

Te Kotahitanga Forum Communiqué

The biennial Te Kotahitanga Forum met last weekend asking the key question 'If the recession ended now, would we be poorer for it?' Delegates from all three Tikanga were concerned that if life returned to what it was like before the credit crisis we might well be.

We might be poorer as nations in the sense of lost opportunities to build fairer and more sustainable futures; poorer in the sense of lost opportunities to demonstrate loving service and build resilient communities. Poorer in the sense of lost opportunities to speak out about the unrelenting recessions of faith, spirit, and hope that afflict many in our nations – people whom Jesus Christ loves and gave his life to redeem – may well disappear with the return, for some, of prosperity.

The Forum, organised biennially by Te Kotahitanga, is the body of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia responsible for overseeing ministry and theological education. 'Moving forward – mission and ministry in a time of recession' was the focus for 2009. Meeting from the 3rd – 4th of October there were 20 delegates and six guest contributors; nine from Tikanga Maori, three from Tikanga Pasefika and 14 from Tikanga Pakeha.

Build Relationships. Forum heard from a variety of presenters about the need to strengthen our communities by reengaging with our neighbours. Our Church was urged to visit the elderly, young families and those who are struggling and to fulfil our mandate to care for our communities.

Engage Beyond the Church: We were asked to reconsider the traditional parish model. This emphasised the local church's concern for the wellbeing of everyone within its boundaries – those who chose to attend and those who don't. Shane Jones urged us to reengage with people in our communities through systematic visitation.

Be God's Love to the Vulnerable: This recession has driven many communities, especially in Tikanga Maori and Pasifika, into deeper poverty. An urgent mandate was placed upon us to embody the love of God by offering life's basics – food and shelter – where these needs are unmet. We were also asked to seek ways of collaborating across Tikanga to deliver services to the most vulnerable.

Begin by Beginning: We must not be paralysed by over-thinking our response. Good systems and processes are important but we must simply begin. Diane Robertson inspired Forum with her story of the Auckland City Mission's vision for the vulnerable. Simply beginning inspires faith, energy and the commitment of others.

Empower People: Take the steps that will help lift people beyond perpetual dependency. Jolyon White explained the importance of enabling people to contribute to their own assistance. Our caring model needs to include opportunities for people to contribute in some way. This enables true partnership and preserves the dignity of people.

Teach and Prophecy: All speakers emphasised the need to develop our critical thinking. We need to provide the tools for people to see, for example, that a life built on ever-increasing consumption and debt betrays the gospel. Over a decade ago the *Hikoī of Hope* helped change the country's direction. Is it time for such prophetic leadership again?

Develop Innovative Ministries: We were told to nurture those involved in innovative ministries and allow their stories to be told. This inspiration will fire us all and seed further developments. Anthon Dancer talked about 'Time Banks' based on the principle of everyone's time is of equal value and trading our skills with the skills of others. This has the double benefit of helping households and building community.

The forum was fed richly by its six keynote speakers. Below is a content summary for each of them.

Rod Oram, who is perhaps the country's best known business commentator and journalist, painted a sobering economic 'big picture' in an address entitled *Global crises...community opportunities*. He spoke of a series of interlocking crises caused by 'reckless financial innovation' and 'turbo-charged lending'; a world whose population is quadrupling in a century, yet whose resources are dwindling; a world facing the 'perfect problem' of climate change - so called because of a 'uniquely daunting confluence of forces'; and a world whose economy is still on the brink of 'systemic failure'.

He warned that the New Zealand economy is facing, not just a transitory recession as normally understood, but a 'seismic shift.' This recession has already lasted twice as long as any faced by New Zealand in the recent past. New Zealand households are, he added, the second most indebted in the OECD.

The country's ability to export its way out of trouble in the conventional way is doubtful, he suggested. Export volumes are 'well down, and remain so,' and our overseas customers 'are deeply stuffed.'

Within this complex crisis he suggested that the Church's role was to reassess the way we use our stored wealth and suggested we redeploy our trusts in mission related investments. He also urged us to engage with the great issues of the world and seek constructive answers bringing the issues of faith into the public discourse.

Diane Robertson, CEO of the Auckland City Mission, spoke briefly of the history of Christian concern for the vulnerable. She described the heroic social reforms of the early 19th century such as those led by the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury. Diane went on to speak about the 'Great Betrayal' by liberal Christianity of the fundamentals of the Gospel at the dawning of the 20th century and the 'Great Reversal' whereby Evangelical Christians abandoned their concern for the poor in favour of an 'other worldly orientation.'

She spoke of the founding of the Auckland City Mission by Rev Jasper Calder in the 1920s. His success then and the Mission's success since had sometimes been due to its 'making waves and not being too polite.' During the Great Depression the City Mission met the

needs of the most vulnerable with a wide range of services and became a 'nuisance' to the government with its advocacy.

Diane spoke of how other churches had pulled out of the inner city and of 250,000 New Zealand children living in poverty. The City Mission now has a staff of 70 and an annual budget of \$7 million. Now she's champing at the bit to announce moves that will allow the mission to further transform lives and not just provide *relief*.

Diane urged the church to 'find ways of bringing people back into the church through a new commitment to social engagement in our communities. She emphasised the many areas of need that still exist and that the church could become involved with. She warned of the dangers and limitations of relying on Government funding.

Shane Jones, a Maori Labour MP who was chairman of the Fisheries Commission and then a cabinet minister in the last government, spoke of the tremendous opportunities the recession presents the church 'to take up the slack'.

He said droves of young people, young families and the elderly 'wash up' at electorate offices, 'crying out for help, structures and values. They're living,' he said, 'in the twilight zone.' 'Go visiting in your communities. Set up a grid system and systematically engage with families on the ground.' He urged us to 'Go back to basics' and follow the 'old fashioned approach of connecting with people.'

Shane also suggested that in this time of recession we should consider our role as advocates for those in need. We can partner with local opposition MPs to this end. 'Local based opposition politicians can be powerful advocates.'

He also warned, that 'culture must not eclipse faith', that people should not look to iwi, hapu and runanga for things they cannot supply. In too many cases, he said, 'culture has become religion.'

Furthermore, he warned, that an 'unfortunate by-product' of the Treaty of Waitangi settlement process is that the iwi and runanga are not, at present, 'particularly interested in philanthropy'. They are, he says, 'more interested in strengthening their hand.'

He said that in this recession we must challenge the poverty of spirit that exists in our communities. 'There is spiritual deprivation out there – bring back the wairua!'

Sakiusa Tabuna works as an economist for the Fiji government and began his presentation by outlining the effects of the recession on the Pacific Island nations. These included a decline in remittances, tourism income and overseas aid. There had also been an increase in unemployment and general poverty and deprivation levels were also up. 40% of Fiji's population were now living below the poverty line. Large numbers of students are also dropping out of school because families can't afford the fees. Other families can't afford to visit the doctor.

He outlined the specific difficulties the churches faced; declining income; deferring maintenance and building projects and financial stress among church members. Church communities also suffered when members were attracted to 'new churches' through incentives.

Sakiusa went on to describe how the Church could respond to these new conditions by strengthening family networks, providing training for church members and enhancing traditional coping mechanisms. There were also opportunities to teach subsistence agriculture skills and to provide food for the most vulnerable. He said that it was important to empower communities rather than allow them to rely on hand-outs.

Anthony Dancer and Jolyon White spoke on issues of Social Justice and the Recession. They began by leading an interactive discussion asking about the ways our ministry units were directly affected. It turned out that many churches were not very involved with those experiencing new levels of hardship. 'We haven't experience the forefront – the brunt of the recession' said Anthony.

He went on to offer an analysis of the way banks rely on a high leverage ratio to grow and make profits. This has led to artificial and unsustainable levels of growth. Household debt has also been growing and an increasing number of families are now using 'fringe lenders' (loan sharks) for short term debt. This is often driven by 'whakama' – the shame of continually asking family members for money.

Jolyon outlined a number of practical schemes to deliver relief in this time of recession. 'Time Banks' use time as a currency and can lead to community renewal and development. Small scale community credit agencies making low or no interest loans are also a way to enable people to overcome short term financial hurdles or seed small businesses. He warned however that the Church is so reliant on the benefits of the present financial system that we may find it difficult to 'give sacrificially and with the clarity and courage the Church has seen in the past.'

Anthony urged Forum to put missional priorities before identity, and to share our resources with the community where they are needed most. 'Then our internal difficulties around identity would be resolved, because our identity would follow mission rather than mission having to be forced to follow identity and therefore being distorted by those pressures.'