

Address for Toowong Uniting Church Annual Congregational Meeting, 2009

Mr Chairman thank you for the opportunity to address the meeting. I am pleased to have the chance to share some thoughts and issues that don't normally find their way into my sermons regarding some of my bigger-picture thinking. I beg your indulgence, for the sake of brevity, to follow closely to my notes so that I can pack as much as possible into the time I have.

My initial expression to this congregation must be one of gratitude. I am genuinely thankful for the privilege of serving amongst the people of Toowong Uniting Church, to have experienced your hospitality and welcome and I want to clearly indicate my enjoyment in the pastoral role that I have undertaken so far. Thank you, again, for the call to this church, for the trust that accompanies that call and for the opportunity to serve along-side you.

I have no idea whether it was an easy or difficult decision for you to extend a call to me, nor do I particularly want to know - but I want to share with you my thoughts during the process which led to my name being put forward for your consideration. When the suggestion was first made in an informal conversation way back in February last year, it took me about five minutes to decide that I would like to share in the life of this parish. At that stage, of course, I was unaware of the high calibre of congregational membership, which may well have further reduced my decision time.

But as a purely hypothetical proposition, I couldn't help but see the potential of a church in this location. With the possibility of forging quality relationships with the families of two child care centres on our doorstep, a Uniting Church school within a few hundred metres, a strong sense of local community identity in the Toowong area, the University of Queensland and its residential colleges just down the road and four theological training facilities within a two kilometre radius, the long term potential for us as a church to serve and enrich, not only the Uniting church families within our geographical reach, but also the wider body of Christ, remains large and fertile.

But potential is and will remain only potential, unless we prayerfully and strategically realise that potential. How might we go about such a task?

My general priorities in my pastoral role fall into three categories which, in turn, reflect my conviction regarding the Church's essential business. For the last three months, I have been seeking to attend primarily to three areas of service:

- 1) firstly, being attentive to God in the worshipping life of the church,
- 2) seeking to form and foster pastoral relationships with the members of the church and
- 3) connecting with people outside the church.

If that description is too wordy, you might like to borrow the mental hooks I use to keep these three things constantly in mind: I think of them as loving God, loving others and doing mission. These three things find their sense of imperative in the three points during his ministry at which Jesus used the language of 'commandment', namely, the Great Commandment (to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength), the New Commandment (to love one another as I have loved you) and the Final Commandment

(often called the Great Commission – to go into all the world making disciples of all nations . . .).

Loving God

So, roughly one third of my time is currently being spent in preparation for our worship services: both for the morning service and TEA party, which of course includes assisting others to prepare services or segments of services. My hope is that we can gradually increase the levels of congregational participation in all services with our worship being enriched by the contributions of others in prayers, readings, music, drama, audio visual presentations, kids talks etc).

I also believe we must continue to *slowly* shape the two regular worship services to both stretch us in a God-ward direction whilst also maintaining a high level of accessibility for those who might one day join us from a background that is totally unchurched. If you could imagine your experience of entering a mosque or Buddhist temple for a service of worship, trying to make sense of a completely different set of beliefs and practices, that is what it's like for someone coming into our midst when church going has not been a part of their cultural conditioning.

In a short space of time we have moved significantly in this direction, but there yet further distance to travel. My approach to the design of worship reflects what Jesus said in Matthew 13:52, "The wise Teacher of the Law is he who brings forth from his storehouse treasures both old and new." I hope that we can integrate the best of the old with the best of the new so that our worship both maintains its rich heritage *and* connects essentially secular people with a living God. And yes, I know, I am an optimist.

I must say that I also carry the cast-iron conviction that our experience of God will ultimately be shaped by the sincerity and depth of our congregational prayer life. As you know, we have commenced a time of corporate prayer prior to each of the services at 8am and 5pm, I want to express my thanks to those who are supporting that prayer and continue to encourage others to stretch themselves in a God-ward direction, so that even if you cannot meet with us in one of those times, please at least commit yourself to praying by yourself or with a few others for the prayer points offered in the weekly bulletin as well as for the general life of our church and its witness and mission.

The provision for the worshipping life of our children is important too. With a few exceptions, young families and children have been our missing demographic for some time and making provision for them is a vital priority. KATS (Kids at Toowong on Sunday) our Sunday morning children's program kicked off two weeks ago with 18 children in attendance. At the moment a number of our committed mums are running the program but it is my intention to ensure that we employ a one day per week children's worker, 1) to enhance the quality of the children's ministry that we offer and 2) to ensure that with our still limited resources people don't burn out. A set of criteria has been written for this position which has been approved by both the church council and the presbytery, which should allow us to advertise for the position in the very near future.

I've said this before, but want to reiterate, KATS is not about keeping our kids happy and distracted so that the adults can enjoy the tranquillity of a worship service. It is about supporting the faith development that occurs within families and allowing our kids to have a

positive experience of the Christian community, planting seeds of faith in their hearts that we trust will grow under God's sovereign hand, blossoming to produce a harvest at the appropriate time. Can I also say thank you very sincerely for the unqualified support of both the morning congregation and the church council, entertaining children's talks and children's songs with actions and everything, as well as whole-heartedly supporting moves to place someone part time in children's ministry.

The other thing that comes under the category of loving God is my desire to encourage and assist every member of this church to explore their own sense of relationship with God and the 'means of grace' that allow that relationship to meaningfully grow. Encouraging the practice of personal devotions, making sense of the Scriptures, assisting individuals and families to identify their own sense of mission in their own context are all things that, if you haven't noticed already, I will be harping on about again and again and again. Making space in groups for people to explore these issues with a mixture of teaching and discussion is something I believe we have to embrace in the near future.

Loving Others

In the "loving others" category of my priorities I am undertaking a schedule of pastoral visiting where my informal goal is to make a minimum of 4 pastoral visits per week. In addition to this, Selena and I have hosted a number of functions in our home, including 25 people pre-Christmas for an evening of food, conversation and games, and, more recently a gathering of eight young families and their children (over 30 people in total), with three further families sending apologies.

As a congregation we have a huge head start in this particular area. This church's reputation as a welcoming community is well known beyond these walls and I have been absolutely delighted by your willingness to welcome and make space for newcomers of all ages. However, this is just a first step. Jesus' command to love one another as he has loved us, of necessity, requires much more space and time than a brief 'passing of the peace' or even than a good chat over morning tea. Therefore, before too long I want to begin to explore possibilities of small group ministry across the church as well as creating spaces for mixing: like having a regular new-comers brunch, a church picnic or whatever its post-modern equivalent might be, maybe even a church camp.

Doing Mission

The third area of priority in my ministry is about turning our attention to those beyond our walls and forging quality relationships with people currently having nothing to do with church. For every pastoral visit I make with a church member, there is at least one corresponding pastoral conversation or cup of coffee with someone from outside the church. A few of those folk have ended up coming to worship with us, some have visited but not stayed and others, probably the majority, have respectfully declined the invitation to come and experience the life of a worshipping community. So whilst you have employed me to be a pastor, I am also assuming the role of missionary. I do so without apology, absolutely convinced that no church has a future unless it forging meaningful relationships with those who have not yet discovered God's grace and life.

Apart from connecting with individuals, this 'doing mission' also includes activities for me such as spending time in the child care centre next door, reading stories to the kids and

playing them songs on the guitar, participating in chapel services at BBC and the university colleges, as well as assisting the university chaplains with some of their tasks, all of which I have begun to do. I also want, but haven't yet had the chance, to get involved in supporting the local school chaplains. It is also my goal before the end of the year to visit each of our federal, state and local members as well as principals of the Toowong schools, asking if there are any ways that they are aware that our church can contribute meaningfully to the life of our local community.

Part of this community-connecting strategy involves the purchase of a new sign for the Sherwood road frontage, one with movable letters so that we can begin to communicate weekly with fresh information to the thousands of people who drive and walk up and down that busy road. We want a *living* rather than a *static* sign that communicates, even if just in a small way, that there is life in this place and we are interested in connecting with them.

There are many other exciting things to report, which I will only summarise in the briefest terms here: we continue to minister to a small faithful group of Christian residents at the Taringa AVEO retirement and aged-care village with a monthly service. The mission house is well underway for the year and the girls involved there, having already undertaken a number of initiatives amongst the young adults in the church, also have lots more good ideas which we shall presently encounter. A number of our young adults are involved in picking up some of the slack that will be created when YACMU closes down by the end of the year and are assisting to plan and implement city-wide and even state-wide young-adult events. We have reworked the church website to make it a more functional electronic shop-front for the church, we have redesigned the church letterhead, developed some new administrative procedures including systems to deal with the requests of the growing number of homeless people who approach the church asking for assistance.

The other and most recent initiative that I have approached the church council about is regarding the provision of further administrative support. I must pay tribute to Pam Whebell's very productive and efficient management of the parish properties and the parish office. She does a fantastic job. I believe Pam is working at capacity (actually beyond capacity – often giving generously of her time to church matters) but if I'm going to be freed to pursue the sorts of priorities outlined in this address, and not get bogged down in the administrative work of the church, we need more administrative support time. Pam currently, in just two morning's per week, looks after

- (i) Property management
- (ii) Newsletter & Order of Service
- (iii) Management of rosters
- (iv) Church finances
- (v) Some pastoral contact with congregation + numerous other admin tasks

In addition to these I see the need to make provision for the following areas of admin support:

- I need help with parish communications, which means not only the management of regular postings, but management and development of the church website, setting up and managing an e-network, database development
- I would like to have someone to assist with event coordination: newcomers brunch, church socials, seniors events, church camp, young adult events etc

- If tea party is going to grow then I believe we need to generate a lot more administrative structure behind it.
- Creation and management of technical resources (powerpoint presentations etc)
- Creation of study materials for groups and courses for use within our parish life (formatting, proof-reading, copying, distribution)

In the budget that will be presented to you later there is a provision for the creation of an extra eight hours per week of administrative support. If you have been listening carefully you may well be aware of a number of initiatives I have mentioned that will require additional funds. A new sign, a children's worker, an extra day of administrative support, my own full time stipend (in contrast to Max's part time) is an additional cost on last year's expenses. I believe these are essential investments needed to create the infrastructure that will allow us to move forward in offering effective, relevant, sustainable ministry and mission to the people of Toowong.

You are a generously giving congregation. Another blessing to greet me here! You give generously despite difficult circumstances that I know many of you face. Our current weekly giving hovers around \$1200 per week. To meet the goals I have outlined, we need to increase that by about a further \$300 per week. On an average Sunday at the moment there are between 60 and 80 adults who attend this church between the morning and evening congregations. If 60 people each week were to increase their giving by only \$5 we would meet our financial goal and then turn our attention to other exciting possibilities like developing better services to meet the needs of our senior members who cannot attend church, or perhaps even developing a dynamic youth program so that in a few years time the children in our midst can continue to worship with us. I'd better not get started on those other possibilities I'm not even entertaining yet. I've taken enough time already.

Two very brief final things to say then. One is to thank a number of people: Neil and Helen as Chair and Secretary of both the church council and the congregation. These good folk are gold and we are blessed to be the object of their efforts and skills. Pam in the office whom I have already mentioned deserves our special thanks, Robert Johnson our treasurer who works tirelessly along with Pam to keep our finances on track and who also acts as chair the Church property committee, Arch Martin our communion steward and general keeper-of-an-eye-out-for-things-that-need-attention person and chief encourager to keep looking forwards. I want to thank the members of the church council, those of you who run groups: bible studies, the morning tea under the umbrellas and the stitches craft group; and those who take responsibility for areas like the kitchen and making sure we have morning tea each week. Thank you to those of you who faithfully pray for the work of the church. I must also pay tribute to the ministers who have preceded me here. Their faithful and diligent community building has created the platform on which we are able to stand and from which we are able to launch ourselves into an unknown and uncertain future, confident, as I said this morning, in Christ's sure promise to us.

My very final word must be this: I indicated earlier that my priorities are to love God, love others, and do mission. I must clarify, though, that having *me* doing those things is *not* the ministry and mission of this church. As a church we will not be fulfilling our God-given call to represent Christ on earth until *all* of us are loving God, loving one another and engaging in whatever mission God might place before us. We are the body of Christ and each one of us has a part to play. My job is not to go and do all these things on your behalf, but rather to be creating a culture, an environment where we can all embrace these things together. Much of

this you already instinctively pursue – but we still have a long way to go. I'm looking forward to travelling that journey with you.