**3. A Church in the City**

In 1978 I was invited to become vicar of St Peter’s church in Wellington, an inner city parish with a long tradition of outreach to the community. As part of the ecumenical Inner City Ministry (ICM)[[1]](#footnote-1), St Peter’s worked with people on the edges of society. The position fitted the outward-looking style of mission we had learned in New York and we decided to accept. Now a family of five, Joanna and Jeremy having been born while we were in Auckland, we packed up in April that year and headed south to the capital.

Jackie had made her own enquiries and asked what might be expected of her. ‘Be yourself,’ was the reply from Rachel Underwood. This was a great relief to Jackie who nonetheless did much to build relationships and provide a listening ear to many. She was at the centre of vicarage hospitality, providing ‘open house’ every year on Christmas Eve prior to the midnight service. This was an annual tour de force with young children, Christmas preparations and church services all mixed in with coffee and sandwiches for dozens of parishioners. ‘We must have been mad,’ we sometimes think looking back, but these occasions were greatly appreciated and did much to build a sense of family and belonging.

I felt both humbled and challenged to be stepping into a 130-year history as the 13th vicar of St Peter’s. I was 38 at the time and, with a young family, felt we were entering a long period of focused ministry. I had no particular plan in mind other than to deepen and extend the ministry already in place. The congregation was a lively and thinking group that included young people and families as well as older members who had been at St Peter’s for many years. It was a church that believed in taking both the Bible and the world seriously.

The first St Peter’s church was opened in September 1848. Four weeks later a huge earthquake hit the city (7.1 on the Richter scale), causing far more devastation than an 8.3 earthquake in 1855. The new church opened its doors and was soon filled with locals making a temporary home there.

The area known as Te Aro was a mix of trade and well-to-do homes. St Peter’s grew quickly and the church was extended four times before a much bigger building was needed. The first church was removed from the site and on 21 December 1879 the new, and existing, St Peter’s was opened. It had been built in only seven months at a cost of 7000 pounds. The parish celebrated the centennial of the church in 1979, the year after our arrival.

The Reverend Arthur Stock was a remarkable man who was vicar of St Peter’s from 1856-1888, and from 1870 Archdeacon of Wellington. Part of his pastoral duties was as chaplain to the city jail, based at that time in the parish. As chaplain he met a prisoner, Walter Tricker, a Maori condemned to death for murder. Stock quickly became convinced the man was innocent and campaigned for six years for a review of the case, Tricker at length receiving a full pardon. Arthur Stock had an unexpected field of expertise as an astronomer and for some years was in charge of the Carter Observatory in Wellington. As astronomer he observed the transits of Venus in 1874 and 1882 ande was theHe was in charge of the Carter ObservatoryH wrote a book on the topic.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As part of its outreach the parish started a school in 1854, and in 1900 established a mission to impoverished Chinese living around Haining Street. As the numbers of the poor in Te Aro grew, St Peter’s opened in 1904 the Taranaki Street Mission which in 1929 became the independent Wellington City Mission. The first city missioner was the Rev’d Fielden Taylor who continued in the post until his death in 1937 at 58 years of age.

By the turn of the century the nature of Te Aro was changing. Urban change led to many parishioners moving out to the newer suburbs. For the first half of the 20th century St Peter’s, like many city churches, experienced a decline in its membership and it was only from the 1960s that a turnaround took place. Allan Pyatt, later Dean and Bishop of Christchurch, exercised a very vigorous ministry from 1958-62. At the time it was claimed that St Peter’s had the largest Evensong congregation in New Zealand.

But it was Pyatt’s successor, Godfrey Wilson, who brought a vision for major changes in city ministry. Godfrey took time out to study urban ministry in Chicago, and also in Sydney with Ted Noffs at the Wayside Chapel in Kings Cross. He wanted to strengthen St Peter’s engagement with the community and had part of the old parish hall converted into the Catacombs. Fitted out in dimly lit cave-like style, and staffed by volunteers from local churches, Catacombs was open nightly as a drop-in centre for coffee and conversation. On Friday nights speakers were invited to talk on some topical issue, followed by energetic debate with a lively audience.

The establishment of the Inner City Ministry (ICM) reflected both the parish tradition of outreach to those in need, as well as the proposals for church union in the 1960s and 1970s. The Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational churches, the Churches of Christ and, at a later stage, the Anglicans, were engaged in these proposals. The negotiations aroused strong opinions within the Anglican Church and failed to get a sufficient majority to allow the proposals to proceed. The negotiations were at length abandoned to the disappointment of many.

During the years of negotiation, however, St Peter’s and other inner city churches, Wesley Methodist, Mt Victoria Presbyterian, and the Society of Friends (Quakers), felt church union could be foreshadowed by a joint city outreach through the ICM. The first director (1973-76) was Bob Scott, who had been associate priest at St Peter’s with Godfrey and shared Godfrey’s vision. Under Bob’s leadership, the ICM attracted government and other funding, allowing it to take on staff to deal with issues such as homelessness, poverty and unemployment.

The ICM also acted as an advocate for the poor, making policy submissions arising from grassroots experience to government or city council, or representing clients in dealing with Social Welfare on benefit entitlements. While the poor struggled, tax cuts were made which delivered large windfalls to the wealthy at the expense of those with least. Several ICM members formed a group to forego the extra income in favour of making an income transfer to those who had missed out.

The St Peter’s congregation included a great diversity of people with around 120 at church each Sunday. The Sunday school was led by Penny Jamieson who in 1990 became Bishop of Dunedin, the first woman in the world to head an Anglican diocese. It also included on some Sundays the Governor-General, Sir Paul Reeves, with his wife Lady Beverley and family. One Saturday night the vicarage phone rang: ‘Paul Reeves here. We’re coming to church tomorrow but no fuss, we’ll just slip quietly into a pew.’ At 9.55am next day the church door opened and in walked Sir Paul and his family, flanked with an entourage of aides-de-camp in military uniforms, and ‘slipped quietly into a pew’. At one Christmas midnight service Paul found himself kneeling at the altar rail next to a large dog. The dog didn’t take communion but I gave it a blessing.

St Peter’s people were not all of one mind, however. One man implored me to preach a sermon berating the congregation for their sinfulness and calling them to repent lest they end up in the fires of hell. I told him that was not my kind of theology, but he hung in at St Peter’s nonetheless. There were also strong leaders among the women and issues of inclusive language and shared leadership were a central focus during our time at St Peter’s.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Many times I had to manage deep differences of opinion. On one occasion a parishioner placed copies of the glossy and well-funded magazine *Above Rubies* on the bookstall. *Above Rubies* extols the image of the faithful and loving wife who serves her husband and family in a committed and caring way. The underlying theology is that of the man being head of the house, following a literal interpretation of St Paul.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A few days later a leading feminist saw the magazines and threw them all in the rubbish bin, replacing them with another magazine called *Vashti’s Voice.* Vashti appears in the biblical book of *Esther*[[5]](#footnote-5) as the wife of Ahasuerus, King of Persia. During one of the king’s parties for the lords and nobles of the kingdom, he called for Vashti to present herself so that all could see what a beautiful wife he had. Not seeing herself as a show pony, Vashti declined the invitation and was promptly divorced by the king. He then took Esther, a Jewish woman, for his wife and she becomes the central figure as the advocate for the Jewish people.

Many sermons have been preached about Esther but clearly Vashti is the role model for self-respecting women. The bookstall saga had a third episode when the promoter of *Above Rubies* was next in church and was delighted to find all the copies had been snapped up already. She went away to get some extra copies, the fate of which I never discovered.

Much care was needed in handling relationships between St Peter’s and the Bishop of Wellington, Edward Norman, elected bishop in 1973. He was a man of deep faith and clergy spoke well of his pastoral care for them. But he was a man of traditional views on church and society who did not always see things the same way as we did at St Peter’s. However, we maintained good relationships and on one occasion when he came to St Peter’s for a confirmation service, I walked him to his car after morning tea. I thanked him for coming and he replied: ‘you know, I always enjoy coming to St Peter’s; you have such an interesting bunch of odd people here. I even met an unemployed person in the kitchen.’

As I got to know Bishop Edward I recognised that two of his prime commitments were the preservation of the Anglican tradition, and maintaining law and order. Many felt he had been elected bishop because of his well-known opposition to the proposal for church union. This made him cautious of the St Peter’s plan to join with other churches in the Inner City Ministry. In my view, healthy inter-church relationships expand one’s faith rather than diminish it.

Bishop Edward’s commitment to maintaining law and order may well have arisen from his distinguished leadership role in World War II, where he received an MC for bravery. Law and order is a desirable thing but in the bishop’s case appeared to have two byproducts: it gave him an inherent trust in the views of those who held authority in society, and also made him wary of protest movements lest they undermine law and order. So the path was set for differences with St Peter’s, and at times with other clergy and parishes as well.

We struck a bit of trouble in the early 1980s when a South African Anglican priest, David Russell, was arrested and imprisoned for defying government attempts to stop his anti-apartheid campaign. Russell worked mainly among blacks, especially in squatters’ camps around Cape Town. He had been banned from leaving Cape Town but defied the ban and attended a diocesan synod at Port Elizabeth. The visit received much publicity, as well as a standing ovation from synod members. But it also led to his arrest and imprisonment for 12 months.

David Russell said his actions were ‘a religious and moral duty’. Desmond Tutu, at the time general-secretary of the South African Council of Churches, called the sentence vicious and said that such injustices filled the people with revulsion, bitterness and anger. But the magistrate said that the priest had acted in ‘open defiance of the law with no sign of remorse, and a stiff penalty was called for’.

The following Sunday I put the issue to the St Peter’s congregation and 55 people signed a statement protesting at the imprisonment. The statement said the action was ‘symbolic of the repressive measures the South African government is willing to take against those, both black and white, who work for racial justice’.

The following week a few of us approached Bishop Edward and proposed that he convey our concerns to the South African government. The bishop said he would speak with the South African consul-general and later reported back that the consul-general had assured him that everything had been done in accordance with the law and hence there was no need for us to be concerned or to take any further action. It was disappointing to hear trust in the law placed ahead of support for a priest fighting to overcome apartheid. We decided to take unilateral action and conveyed our concerns directly to the consul-general, as well as affirming our support for David Russell via the Archbishop of Cape Town, Bill Burnett.

As the apartheid debate heated up during the 1980s I proposed a motion one year calling on the diocesan synod to endorse the call of the Commonwealth Gleneagles agreement to avoid all sporting contacts with South Africa. The synod debate had two main thrusts. Many believed such matters were political and not proper topics for the church to debate. And many also believed strongly that ‘bridge-building’ through sporting relationships brought South Africa in touch with concepts of racial equality in New Zealand.

The debate ran all afternoon with much energy and heat. As mover of the motion I had only a few minutes to respond to some of the key points but was greatly relieved when the motion went through. Synods in the 1980s were more leisurely and allowed time for detailed debate. Today synods are crammed into a shorter space of time and debates on key issues can be desultory and truncated. We also miss some of the vigorous and colourful characters of earlier years who added a cutting edge to issues of the day.

A major debate in the media broke out in 1989 following a statement by 94 clergy and laity around New Zealand opposing a government proposal to purchase four new naval frigates. The statement was my initiative and, having released it to the media, I was contacted by national television to see if I would be preaching on the topic that Sunday. As it happened I was, but only by way of illustration of wider biblical principles of peace and justice. A television crew came to cover the service and the news that night predictably carried a highly edited extract from my sermon, specifically the section about the frigates.

The report sparked off a wide correspondence in the pages of Wellington’s morning paper *The Dominion.* First up was J S McBeath, a veteran correspondent to the newspaper, who wrote that the pulpit was not a soapbox for the vicar to expound on his own pet hobbyhorse to a captive audience. Were the 94 who signed the statement experts in matters of defence? And by what authority did they speak for the Anglican Church? She pointed out that Bishop Norman had always been in favour of the defence of New Zealand, and lamented how times had changed.

But R O Hare of Lower Hutt wrote saying that I did not forfeit my right to speak on moral and economic issues because I was an archdeacon. He doubted that Christ the Prince of Peace would advocate spending money on warships instead of on health, housing and education. Marion Blackbourn, a member of St Peter’s, wrote that she did not feel part of a captive audience because the congregation always had the opportunity to debate issues.

I also wrote to the paper pointing out that a sermon that does not relate to contemporary concerns runs the risk of being irrelevant. I pointed out that the frigates statement was clearly the view of the 94 signatories only, and noted that church services were regularly broadcast on radio and television without any conclusion being drawn that the preacher was speaking for the church at large. A final letter from J S McBeath said she was glad I had acknowledged there was no claim to be speaking officially for the Anglican Church, but since that was clear from the outset I wondered why she bothered to write in the first place.

Over the years I have heard countless times that ‘the Church should keep out of politics’, usually from those who disagree with what is being said. There is no fuss if church leaders speak in favour of helping the poor, marriage and family life, or love and forgiveness. But having a view on issues such as defence, economics or social justice always generates hot debate. Yet it is precisely these issues that determine for good or ill the extent of poverty, or the wellbeing of families.

Too often the Church is silent on these issues. Arising especially from our two years in New York City, I have held the view that a silent church is a church that has become preoccupied with its own life and has lost sight of its mission to be a channel of compassion and a voice for justice. Both church and society are poorer for that. In speaking and acting I have always sought to be well informed on matters of faith as well as on topical issues. I also seek to consult with others before framing a viewpoint. Having done that I have taken a stand and prepared myself for whatever responses might come.

Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, known as the bishop of the poor, was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating Mass. Among his many words are these:

‘A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth—beware!—is not the true church of Jesus Christ.’

**“If I feed the poor, they call me a saint. If I ask why some are poor and hungry, they call me a communist.”**

Growing poverty in the community prompted one of our parishioners, Janet Bromley (now Janet Brown), to set up a foodbank at the railway station over Easter weekend 1983. This generated much media publicity and all weekend train passengers and others were dropping off large quantities of canned and packaged food, as well as cash donations.

Janet had originally thought the foodbank would be a one-off action to assist people to set up for the winter. ‘But,’ she said, ‘once I’d turned the tap on, it wouldn’t turn off.’ Other churches joined in and church members set up collection points in the Ombudsman’s office and other workplaces. Supermarkets and shops assisted with surplus food or discounted products.

Much of the food was distributed via ICM’s community worker in the Aro Valley, Pam Whittington. Over many years Pam had become known to countless individuals and families whom she assisted with daily concerns about food, budgeting, children, health care and general advice. Janet would pack to order on the basis of Pam’s requests for different family needs and then work with Pam to distribute the parcels around the Aro Valley. Pam also had a link to the Women’s Refuge, and a large box of groceries went there each week as well.

Janet commented that the need for food was often only temporary, and that recipients sometimes became donors later on. One woman said: ‘Your foodbank saved us when we needed it, and I promised myself that when I could I would pay it back to help others’. She had driven all the way from Wainuiomata to Wellington to hand Janet $100 worth of groceries.

That was 30 years ago and St Peter’s has had a regular food collection at Sunday services ever since. The same is true of many other churches throughout New Zealand, so that the ‘parish foodbank’ has become an established institution. Statistics show there has been no lessening of the need for supplementary food supplies for households and individuals, a sad commentary on an affluent but unequal nation.

St Peter’s had an ancient wooden parish hall, now demolished, which was used by various community groups. WUWU, the Wellington Unemployed Workers’ Union, occupied it for a period, providing a drop-in centre and free lunches for all comers. At another time it was used as a training centre for young Maori women to equip them in a cultural context with both life skills and job training for employment in the city. After Waitangi Day one year around 30 homeless people occupied the hall for several weeks, finding temporary shelter while looking for a more permanent home.

Vincents Art Workshop also found a home in the St Peter’s hall in the late 1980s. Vincents welcomes people with disabilities, people moving into the community out of institutional settings and many on the margins of society. It provides an art space with materials to enable people in arts and craft activities as part of a therapeutic community. The parish saw the use of its hall as a base for all these activities as a central part of its mission.

I had got to know a visiting rabbi, Murray Blackman, at Temple Sinai, the liberal Jewish congregation nearby. Together we arranged a programme to build understanding between two faiths with a common heritage. I was invited to preach at Temple Sinai, and on another occasion Rabbi Blackman, preached at St Peter’s. Two reciprocal evenings were held with the titles ‘Everything Christians should know about Jews’, and ‘Everything Jews should know about Christians’. I had first experienced Christian-Jewish dialogue in New York and found much enrichment from these inter-faith exchanges.

Bishop Edward retired in 1985, having been knighted in 1984. No doubt his filing cabinet would have contained a thick file of correspondence between us. I wrote a farewell letter to thank him for his time as bishop noting that, while there were many things on which we had different views, nonetheless I affirmed his faith and care as bishop. Some weeks later I received a reply saying he had kept my letter to answer until last, as he wanted to take some time in doing so. He acknowledged that we had indeed disagreed on various things but he had always appreciated the reasoned and respectful way in which I had set things out. This, he said, was as things should be if there was to be healthy dialogue within the church. Bishop Edward was a humble man who did not exercise authority in a heavy-handed manner. I thought it sad that excessive deference to a bishop precluded many from talking openly with him.

The retirement of a bishop triggers an electoral synod to find a successor. Clergy and laity gather in solemn conclave, numbering as many as 200 depending on the size of the diocese. The electoral process works on a single transferable vote (STV) system. But, unlike a public election where voters number the candidates in order of priority and a computer spits out the result, an electoral synod has sequential ballots, with lower-polling candidates dropping out each time. Between ballots synod members make speeches about the merits or demerits of one candidate or another until a final ballot produces a result.

Sometimes there is a standout candidate and a clear result is quickly arrived at. At other times several ballots and rounds of speeches are required to choose someone. Some synods can be very unedifying when partisan groups campaign not just to promote their own candidate but also to undermine someone else’s. Misrepresentation, misinformation, unsubstantiated allegations and words taken out of context can all be part of the process. Too often presiding bishops and diocesan chancellors take a laissez faire approach that allows such misrepresentation to go unchecked. Subsequent appeals to higher church authorities fall on deaf ears.

A major scandal surrounded the election of a new bishop for Wellington following Bishop Edward’s retirement. No less than three synods were required in late 1985 and early 1986 to get a result. The first synod lasted for three days, in the end electing a very saintly scholar who declined the position feeling it was not vocationally right for him. There was doubt as to whether his availability for the post had been checked in advance.

A second synod took place over two days and after a fairly harmonious process elected Canon Paul Oestreicher. Paul grew up in New Zealand, the son of a German part-Jewish refugee family who fled from Hitler just before the outbreak of World War ll. Studying at Otago and Victoria universities, he wrote his MA thesis on the Second World War history of New Zealand’s conscientious objectors. Paul trained for the priesthood in England and later headed a parish team ministry in Blackheath, South London. Known for his spirituality and as a preacher, Paul was also greatly committed to issues of peace and justice as central to the Gospel. A pioneer of women’s ordination and gay rights, he also worked with the British Council of Churches to help break down the barriers between East and West in Europe. As chair of Amnesty International UK he was particularly engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. He did several lecture tours through New Zealand’s universities and never ceased seeing New Zealand as his home.

However, Paul’s election by the Wellington synod was only the first part of the process. Confirmation by the rest of the Church is also required, and this has two parts. First, the bishops have a chance to raise any questions but not to veto an elected candidate. On this occasion news came to the bishops meeting on Waiheke Island near Auckland. One or more raised questions about whether he could be relied on doctrinally as an Anglican, because while working as a parish priest in Blackheath he had become a member of the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. Paul had joined with the public support of his bishop as a sign of ecumenical openness, appreciating the silent worship of the Quakers as well as their principled rejection of war. But there was never any question of doctrinal conflict because Quakers do not express their Christian faith by way of a creed.

The second part of the confirmation process (in the 1980s) involved majority approval from each of the diocesan standing committees in New Zealand and Polynesia. Those committees would have been aware of the question raised by some of the bishops, but were also in receipt of information circulated by the senior bishop to provide background on Canon Oestreicher. Much of that information might more accurately be described as misinformation.

It included comments from a leading British Quaker, Gerald Priestland, who described the Quakers as ‘heretics with no priests, creeds or rituals’. Doubtless it was the ‘heretic’ tag that stuck, but the remark was entirely out of context. Gerald Priestland was affirming the importance of all churches in providing vision and values in an increasingly secular and technological age. He described the Quakers as being a lay order within the worldwide Church, and then said in jocular spirit: ‘of course, some might regard us as heretics because we have no priests, creeds or rituals’. He affirmed those features of other churches as part of the Christian heritage Quakers valued.

Such misinformation doubtless contributed to the rejection of Canon Oestreicher’s nomination by all the diocesan committees. Two of us from Wellington lodged an appeal with the Church’s judicial committee on the basis of the misinformation. The committee turned the appeal down, unbelievably saying that ‘the senior bishop does not have a responsibility to ensure a fair and unprejudiced consideration of the issue by the standing committees’. Natural justice flew out the window.

Were there other reasons for the rejection of Canon Oestreicher? In the absence of any reason of substance my own view is that he was the victim of the ‘tall poppy’ syndrome – someone who would bring a challenge to the New Zealand Church on things it did not wish to be challenged on. This view seemed to be confirmed by a comment a few months later. A New Zealand bishop visiting England called on Canon Oestreicher. Returning home he rationalised that Oestreicher was probably better off in England as New Zealand would have been too small for him. I thought it the saddest of comments on the bishop’s circumscribed vision.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A third electoral synod in Wellington in April 1986 led to the selection of Brian Davis, Bishop of Waikato, who had just been elected Archbishop of New Zealand. Canon Oestreicher went on to become Director of the Centre for International Reconciliation at Coventry Cathedral. In 1995 he was awarded the Lambeth degree of Doctor of Divinity by the Archbishop of Canterbury for his life-long work for peace and justice.

In 1988 I received an unexpected invitation to act as a staff member at the upcoming Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops. My role was as secretary of the Christianity and the Social Order section of the conference and probably arose from my membership of the global Anglican Peace and Justice network. Lambeth conferences are called every ten years by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The first, held at Lambeth Palace in London, was called by Archbishop C T Longley in 1867 and attended by 76 bishops from Great Britain, America and the colonies.

By 1920 that number of bishops had grown to 252. These days the conferences are attended by 800 bishops and their spouses and have moved to the Canterbury campus of the University of Kent. The composition has changed markedly from a largely British-dominated membership to one where there is an even balance between western and non-western churches, a majority of the latter being from Africa.

Gatherings of bishops are still grand occasions, but they lack the grandeur of 1974 when bishops were invited to Canterbury for the installation of Donald Coggan as the new archbishop. The (English) *Church Times* printed a story by ‘PG’ of a special train laid on for the occasion:

At Victoria Station came the announcement, ‘Would passengers please note that the train standing at platform 8 is the special 11.46 to Canterbury. This is a private train for the Archbishop’s enthronement. Ordinary people are reminded that the next train for Canterbury is the 12.10 on platform 1.’

‘At Platform 8,’ says PG, ‘stood a train consisting entirely of restaurant cars, with men in blue hurriedly loading crates of wine and boxes of hors d’oeuvres. From all around very important people were arriving. Dominating the crowd were constant specks of purple as bishops by the hundreds prepared to depart to Canterbury. A whiff of smoked salmon pervaded the air and, to the sound of corks being extracted from bottles, the train slowly left the station.

‘But then, from the Underground exit, appeared a slight figure dressed in monastic black, clutching his sandwiches in one hand and his cheap day return ticket in the other. The man was none other than the Abbot of Nashdom[[7]](#footnote-7). Gracefully and unobtrusively he made his way to platform 1 and joined the train with the “ordinary people”’. The writer concludes that for Benedict there would have been no question which train he would have travelled on. ‘If choice there be, the Benedictine will always choose to travel with the “ordinary people.”’

Lambeth Conferences take place over three weeks, during which bishops and spouses worship together, engage in daily bible studies, hear keynote addresses, and attend daily working sessions in one of four topic areas. Bishops choose which topic area they wish to join, Christianity and the Social Order being one of the choices in 1988. Chaired by John Habgood, Archbishop of York, with Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Cape Town, as deputy, I sat alongside recording proceedings as we prepared resolutions on key topics for the final conference plenary session. John Habgood did an excellent job guiding and controlling a quarter of the world’s bishops. I worked hard distributing papers and making notes, while Desmond Tutu encouraged members with witty insights while sharing his chewing-gum at the top table.

Every Lambeth Conference has its ‘London Day’. A convoy of buses sets out early with all conference members and spouses on board. In 1988 the day began with a service of worship in St Paul’s Cathedral, followed by a summer lunch in marquees in the grounds of Lambeth Palace, and then on to Buckingham Palace for afternoon tea. The Duke of Edinburgh had sent a challenging letter on environmental matters to our section of the conference, and I took the opportunity to thank him for it. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘I don’t believe what Isaiah wrote about the wolf lying down with the lamb. Nature is red in tooth and claw, and we have to live with reality.’

At the 1998 conference a fleet of barges took members down the Thames, with four bishops throwing their mitres into the river as a protest against hierarchy. Some saw this as a token gesture, however, when it transpired the mitres were made out of cardboard for the occasion. A more meaningful action took place at the 2008 Conference when the bishops marched through the streets of London to witness against growing levels of poverty worldwide.

For me the 1988 Lambeth Conference was a high water moment. Key issues of belief and mission became clear in a compelling way. Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie in his opening address painted a biblical picture linking the creation story of *Genesis* with the closing picture of a new heaven and earth in *Revelation*. Each picture, he said, shared a common vision of a world that lived at one under God and called God’s followers to the task of making such unity real. It was a theology I had first learnt 20 years earlier in New York but now saw with greater clarity.

By far the wittiest and most compelling speaker at the conference was Elizabeth Templeton, a theologian from the Church of Scotland. Addressing the question of ecumenical dialogue, she said attempts to find theological agreement between the churches had to be more than a search for the lowest common denominator. True ecumenism, she said, involved going on a journey together, travelling with God and with each other seeking some greater truth beyond any current position. But an essential pre-requisite of such a journey lay in acknowledging that any current position was merely provisional, and open to change in the light of new insights.

Elizabeth had proposed this approach at an ecumenical dialogue in London attended by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI. The Cardinal responded that magisterial encyclicals could not be described as merely provisional ‘approximations to the truth’ and argued that ‘if God had not disclosed himself and his truth in absolute, determinate propositions, then salvation was at risk’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Elizabeth responded that ‘many a good Calvinist would agree with him, but I do not’. She added that the underlying polarity in theological discussion was between those who believe that the invincibility of God’s love is disclosed in some kind of ‘absolute, safeguarded articulation’, and those who believe that God’s love is disclosed in ‘the relativity and risk of all doctrine, exegesis, ethics, piety and ecclesiastical structure’. In simple terms, are church doctrines fixed unchangeably for all time, or can they move to encompass fresh understandings of God’s action in the world?

A related theme came across in a delightful BBC television dialogue during the conference. Richard Holloway[[9]](#footnote-9), well-known internationally as a writer and speaker, was chairing a debate between five bishops on whether the Church should debate theology publicly. David Jenkins, then Bishop of Durham, said absolutely it should. His approach was that when he had a question about some matter of faith he would ask it publicly. The media and the public immediately joined the debate, so much so that his clergy could not go out safely on the street without being approached by people clamouring to know what their bishop was saying.[[10]](#footnote-10) David said he listened carefully to everything being said and then decided whether or not he wished to modify his position. ‘Dialogue enlarges our understanding,’ he said.

This approach, however, was seen as dangerous by Robin Eames, then Archbishop of Ireland, and Brian Davis, Archbishop of New Zealand at the time. Their view was that in an age of uncertainty and doubt people were looking to the Church for clear answers to reassure them. This provoked a response from John Spong, then Bishop of Newark, who said: ‘Look, I have a daughter who’s 26, has a PhD in Physics and says to me: “Dad, the answers theologians are giving today are to questions people aren’t even asking anymore”. Now we’ve got to hear that’.

At Lambeth 1988 I was mid-point in my 43 years as a priest. I came away from the conference with a feeling of exhilaration and a clear sense that a church that did not engage with the world in matters of faith, ethics and justice was a church preoccupied only with itself. It was a church that failed to comprehend that the whole of the world was God’s mission field, and that ecclesiastical self-absorption was an abandonment of the field.

1. Now known as the Downtown Community Ministry. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The planet Venus crosses the face of the sun twice in eight years, with an interval of over 100 years until the next twin crossings. The transits that Stock observed were the immediate predecessors of the recent transits in 2004 and 2012. Captain James Cook observed a previous transit from Tahiti in 1769. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Further outlined in Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ephesians 5. 22-24.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Esther,* chapters 1 & 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is a complete file on ‘The Oestreicher Affair’ in the Church’s provincial archives at St John’s College in Auckland. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An Anglican Benedictine Monastery. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As quoted by Elizabeth Templeton. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bishop of Edinburgh, 1986-2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some, he joked, were demanding overtime because of this extra work. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)