within every breast an evangelical and a Moderate (we would say liberal) struggled for supremacy; Jim Matheson sought to combine both. Was he ever a New Zealander, though? I wonder.

He was fortunate not only in the elders and other lay leaders around him<sup>38</sup>, but also in the period during which he ministered. His successor, Doug Storkey, was a fine preacher, and had a large radio following. In 1963 Communion attendances reached an all time high of 800. Yet despite rising numbers at the University from 1967 attendances began to fall away quite dramatically, and continued to do so.<sup>39</sup> The socio-cultural world had changed. James Matheson could have done nothing about

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<sup>36</sup> AGM 1960; Session 9.11.60; the Deacon's Court spoke of the "dignified, kindly and clear-headed way he had conducted its meetings. 9.11.60.

<sup>37</sup> *A centennial survey*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> A dramatic example is the burgeoning of the scout movement, with lay members such as Eric and David Hill and Les Carrick leading it, splendidly documented in Alan McRobie, *A History of the 17<sup>th</sup> Dunedin (Knox Church) Scout Group*. Dunedin, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Ross Anderson, *They Grew in Faith. Knox Church Dunedin 1960-1985*, 3.

that, either. In a sense he had misdiagnosed the church; his optimism about its future strengths was no doubt misplaced. But would one want to hold that against him?