

SPAGHETTI JUNCTION

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I have been asked to speak on "Significant Issues for the Church Today."

My thoughts turn not to the internal life of the churches, though there are perhaps significant implications for them in what I will say, but to our influence for the kingdom of God in this land.

I have marshalled my thoughts in answer to two questions:

- § How can the people of Christ most effectively influence this land in this post-Christian era?
- § How might we as leaders encourage and serve their influence?

There's a lot of talking going on about leadership and church and mission. And rightly so. Sometimes, however, I confess, it all starts to sound the same to me and feels as though it's not moving anywhere. Most of it seems to be about ourselves. About our churches and our programmes. And some of it seems, well, a bit muddled. Like there's no clear big picture.

As a resident of Auckland, a metaphor, an analogy, has been brewing in me for some time.

Auckland has two motorways. Highway 1 runs north-south through the heart of Auckland. Highway 16 runs from the northwest into Auckland. The place where they – sort of – meet is commonly known as 'Spaghetti Junction.' Once you've seen it from the air the name makes sense. A wondrous jumble of ramps and fly-overs and -unders.

Auckland has no public transport. Well, not on any scale comparable to most other modern cities of the world. 5.4% of Aucklanders use public transport to get to work. The rest drive. We drive lots. Everywhere. So do people in other cities (though rarely as much as here). Most of them build motorways to cope with the volume of traffic. So did Auckland. The story of why and how we built those motorways is fascinating and perhaps instructive.

The bottom lines are clear: One, Auckland put all its transport eggs in the motorways basket. Two, it didn't build good motorways. Let me cite the evidence for the last claim:

Exhibit A: Good motorways connect – in both directions. I'm sure it was on someone's to do list but it must have been on the corner of the page that got chewed up by the dog. When you want to drive from Highway 1 north to 16 northwest you have to exit the motorway, go through the city and its traffic de-lights, and back onto the other motorway. Same thing in reverse. They were working on fixing this in March 2004 when I first visited Auckland. In fact they've been working all over Spaghetti Junction. And they've moved some bits around. But two and a half years later, as far as I can tell, and I've asked a lot of Aucklanders, you still can't drive from anywhere to anywhere that you couldn't in March 2004. It's a big job I guess.

Exhibit B: Good motorways don't have onramps immediately followed by offramps. Have a look next time you reach the Gillies Ave onramp going north on Highway 1. And watch the pantomime as the Gillies Ave folk are trying to enter the motorway while the Khyber Pass crowd are trying to exit.

Exhibit C: Good motorways don't have two onramps from one connecting road. Good motorways get the traffic to sort out its congestion before it gets to the motorway. Bad motorways invite you to do all this on the motorway. Take a look at the two onramps from Te Atatu peninsula on Highway 16 next time.

Exhibit D: Good motorways have onramps long enough to get up to motorway speed before you enter. [Mind you, there are quite a few onramps that do give enough room, but not a lot of drivers seem to know how to drive on motorways.]

¹ This is an extended version of a paper delivered at a lunch meeting of church leaders in Auckland on August 2, 2006 sponsored by Vision New Zealand. Mark can be reached at mstrom@bcnz.ac.nz.

Exhibit E: Good motorways don't have offramps that make you slow down on the motorway. Try the Te Atatu exit going into the city on Highway 16. [PS. Most drivers slow down on the motorway even when there is enough room.]

Exhibit F: Good motorways have a minimum of exits and entries. [Next time you're stuck in the crawl on Highway 1 south you might distract yourself by counting them.]

Exhibit G: Good motorways have transit lanes for cars with multiple occupants to encourage car-pooling. Sorry, all my examples are overseas.

Exhibit H: Good motorways have busways that are wide enough for a bus. I guess it's a small point and easily overlooked. They also go the whole way into the city. Check out the intermittent busway (or is that a cycleway?) on Highway 16 going into the city.

Enough. Let me try to name the underlying problem. And the story behind it.

These motorways offer little evidence of having been designed from a deep understanding of what a motorway is supposed to do. But the problem, like Auckland's traffic, is much bigger than any motorway. If we were seriously thinking 'traffic flow,' there's a few simple things we'd probably do.

We'd probably build arterial roads and major suburban roads of four lanes. Have you noticed how few four lane roads exist in Auckland? There are plenty wide enough for four lanes but they constantly change from 2 to 4 to 2 to 4 to 2 lanes? [Take a look at St Luke's road and especially the baffling configuration for the first few kms from the motorway.] We'd probably make those roads 60, 70 or 80 kph. We'd definitely get rid of NZ's entrant in the World's Dumbest Road Rule competition – the give way to traffic turning in front of you nonsense.] We'd teach people how to drive! And we'd stop pushing people into cars.

But the issue is bigger still. We seem to lack a bigger picture of what it might look like if Auckland was a city that moves well to live well.

A vision of a place where people don't have to drive all the time. Where they catch trains and buses. Where people don't have to go long distances or to the same places as everyone else to do things, especially to work. Where when you do have to drive there are clear and positive incentives to travel with someone else rather than always in your own car on your own. And where when you do drive it just floowwws. A place where people don't do road rage. Where carbon emissions drop. And where we spend more time with our families and friends and fulfilling our responsibilities as citizens.

That picture did exist.²

In 1955 the first Master Transportation Plan for Auckland was produced. The original drafts included an electrified underground and above ground rail system to rival any major city in the world. The lines were planned. The stations identified. Even the colour of the trains was known. At that time 58% of all motorised travel was by public transport – 105 million trips annually. Only 42% was by private cars.

The public transport dimensions of the Master Plan were never implemented. The committee quashed these in favour of motorway development following American plans of extensive motorways based on the idea of the priority of the motor car for so-called "dispersed cities." By the time construction began in the 1960s even the Americans regarded the concepts and designs as outmoded. And we've been working around them ever since.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, Sir Dove-Meyer Robinson, mayor of Auckland, fought to overturn this paradigm and sponsored what is widely regarded as a brilliant and far-sighted vision to build a world-class public transport infrastructure for Auckland. The money was secured. The land was secured.

² For an outline of the history of past and present transportation planning for Auckland see the following sites, each of which has its own perspective: www.aucklandcity.govt.nz, www.northshorecity.govt.nz, www.manukau.govt.nz, www.waitakere.govt.nz, www.transport.co.nz, www.getmoving.org.nz, www.arta.co.nz, www.greens.org.nz, www.joelcayford.com/motorways. My historical comments draw liberally from these sources and from conversations with leaders involved in current transportation planning.

But the national and local leaders of the day, and many of the people, could not see the need. Besides it would cost too much. [\$30m then. \$16b now.] Bus routes and ferry routes were dismantled to encourage people to drive. Subsequent reports seemed to pick up the emerging international trend towards rail systems. Yet somehow the authorities always concluded that we needed more motorways. In 1983 the Auckland Regional Authority tried to shut down the rail system altogether.

Today Auckland's population has increased by more than 300%. Our per capita patronage of public transport has declined by over 90% – the single greatest decline in use of public transport of any city in the world.

We ended up with neither the public transport nor even the motorways that we need.

Planners sometimes cite the so-called "law of unintended consequences."

The basic idea is that any infrastructure planning solution based on a flawed model and short-sighted analysis will fail to deliver the intended outcomes. In fact, it will create the exact opposite result. If you plan badly for traffic flow, you create traffic chaos. The story of Auckland's transport planning is all the evidence anyone needs.

There are several constants in the story of Auckland's transport fiasco.

No coherent worthy big picture. Little leadership will to effect a worthy big picture. Many partial and ill-conceived big pictures touted as the answer to all ills. Short-sighted planning. A sense of dependency on overseas models. Poor models already outmoded. A mindset fixated on a single impressive answer: bigger roads. And talk. Lots of talk.

In their study of the 1955 planning documents produced to champion motorway development, Mees and Dodson state: "A powerful impression is created of a contrast between a backward Auckland and an American ideal of modernisation... So while the logic and analysis of the Master Plan may not have been irresistible, the need to follow the pattern of the United States certainly was."³

Their conclusion is worth reproducing in full:

Half a century of motorway-dominated transport policy has made Auckland a car-dominated city. This dominance is reflected in the on-the-ground reality of congested roads and pitiful public transport, but also in the intellectual reality of a transport debate that cannot make a decisive break with the past. Many of Auckland's citizens, community groups and elected politicians wish to make such a break, but we are constrained from doing so by a policy discourse which renders such an option impossibly radical... an improvement in Auckland's transport situation is being prevented not by low densities, dispersed employment or the public's irrational love-affair with cars, but instead by a mindset which has been established over the last half century.⁴

Analogies are like tonsillectomies. They only hurt when we laugh.

At regular intervals leaders like us get together and talk.⁵ This is important. Good people from every tradition. There are papers. And presentations. Sometimes visions, strategies, and plans. Good things come out of all of this. Often very good things. Maybe even enough to justify all the effort. Yet I can't shake the sense that something is missing. Maybe it's just me, but somehow I don't think so.

I'm looking for a big picture. I'm sure many of our leaders have one. But I rarely hear a picture grounded in a rich theology of life. A really big picture. Something that draws deeply from a panorama of biblical wisdom and promise:

Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. Jeremiah 29:7

³ See Paul Mees and Jago Dodson, "The American Heresy: Half a century of transport planning in Auckland," page 4, available at www.getmoving.org.nz/articles/TheAmericanHeresy.pdf.

⁴ Mees and Dodson, page 9.

⁵ I will use 'we' to refer not only to those present today but to church and Christian leaders more generally in Aotearoa.

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:35

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. Ephesians 1:9-10

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Romans 12:2

The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay through the glory of the freedom of the children of God. Romans 8:21

Behold, I am making all things new. Revelation 21:5

A picture of living well in a marvellous cosmos declared good at its creation, reaffirmed in Jesus' incarnation, and promised new life in his resurrection. A picture of redeemed images of God setting a groaning creation free by the power of the Spirit through the freedom and glory that is theirs as the children of God. And churches – those magnificent gatherings of redeemed images – that are living pointers to all this goodness of creation and certainty of renewal in the midst of suffering and perversity. Of believers seeking the welfare of the city. Justice in the midst of injustice. Compassion in the midst of expediency and greed. Wisdom in the midst of foolishness. A big picture of the kingdom of God. Of the lordship of Jesus Christ being lived and proclaimed by every redeemed image going about his or her business refusing the claims and aims of Caesar for lives of radical obedience to our subversive, counter-cultural King. A big picture grounded in an unshakeable confidence that all things are to be made new.

Any worthy big picture must of course make vivid the contexts in which we live and lead.

For years we have been saying that Aotearoa and the West generally is now in a post-Christian era. I agree. Once upon a time we could influence quite a lot through our Christian institutions. We can debate whether that was ever the wisest strategy. We can also debate whether the deepest influence was ever exerted via these institutions. Either way, Christian institutions have been prominent and influential in society. This is no longer the case to the same degree.

We are here today because we care deeply. I know we are troubled by trends in our country and perhaps also in our churches. The appalling stories of child abuse. Escalating rates of suicide, depression, divorce, violence and welfare dependency. Low levels of literacy. And a pervasive foolishness that mitigates against speaking the truth. I know we long to see the grace and truth of Jesus Christ shake and shape the Shaky Isles.

But I think we should question how we are going about this influence. I want to share with you some hunches and convictions.

I wonder if our ideas about how to bring kingdom influence are being skewed by two paradigms. Like the way motorways have dominated the thinking of Auckland's transport planners for half a century, I suspect we too may be investing too much in models and answers which seem too impressive and conventional to possibly be wrong. Yet each mode of operating is, in crucial respects, I believe, inappropriate and ineffectual. We certainly are influential in many good and important ways. But I wonder if at the same time we are not inadvertently undermining our capacity for deeper influence.

First, we continue to build a parallel Christian universe.

We do so in the name of breaking the sacred-secular divide and the hold of dualism. But I worry that we are feeding the law of unintended consequences. I fear that our institutions and conventions are extending the cocoon and decorating the ghetto. No one intends this. But if we think systemically, what does a parallel world of Christian enterprises do to our capacity to bless the wider world by engaging and subverting it with grace and truth? At our worst I fear we are inadvertently marginalising the people of God.

Second, we shape our churches largely around three questionable models.

The first is the corporation – it's about branding and numbers. The second is the motivational seminar – it's about me. The third is the concert – it's about the experience and the performance. I fear that, at worst, we are feeding a performance mindset that is normalising biblical illiteracy, and spiritualising individualism and consumerism. No one intends this. But if we think generationally, what is our focus on numbers and concerts doing to our capacity to think, speak and live from a profound grasp of life

grounded in the scriptures and the gospel? At our worst I fear we are inadvertently dumbing down the people of God.

I take it we want to influence the nation with the grace and wisdom of Christ. I take it there is general agreement that we are living in post-Christian era. I think if we took both points deeply to heart, our conversations, strategies and actions would run along another trajectory. I think we'd design things differently. And I think we'd lead differently.

For starters, we wouldn't focus on institutions and churches. I am very conscious that this will sound contentious. I am very conscious that many church leaders interpret a questioning of how we do church as not believing in church.

Hear my heart and mind clearly: I love the local church. I believe in it. I believe it is absolutely crucial to a strategy for influence. The local church is a cornerstone. I am not questioning church. I seek to strengthen church. But I don't believe we think clearly enough about church – neither biblically, nor strategically.

Hear me clearly: I think there is still a vital place for institutions. I think there is an important strategic place for well-designed and well-lead institutions with the clarity of vision and flexibility of operations to support the larger and more pervasive reality of non-institutional influence.

I need to unpack this point about institutions. In a nutshell, there is an economy of scale to influence by institution.

Where an institution is desirable for the influence it can bring, then it needs a certain mass of resources and presence in order to influence. However, beyond that optimum arrangement, the larger the institution becomes, the less it can focus on influence. It simply cannot avoid becoming increasingly self-preoccupied. Please hear me: this is not a cheap shot, just a reality of social systems.⁶ And where there are multiple institutions with roughly the same aims of influence, they cannot avoid becoming increasingly pre-occupied with one another. And competing. And competing. Again, I am not firing cheap shots. This is simple realism about social systems of any ilk. If two or more institutions share much the same value base and aims, they will – despite all the goodwill in the world – end up competing but mask that competition to look like co-operation.

This, I suggest, is too often the case today.

We talk about the need for unity, but the people of God have little problem with unity. It's the institutions which don't cooperate. We are the ones who struggle with unity. We the leaders. So at times I confess it seems to me our language of 'church' obscures where the problems lie. I suspect they lie in the very design of our institutions and in our ambitions and mistrust as their leaders. Like the transport planners of the last decade, we may project our mistrust and insecurity onto our people.

But I did not come to harp on problems. I want to talk about influence. Deep abiding, subversive influence for the kingdom of God. And about how we might attain it.

I consider that the greatest influence will be achieved non-institutionally. And I think the most influential institutions will be those which support non-institutional influence.

I believe the greatest influence is achieved by individuals and by small groups. These individuals and small groups achieve and sustain deep influence best when they are networked with others of like mind and action. These networks don't form institutions. It would slow them and distract them. They do not become preoccupied with the network itself. They focus on conversations which feed vision, understanding and heart, and on subtle, highly leveraged action.

Most influential leaders know this. They know this is how influence occurs and they nurture this conversation and action irrespective of whether they operate inside or outside an institution. Influential leaders within institutions know the difference between communities of practice formed along structural lines, and networks of influencers organically related without any reference to structure or role. When it comes to change, these leaders influence through networks.

⁶ Much of my more than fifteen years consulting experience was in reading large, complex socio-technical systems like taxation systems, railways, public education, mining corporations and global professional services firms.

This kind of serious intent to influence – oriented in heart, mind and soul to the kingdom of God – might lead us to lead and design quite differently. For a start, it might lead us to re-examine our primary sources. For my part, I keep looking back in this post-Christian era to the brilliance of what was unleashed in first century as a model for influence in our own times.

What might this look like for us?

For starters, I think we would deliberately seed influential leaders in influential places.

I think we would work to place women and men of the highest character and calibre, steeped in the world and life view of the Bible, on the benches of our courts and our parliament, in the chambers of local government, in the top positions of government agencies and departments, behind the microphones and in the editing rooms and programming offices of our radio and TV stations, in the provosts' and deans' chairs of our universities, in the principals' offices of our schools, in our galleries and concert halls, in the executive suites and board rooms of our major listed companies, in every local school board and community organisation, in the presidencies of our trade and student unions, in every elite and professional sporting team...and at the heads of planning departments for local councils and transport authorities! And many more places besides.

I think we would retain or create just enough institutions to support this subversive agenda. Each institution would be as small as possible, and as big as necessary.

They would know and support each other's strategic role. That support would be partly formal, but mostly informal. The leaders would be unencumbered by the need to preserve their patches or assert their priority. And I think we would quietly close all redundant institutions and redeploy their assets into the strategic institutions and out through the informal networks.

I think one institution would take up the responsibility to articulate a profoundly faithful and relevant view of the world and of life grounded in the Scriptures and the gospel of Jesus Christ. It would research and it would teach. It would research and teach with a double imperative: to inspire and equip worthy young leaders for church/mission and for society. It would redefine theological education through one program. It would match the best humanities degree of the best universities in the world through another program. Imagine the graduates: faithful to Christ and the Scriptures; able to discern best and worst in the world; committed to the kingdom of God; committed to the people of God; deep in understanding and character; highly literate, articulate; and skilled in influence. And ready to be seeded in the institutions, corporations, departments, universities, schools and communities of our land.

I think another institution would be a voice for wisdom and grace speaking into the framing of public policy and debate. It would work to restore heart and confidence in a society where people honoured truth, beauty and goodness. It would speak prophetically and subversively into the bastions of foolishness. It would seek to woo with wisdom the hearts and minds of the leaders and peoples of our most troubled and most plastically peaceful suburbs and ethnicities.

I think another would take up the calling to teach the arts of relationship to all. The dignity and nuances of marriages that beautify and bless the land. The heart and arts of parenting with hope and grace. The joys and accountabilities of friendship. The honour and responsibilities of citizenship. Each a voice for truth, beauty and goodness. Each profoundly shaped by the astonishing wisdom and grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet offered to all irrespective of faith, race or status. A beautiful act of grace by those called to seek the welfare of the cities to which they are sent.

And I think another would bring to Aotearoa the brilliance of micro-enterprise and other strategies now deployed in developing countries to bring dignity and hope to the poor and marginalised. It would demonstrate and facilitate an alternative to dependency and the welfare state – one family and community at a time.

To a greater or lesser degree these institutions exist now. A little rationalisation, a shifting of focus, and a lot of strengthening may be enough. No doubt there would need to be other institutions too. But not too many. Just enough for real, aptly chosen, undistracted, unself-preoccupied influence.

We are talking influence on a large scale. A community. A society. A culture. A nation. A generation.

The paradoxical power of such influence lies for the greater part in individuals, and in an old, old art and calling. Intentional mentoring. Discipleship!

All this is too important, too precious, too serious and too necessary to leave to chance. We can't hope young leaders will arise. We can't advertise for them. We can't hope they stay true and focused and faithful. We can't wish they grow in grace and truth. We can't even pray for them alone.

We must intentionally, deliberately, strategically, whole-heartedly find them and nurture them. From their beginning, to our end. The joys and cries of Jesus' heart and brilliant mind in the Upper Room give us our strategy. He has told us how the kingdom will come. How the oppressed will be set free. How the poor will be fed, and the lame come to walk. How to subvert the powerbases of Herod and Caesar. How to bypass and rebuke the hollow self-serving religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

By making disciples known for their love. By changing the world one life at a time. By investing our lives, our hearts and our understanding, our wealth and our time, even our institutions and our ambitions, in the lives of a few who will do the same in turn, unleashing a geometric progression of grace and truth, justice and compassion that floods the land.

Local churches have a crucial, irreplaceable role in this. They are foundational.

Jesus said the world will know we are his disciples by our love. And so his disciples gather together to remember him and to practice this love. To deepen it. To hold one another to it. To remind ourselves again and again of the extraordinary story and its central figure whom we confess has changed the world forever. Of the one who walked through death to bring life and hope. Of the one in whom the future has arrived. Of the one whose Spirit draws us into the power of his resurrection through the fellowship of his sufferings. Of the one who has already blessed us with every needed blessing. Of the one who works signs and wonders through his Spirit within us.

This is why we gather. This is why we church: To remind. To rekindle. To reconfirm. And to recommission.

Here we come back to influence. For this simple little divine economy and strategy – the local church – has been and can be a powerhouse for profound influence. But this is the paradoxical rub: it is only a powerhouse when it is not distracted by itself. When it is not central to its own concerns. When it is not preoccupied with its own programs and ways of doing things.

If we were focused upon influence, I think we would simplify and diversify our expressions of church. Our gatherings would be more conversation than concert. Our teaching would be more Jesus-centred than me-centred.

We would build our teaching and our gatherings on a search of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge found in Christ and in his scriptures. Sustained examination of Ephesians, or Acts, or maybe Mark or Luke might be the keynotes of our conferences on church and mission. Deep exposition of the Pastorals or Peter or John might take precedence over "Breaking 200" at our leadership conferences.

I talk to a lot of pastors and a lot of students. They tell me they don't hear it often: Biblical exposition. Theological reflection. Engaged enquiry and debate. Not in earnest. Not deep and sustained. Sure we do devotions. Bible studies even. Our conferences on church, leadership and mission are not crafted around sustained exegetical and theological reflection about these issues. Pastors tell me they have never experienced a fraternal or cluster meeting that opened the scriptures seriously. Students look at me bewildered when I ask if they have ever heard a book of the Bible expounded at depth over a long period. They have no cognisance of the majesty of say Isaiah or John or Romans. It's hard to shake the sense that the Bible just doesn't cut it for us anymore. Most of our people own multiple copies in multiple translations but don't see the need to bring one on Sunday.

Ok, maybe we've inadvertently given our people good reasons not to bring their Bibles. This is not about blame. It is about the (re)gaining of wisdom. Where else can we turn? Where else do we learn of Christ? Where else do we find wisdom sufficient to transform hearts and minds and lives and communities?

I want to say this clearly: There can be no lasting influence worthy of the name of Jesus Christ which is not grounded in the word of God.

I want to say this clearly: There can be no lasting work of the Spirit divorced from the faithful proclamation of Jesus Christ as central to scripture and life and faith.

I want to say this clearly: There can be no lasting transformation without the people of God finding afresh the deep and abiding answers of scripture to the great questions of their own age.

I want to say this clearly: I know we believe these things. I know we love Christ. I know we cherish the Scriptures. I know we want to teach them well – powerfully, intelligently, inspiringly, prophetically.

But something perilous is at work amongst us.

At present, I believe we stand too close to condemning a generation to illiteracy, ignorance, irrelevance and, eventually, to apostasy. But it is not too late. Nor is it an impossible task. But it will require a deepening of intent based in a deepening of confidence in Christ, his Spirit and his word.

If we would shake this nation with grace and truth, then let us teach Christ and him crucified and risen. Let us teach the whole Scriptures as one magnificent story centred in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us teach and proclaim a full-orbed, wondrous theology of life. Let us teach and model the radical subversive words and example of Jesus.

Then we will see the Spirit pushing back the tide of illiteracy. People will bring their Bibles again. They will rejoice in the whole counsel of God proclaimed with heart and understanding and compassion. Profundity will displace eloquence. Authenticity will overshadow popularity. Prayer and faithful exegesis will dispel downloading. And conversation, real lingering meeting of hearts and minds over real chunks of bread and real tumblers of wine, will be the heart of our gatherings.

And the people will go forth from our churches: reminded, deepened, inspired and enlivened to disciple and to influence.

They will carry the precious memories of grit and grace together. An authentic word spoken into one's life bringing rebuke and strength and solace. A deeper grasp of the finished work of Christ and the unfinished business of the kingdom. A new vista of wisdom within the Scriptures. A new friend to share the load. A fresh glimpse of the Spirit's power to open hearts and minds, to set the captives free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's good favour.

They will leave our gatherings having glimpsed again the new humanity fashioned after the new Adam. And knowing that their glory is to live fully alive as the image of the Creator and Father of us all.

Imagine our congregations going back to their families, communities and work clearer-minded and intent on the radical business of blessing society by subverting it with grace and truth. Salt and light in abundance. Just as it has been so often in history and in this country.

More of our children will be cared for. More parents will see a reason to stop beating their children, and each other. Gang members will lay down their weapons and embrace their children. Our courts will be a little more just. More of our poor will be fed. Our illiterate taught. Our teachers and schools will regain heart. Our police will feel respected. Our citizens will reject the panacea of dependence upon government. And our political leaders might feel emboldened to give voice to wisdom over expediency and self-interest.

And we, the leaders of our churches, will gather on behalf of this larger picture.

Hearts and minds laid bare before the wisdom of the Scriptures, the grace of the gospel, and the power of the Spirit. Visible limbs! Strength made manifest in weakness. Speaking the truth in love. Growing together as sinews and ligaments strong and useful. Given over to the health of the body and the influence of the kingdom.

Of such is the intercourse of those who will influence.

Thirty years ago a group of young aspiring leaders crafted a vision. They understood the rudiments of influence and grew in their skill and reach. They drew upon a well-defined worldview. They mapped out spheres of influence and chose future roles to which they were most suited. They sought out mentors. They charted a course. They patiently built a platform for influence. Today they hold many of the highest positions in Aotearoa and are deliberately shaping our society.

Those leaders understood influence. To that degree I admire them. For the most part, it seems, their detractors and critics do not know how to bring about such influence. If they did, they would speak and act very differently.

And I wonder: What will *our* influence have been in thirty years?