

“Spirited for others” – a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin on Sunday 20 September 2015 before the congregation’s Annual Meeting. Readings: Isaiah 55:10-13, Matthew 9: 35 – 10.4.

I have been minister here for sixteen months. In that time I have visited about half the people who were here when I came and nearly all the new people – I am sorry if I have missed anyone. I have shared in the work of the Church Council. I have been part of thousands of conversations about Knox and its future. As today is our Annual Meeting, I would like to reflect on what I have heard, and put it in a biblical context.

Each one of you is part of the story. A church is not a membership organisation like others. The Church, said the apostle Paul, is like a body with parts, like an organism. The arm cannot say to the leg, I do not need you. We are an organism that moves and evolves together, every part affected by every other part. The Church Council has responsibility for listening for God’s direction, for discerning a way forward and leads us in moving. In so doing, it interacts with the rest of the body, as we move together.

This might be your first day in this congregation, or you may have turned up by mistake. Jesus says the person who arrives last is as important as the person who arrives first. The person who mistakenly turned up today is as important as the person who was baptised here 90 years ago. The body, whether you feel part of it or not, includes you.

As a people, a body, a church, last year we decided to grow - in following Jesus, in joining God’s Spirit, in courage, in fruitfulness.

How do churches grow?

Churches grow from their strengths, from enhancing their strengths, developing their strengths, multiplying their strengths.

What are our strengths?

Our location – during the day during semester, 1200 people walk past this church every hour.

We have a building known by many, not by all, from concerts or driving past.

We have a constant stream of new neighbours on our doorstep – the University and Polytech bring thousands of new people every year into our neighbourhood.

We encourage exploration and diversity. We do not expect people to have one view. We have people who are exploring Christianity from other faiths. We have new Christians and old Christians. We are diverse culturally. We have people whose faith has helped them through extremely difficult circumstances and people whose faith causes them problems. There is a lot of energy for inquiry and exploration.

Our heritage of music - of organ and choir - has evolved and continues to evolve to resonate with people’s experiences and faith today.

We try to bring good scholarship to Bible and theology and church. We host world scholars and have people who have spent a life-time studying the faith.

We have a tradition of prayer and spirituality that is true to us: honest, authentic, genuine. Our faith is not drily intellectual or unemotional or detached.

There is a spirit of inclusion. We seek to follow the boundary-crossing Jesus. We can discuss controversial subjects without being consumed by competing claims to truth. That is much more than tolerance.

We have a stream of new people, bringing fresh questions and challenges and energy.

We have children and young people who are articulate and thoughtful, who inspire and educate us.

We engage our local community on issues of justice. Today some of us are at the Peace Day Event at the stadium. Many are engaged in political or community movements.

We have a heritage of going to people where they are, rather than expecting them to come to us - Donald Stuart's remarkable ministry of visiting people in their homes.

We still have many people turning up!

Our greatest strength is the action of the Holy Spirit, at our door step, drawing us into her life in the community, inviting us to be part of her action out on the street, in the shops and hospital and university and polytechnic and work places, in the lives of people, in the questions and spirit of people beyond us.

Strengths bring opportunities.

In the Church of England, the two kinds of churches growing are emerging churches and cathedrals.

Emerging churches emerge from their local communities – they may meet in cafes or pubs or night clubs. Their life is shaped by the shape of the community and is often edgy.

Cathedrals offer diversity, options, styles that resonate with particular communities. Cathedrals comprise many communities that together make a whole.

We sense this is our future.

An approach that relies on attracting people to a dominant traditional style is insufficient.

We will continue to value a dignified service, a thoughtful preacher, a beautiful building and good music – but it is unrealistic to expect that to attract the diversity of people on our doorstep.

Anderson's Bay Church closed earlier this year. St David's Auckland, four decades ago was the largest Presbyterian Church in the country. It is in danger of closing.

In Australia and New Zealand formerly large inner-city churches using an attractional model with dignified buildings, worship and music are struggling.

This Church has been gradually declining in participation for 50 years, since 1964.

In the financial year before I began, Knox had a deficit of \$15k. Last year we had a deficit of \$15k. This year, if nothing changes we will have a deficit of \$15k. By then we will have run out of money. We have nine months to begin making a significant transition.

This is unnerving, not least for the minister. Just as unnerving, nearby churches are growing.

Two weeks ago the small evening congregation at the Anglican Cathedral joined us for our evening service. As the Cathedral was not being used, it was hired by a church that started in Dunedin in February. There were four hundred people at that evening service.

A Presbyterian Church that meets in a School a kilometre from here has grown over the last decade.

Around us there are congregations of several hundred.

Let's be realistic. They don't spend as much on their buildings and as little on mission and ministry as we do.

Most central city churches like ours have investments to be adventurous and outgoing - St John's in the City in Wellington has \$11M of investments.

We do not have investments.

We probably rely on congregational giving more than every other central city Presbyterian congregation in New Zealand.

Or they have several congregations within the same Church - Anglo, Pacifica, Asian. Or they have several ministry staff. We have none of that.

So what do we do?

Keep valuing and enhancing a service with thoughtful teaching, broad inclusion, children's engagement, resonating music, collaborative leadership.

At the same time, encourage new congregations as part of Knox with styles that resonate with a greater breadth of people.

So within our buildings, as part of our community, continue to worship with organ and choir. And develop worship led by other instruments, or with no music, with people sitting in pews or sitting on the floor, in quiet reflection or exuberant action.

Continue to encourage inquiry and conversation, through small groups - personal, real, honest, from us.

Use our location to communicate our understanding of Jesus.

Less the black noticeboard in front of an imposing edifice – more a heart-moving, community loving, radical prophet, in whose presence people flourish or are at least disturbed.

Less a building, more a community; less a gathered body, more a sent people; less attracting, more going.

Recapturing the Stuart spirit of going beyond ourselves, to where people are.

Why?

Because it's who we are.

A church is a group of people called from the community, for the community.

So we will mirror the shape of our community, the demographic of our community.

Our gathering is for sending; in going we find we need to gather, for worship, for learning, for acting collaboratively.

I invite you to be part of an exciting, challenging, risky and unnerving period in our life, to respond to the call of Jesus Christ, with fresh spirit, for the sake of our city.

Let's face our challenges now, not tomorrow.

Let's not play around the edges, trying to improve this or improve that. We are looking at our way of being.

Vincent van Gogh was the son of a Reformed pastor.

He said – the fishermen know that the sea is dangerous and the storm terrible, but they have never found these dangers sufficient reason for remaining ashore.

The wonderful thing, in all our conversations, I heard no one wanting to hold on to everything just as it is.

We know enough of Jesus, enough of the Spirit, enough of the church, enough of who we are, enough of our finances, to venture out. Let's leave the shore.