**Doing worship in the future**

**Prolonging ‘as is’, or pressing on to pave other ways?**

**1. From where I stand (or sit or kneel)**

It’s a privilege to be assigned the topic of future worship which, for the purposes of this article, I need to equate chiefly with *Christian* worship. As such, it is central to the project behind this publication. It’s also very challenging, both to the church at large and to me personally, as will soon become clear.

‘There’s just one point.’ That sentence only came to my mind as I began to write these notes, and realised I needed to put it in quotation marks. It’s almost spooky to recall that it dates back to the very beginning of my interest in worship. Seventy years ago or thereabouts, I joined two or three of my older siblings in attending some classes on worship and preaching. They were led by Rev C.M. Roberts, a Home Missionary at St Aubyn Methodist Church in New Plymouth. Whenever he gave a critique on the efforts of one of the class members he would make a little compliment and then add: ‘There’s just one point’.

Incidentally, those were the classes at which I probably first came across the elementary rules that a sermon should be about God, have *three* points, and last about 20 minutes. If only I had kept my notebook on all the other tips, how much easier this present task would have been.

But to get back to the one point at issue for me right now. I need to own up to being a bit of a square peg in a round hole. I still identify nostalgically with some of the most Sankey-ish of ‘Redemption Songs’, yet I have taken flight from practically all versions of supernaturalism, whilst remaining magnetized by the attraction of worth-ship. At least I have been able to sum up my rather peculiar perspective in one sentence!

Needless to say, I won’t have a straightforward answer (just some strong leanings!) and I may not be as optimistic as many may wish. My forecast tends to be ‘Partly cloudy’ rather than ‘Mainly sunny’. The best I can do is to approach the question from a number of angles. That in itself may suggest part of an answer. We must accept that the future is foreign territory and we hardly know what to expect until we get there. So be prepared for a potpourri of material, spiced with personal opinion, and even a little bit of whimsy.

**2. Prolonging past and present ̶ the default model of future worship**

I’ve derived this name for the prevailing future model from *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (2006). A few months ago the Mornington congregation generously presented me with a copy of this reference work, weighing in at over 4 lbs and extending more than 900 pages. I am most grateful ̶ even if, for my bedtime reading, they ignored the fact my eyesight and muscle tone are in decline.

Despite the book’s preoccupation with the past, it’s a good stepping stone towards the even bigger subject of the future. It has 36 international expert contributors, but its two editors, Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (from the UK and the US), are both Methodists! That may say something about the strategic positioning of Methodism within the world church. We sit somewhere in the centre, which may better help us to assess the broad sweep of worship practice, historically and geographically. Whether that makes us more adaptable to the future of worship remains to be seen.

The book’s opening sentence (on the dust jacket) reads: ‘The history of Christian worship is in many ways the history of Christianity itself.’ It should therefore follow that the future of Christian worship will also be the future of the faith itself, and vice versa. That indicates just how pivotal worship is to the overall theme of this more modest, current publication.

In wrapping up their tome, the editors address ‘Retrospect and Prospect’. Whilst warning that predictions would be foolhardy, they do offer some thoughts on prospects. The nearest they get to a Methodist milieu is in reference to recent worship practices in the United States:

Many congregations, especially those in “mainline” Protestant denominations that are in decline are…drawing from an array of approaches to worship, some of which depart from the denominationally approved standard… Among the current forms are a more music-driven “praise and worship” style and “emerging” worship that borrows forms past and present… Some have returned to more “traditional” forms in order to reclaim the sense of mystery lost in an instant messaging age. (p. 864)

They conclude with what can be taken as their own prescription for ‘doing worship in the future’:

What will, by definition, prolong the history of Christian worship is the continuing gathering of people, in the name of Jesus, to encounter in praise and prayer, in scripture and sermon, in sacrament and song, the God understood to be self-revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and thus communally to exercise the vocation and fulfil the destiny for which they as humans were created and redeemed. (p. 865)

If that satisfies you as an adequate and desirable portrait of the future of worship, then you are firmly placed in an extraordinary 2,000-year-old tradition, in company with the vast majority of those who identify as Christians. For myself, there are several hurdles. For example, I no longer believe in the traditional concepts of creation, revelation, or redemption. But I also sense a thread that wants to keep me connected with the people who so gather, and I have a desire to retain some kind of encounter at a subliminal level hinted at by the religious language so expressed. That’s a bit of a mouthful, and I would have difficulty explaining it systematically, so I shall resort to raising my misgivings and wistfulness rather obliquely.

**3. Pause for thought ̶ some vivid pictures in my mind**

1. **Italy. The Adoration of the magi, by Gaspare Diziani, 1718 (or 1733)**. A photo of this painting appeared in the 2018 Christmas Special edition of *The Listener.* If the event could be taken as history, this exquisite scene depicts perhaps the first, or at least the second, instance of really *doing* Christian worship. A hard act to follow, especially if you include the gold, frankincense and myrrh! The illustration accompanied an article by Andrew Anthony entitled ‘What binds us’. He introduced the latest book by Neil MacGregor, *Living with the Gods: On beliefs and peoples* (2018), which explores the enduring power of belief and ritual. Although MacGregor says he has no spiritual beliefs, he is an Anglican Christian for communal and ritualistic reasons (how common might that be across the denominations?). An extract from the book was headed ‘Belief is back’, but included Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, at least as much as Christianity. What should one make of it all?
2. **Papua New Guinea. Southern Highlands, Nipa, 1965-66.** In a pit-sawn timber and pit-pit grass church in a Methodist Overseas Mission station, I was under the tutelage of a local man, Aolso, a recently baptised Christian. This shy, gentle young man was patiently trying to introduce me to the local language. He was also (to use a word no longer in vogue) a leper, and benefitting from treatment by the Leprosy Mission. His introduction as an adult to Jesus had been via stick-drawings, including the parables and miracle stories. The latter would have included Jesus’ encounters with the disease (or at least a similar condition). That may have enhanced a sense of connection for him, and yet I was aware of a vast gulf as well. According to recent genome studies, Aolso’s ancestors remained genetically independent from Europe and Asia for most of the last 50,000 years. In the case of the Nipa area, the first missionary contact from the outside world had only occurred five years before Marion and I arrived. It all makes John 3:16 that much harder to comprehend.
3. **Scotland. St Peter’s College, Cardross, Argyll, 1966-80.** At the same time as I was living in the remote past, the Catholic Church was about to open one of the world’s most [modernist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernist) chapels. The complex was inspired by the brutalist works of [Le Corbusier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Corbusier), and was a winner of a number of prestigious architectural awards. In an extraordinary turn of fate, it closed in 1980, was abandoned five years later, and now features in *Britain’s Lost Churches: The Forgotten Holy Sites of Britain’s Christian Past* (2015). The author, Matthew Hyde, rated it as ‘maybe the greatest of all our lost churches’, but placed it in his last chapter, simply headed: ‘Hubris’. A photo of the smashed and despoiled granite high altar is captioned ‘abject ruination’. ‘Haunting’, I would add. Two principal factors led to the chapel’s demise: structural and spiritual. Leaking roofs ‘can be solved’, said Hyde, ‘but in Rome the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, which concluded in 1965, had already sealed its fate.’ The whole system of priestly training was altered and vocations to the priesthood were falling rapidly. Even Catholicism, for all its seeming unchangeableness, can provide deeply cautionary tales, yet laced with hints of contrary hope.
4. **South Dunedin. Wesley Methodist Church, Hillside Road.** Sadly, this church within our Dunedin Parish was closed in 2016 and demolished the following year. It had structural issues (mainly seismic standards) but also declining congregational numbers. During the final stages of dismantling, after removal of the varnished plywood behind the Communion table, it was just possible to make out, in all likelihood, the original backdrop to the worship centre, dating back about 120 years. A colourfully painted, curved scroll had displayed the words from Psalm 96:9: ‘Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness’, familiar to longtime Methodist worshippers as the first line in hymn number 9 in the *Methodist Hymn Book.* At some point in time the scrolled text must have no longer felt quite suitable, and plain varnish took its place. What contemporary congregation would choose to reinstate it? Art and fashion and even language change over the years, but who are we to suggest that the original worship centre was (shall we say?) ‘backward’ in some way? By the same token, how valid, (even if ‘with it’) might be our next style of worship, however it might change? And if worship modes are essentially transient, what about faith itself? Maybe its deep core barely alters but how deep do you go to reach the core? Deeper than church goers may be inclined to think as they gather Sunday by Sunday, ‘prolonging’ Christian worship?
5. **Northland. Waipoua Kauri Forest. Tane mahuta (approx 2,000 years old).** Kauri trees are among the most ancient in the world and have flourished in forests for longer than 100 million years. Yet, prior to 2009, who might have guessed that the kauri forest, now including Tane mahuta itself, could be at grave risk from a tiny pathogen known as kauri dieback disease? Now, I agree with Neil MacGregor (via Andrew Anthony) that ‘what matters about religious festivals is…their ability to make us think on a larger scale than ourselves’. But sometimes it takes nature and the cosmos to make us think on a larger scale than even our venerable religious festivals themselves. Just compare 2,000 years to 100 million years.
6. **Unimaginably far away and back in time. GW170729.** This object (assuming it still exists) is virtually unimaginable as a picture in one’s mind, despite impressions made by artists, but the thought of it is compelling. GW170729 was detected on 29 July 2017 by the gravitational waves created by the largest binary black hole merger ever witnessed in the universe, following the first such discovery in 2015. The waves from this latest one were caused by the formation of the black hole, more than 80 times as massive as our sun and about nine billion light years away. If this is all about getting things into perspective how would one go about drawing the actual lines of such a perspective – from earth to GW170729?

**4. So what? Where are we heading?**

I did promise something of a hotchpotch, but this may be trying your patience. I just hope that the above vignettes will have helped to free up the mind in a preliminary way. But it’s time to be more head-on than side-on. My main thrust is that a simple prolonging of Christian worship practice is no longer tenable, and not even an energetic revamping by way of style and expression will be sufficient. Some continuity is essential but nothing remotely as much as is taken for granted in practically all denominations. Obviously nothing substantive is going to happen soon in the bulk of Christianity, but unless some pockets begin a major shift the long term prospect will be one of increasing irrelevance.

The change that is needed involves worship and theology in similar measure and each affects the other at steps along the way. Prominent theologians have often referred to change in terms of major steps rather than gradual evolution. Such epoch-marking events are expressed in different ways at different times by different analysts. Sir Lloyd Geering made use of the term ‘axial periods’ and Phylis Tickle popularized the idea of ‘massive transitions’ or ‘upheavals’ every 500 years or so. Hans Küng used the term ‘paradigm shifts’ and Harvey Cox in *The Future of Faith* (2009) divided Christian history into The Age of Faith, The Age of Belief and the emerging Age of the Spirit.

My concern here is not to seize on any particular term or type, but simply to stress the view that tectonic pressures are building at an increasing rate. We can only go so far in accommodating the old order and the world view from which the ancient scriptures and Christianity emerged. It was possible for centuries to take on board new heights and depths on a scale of *arithmetical* progression. That can’t go on. We need to recognize that in religion, as in nearly every field (from astrophysics to neurology to quantum science, just as examples), the expansion has become *logarithmic*.

There’s a need to challenge some deeply embedded assumptions that underlie much of the groupthink within the church, not just locally but right across the board. I have two fundamental challenges to make, one of which only a handful of churches worldwide may have had the courage to face.

The only preliminary assurance I can offer is that, to my mind at least, the implications are not as dire as they may at first appear. Seriously considering such steps should not automatically disqualify a congregation from seeing itself as ‘Christian’ in the broadest sense of the word. Church authorities could be expected to prohibit formally restraining the status of the Bible, but that should not stultify examining the pros and cons in the interests of free thought and expression.

**5. Two substantive suggestions**

**5.1. Demote the Bible from its singular position of supremacy**

One of the biggest blocks in the way of theological and liturgical development is the way the Bible has been allowed to become almost an object of worship in itself. To be absolutely blunt, the Bible needs to be dethroned from its imperial position of all-embracing authority within our faith. It even has a lot to answer for, largely because of the misguided veneration it has received. Christians need to be able to hold and express that view freely within church life. The churches themselves should redefine its place in much more measured terms than has been the norm. Among other implications, the vitality of future worship may ultimately depend on such a reality check regarding the Bible.

An easing back from Biblical ‘idolatry’ would also help to ease some of the pointless squabbling that goes on about moral issues such as sexuality, abortion, and euthanasia. So much of this is exacerbated by excessive appeals on either side of such debates to Biblical warrant which is simply not appropriate in many contemporary conditions. Further, and maybe even more important, such a move would signal to the world community, including other faiths and indigenous peoples, that we no longer assume that the Judeo Christian stream is the paramount treasure of human civilization.

The Bible is a most remarkable product of human culture and foundational for Christianity, but even foundations are subject to seismic forces. It was tradition that formed the Scriptures in the first place and later bestowed sacred, canonical status on them, but they remain within, not above, the tradition. The ultraconservative view of divine inspiration virtually dictating every word is completely absurd. For one thing, we do not have one single verse of the Bible in its original state. All we have are copies of copies of copies, with all the error proneness that that entails. I have a metre length of Bible versions, including Hebrew and Greek, but not one of them could claim with any certainty a single original parchment word.

Unfortunately, the Church finds it convenient to fudge the issue of the textual and canonical history, presenting the Scriptures as ‘the lively oracles of God’, while reserving unto itself their ultimate interpretation. The Bible may still be tops, but is not without serious flaws, even despite the selectivity of the Common Lectionary Revised (1992). We shouldn’t pretend otherwise. It is not enough to shelter behind the distinction between literalist and figurative interpretation when the intention is still to reserve divine guidance and inspiration.

 In the Methodist Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience, Scripture has always been presented as primary and conclusive, as compared with tradition. Our New Zealand Church’s mission is ‘to reflect and proclaim the transforming love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and declared in the Scriptures’. As is so often the case, the supremacist, spiritual role of a cultural artifact, albeit under the guardianship of the Church, is here allowed to be implied. In the long run, healthy worship suffers under the power coupling of Church and Bible. We need to front up.

**5.2. Dispense with the sanctioning and regular congregational use of the formal creeds**

In the early 1960s, I conducted a confirmation class for adults at Roslyn Methodist Church, Taieri Road, Dunedin. I included the clauses of the Apostles’ Creed in the sessions. I recall that at least one member of the class found it stretched his own beliefs quite a bit, but we got by at the time. I suspect this wouldn’t be a feature of our Church anywhere today. For that matter, confirmation classes must also be much rarer nowadays.

Nevertheless, The Apostles’ Creed remains an option in the Church’s Order of Service of Holy Communion, but with the following comment: ‘The creeds are not a definition but rather a witness of the church, in the language of the times, to God’s saving action in creation and in human experience.’ The supplied text is that approved by the English Language Liturgical Consultation. I note that the former phrase ‘His only Son’ has changed to ‘God’s only Son’, while leaving untouched ‘the Father almighty’. Such are the infinitely incremental steps of liturgical reform!

An alternative Affirmation offered in the Order is a modern statement of faith written for the United Church of Canada, beginning with the words: ‘We are not alone…’ This is frequently used in services at Mornington Church, but I find it not much less demanding that the Apostles’ Creed.

In 2010, I attended a Sea of Faith study group on *The Old Creed and the New*, by Don Cupitt (2006). His focus was on a radically new religion of life, scarcely creedal at all. While I agreed with much of his emphasis on life, even ordinary life, I felt that his own text would be unusable in any public setting. I therefore suggested an alternative wording, which is designed to echo, if ever so faintly (but experientially) the deep heart underneath the Apostles’ Creed:

We believe in Life – the mystery evolved from the stardust of the heavens, manifest on the Earth, and surging in our inner worlds.

Our faith draws on those from past and present who have lived life to the full and help us to own our own lives.

We affirm the sacredness of ordinary life in all its physical and spiritual diversity.

We say yes to life despite randomness, suffering and death.

We seek commitment to bring about fairness and show compassion for all life.

We open up ourselves to the eager love of life – life ever passing away yet calling forth the hope of a joyful Amen.

But I come back to querying the value of regular group recitations of creedal statements that can so often exert subtle pressure on individuals. Having said that, I acknowledge that very similar issues arise with many hymns and prayer liturgies,. So there is plenty to think about in the area of group dynamics and sensitivity to the wide range of personal belief stages in contemporary congregations. That’s something that I think is too underrated by leaders of worship.

In wrapping up this section, I am reminded of a friend who recently, in his 99th year, published 144 limericks. If a picture can be worth a 1,000 words, so too might a limerick be worth a 1,000 lines of prose, so here’s one to sum up the above suggestions:

There may be a church in Dunedin

In need of a path to proceed in.

It could loosen the strictures

Of the creeds and the scriptures,

And not just the Garden of Eden.

**6. Some previous worship pointers for consideration**

In 2006, the Dunedin Methodist Parish asked the Explorers Group to report on how ‘our worship might do differently and better’. I prepared a 27-page study, ‘Worship revisited’, which covered the range from ‘housekeeping’ matters to some of the more meaty questions referred to above. For the final response to the Council, we included 23 pointers for consideration. Here are 10 from that list which particularly touched on the more ‘ambitious’ challenges:

1. Acknowledge that in society at large the traditional setting and manner of public worship are being questioned as never before.
2. Recognise…that there…is a wide spectrum of faith even within our congregations, and varying understandings of God-talk, the status of Jesus, and the place of various elements in our liturgy.
3. In publicising our services, be bolder in inviting a broader spectrum of participants. Find a way of indicating that people are welcome on their own terms, including those for whom even ‘God’ is one of the stories woven into worship.
4. Within services, be also mindful of the value in signalling that we want people to be able to feel equally at home, whether they lean more towards or away from traditional theology.
5. Apply this approach to prayer. Respect time-honoured liturgy but also allow more scope for ‘equivalents’ of prayer, such as meditative reflection and silence.
6. Avoid feeling bound by the prescriptions of the lectionary, both for preaching and readings. Be prepared to draw on wisdom from beyond the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.
7. Welcome and employ non-traditional means of evoking anew the sense of wonder and transcendence.
8. Similarly, look for ways of exploring new paths towards truth and insight, even those that may be intellectually challenging.
9. Think about whether we are in danger of claiming for Jesus more than he claimed for himself. Distinguish the Trinitarian formulae of the Creeds and the Church from ‘Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’.
10. Focus on what worship may need to be like if it is to meet the needs of our grandchildren’s generation – it will take creative passion to reach them and to pass on the enduring essence of the faith.

**7, A proposed rebalance of worship components**

This proposal was offered by the Explorers Group to the Parish Council on two previous occasions (in 2006 and 2014). In floating it for the third time, I might avoid any suspicion of my not being an optimist! And who knows? Perhaps it’s an idea whose time has come.

It proposes four elements: **Tradition, Wonder, Exploration, and Concern**.

The whole intent is to keep in touch with traditional worship, but to accentuate and radically develop the latent power in the tradition to evoke a sense of wonder and awe, to promote exploratory activity, and to lead to expressions and acts of concern. The effect would be:

 Traditional ) ( hearts more aglow (Wonder)

 riches ) plus ( minds more stretched (Exploration)

 retained ) ( and more hands-on (Concern)

Tradition itself would include a mix of the elements listed in the default model for the future (Section 2 above). While Scripture might never be omitted, it would not be singled out as ‘The Word of God’ (assuming Section 5.1 were accepted). But in keeping with the overall motivation, the ‘tradition’ element would be handled in the light of the definition attributed to Gustav Mahler: ‘Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.’

The terminology for the three other elements is just suggestive and provisional. Alternatives from the literature on worship include ‘The Beautiful, The True, and The Good’ and ‘Devotion, Knowledge, and Action’.

Examples of how each of the three elements have already been fostered within the Mornington congregation:

**Wonder**: Displaying magnificent photos of the universe in the foyer.

**Exploration:** ‘Hands of 500’, i.e. personal contributions (in 500 words or so).

**Concern**: Recent commitment to the West Papuan Liberation Movement.

Examples of how the creative development might expand:

**Wonder**: Additional opportunities to develop the power of music and song?

**Exploration:** Aspects of the Explorers Group and Open Education programmes?

**Concern**: Community outreach, such as in 2009 on climate change?

Any such model would, of course, need to proceed only after full consideration by the congregation and could be introduced incrementally. But it could lead to a major change in congregational activity. It would invite a radical review of the whole Sunday morning event (assuming that the timing itself wouldn’t be greatly altered).

**8. Conclusion**

In his interview in *The Listener*, Neil MacGregor, pointed out the important role of religions and their rituals in keeping alive the larger patterns of life. In one respect, I think he overstates their strength by suggesting that they specially preserve the notion of time. In some of the apparent digressions in this paper, I have alluded to a need for religion to greatly expand its own sense of time and space. That adds to my concern for the churches to perceive a much wider vision than they appear to have settled for.

Aside from that reservation, I fully endorse his view that an overarching, workable narrative is the biggest political, philosophical, and religious question we face. The challenge for all of us’, he said, ‘is to make and develop a narrative together that can expand, embrace and keep moving forward.’

He then concluded by saying: ‘I don’t know if such a project is possible on a global scale, but if you were looking to appoint someone to oversee it, then I wouldn’t look beyond the man with the quiet voice that carries a timeless authority.’ His words .are a bit reminiscent of Albert Schweitzer’s evocative description of ‘One unknown…by the lakeside’.

Christians may take heart from such comments, but their reserved tone is salutary. They don’t endorse the lusty singing of ‘Jesus shall reign where’er the sun…’ That is no longer credible. We have to step away from simply prolonging the past triumphalism of Christian worship, which still lingers, often unspoken. The comments also fall short of the necessary openness to multifaith realities.

Our faith may still be chiefly inspired by Jesus of Nazareth – his star still shines (despite the likes of GW170729). But we need a progressively humbler form of Christianity, coupled with a heightened sensitivity to The Beautiful, The True, and The Good. That should significantly affect both church and worship.

David Kitchingman, January 2019