

GR Stirling Lecture

This lecture was given on 30 April 2015 by Janet Woodlock as part of the Annual Convention of Churches of Christ in South Australia and the Northern Territory.



Good evening. It's such a delight to be here with you tonight.

I hope you can all hear me clearly. Put your hand up if you're having trouble hearing me!

I've become conscious of hearing issues recently because my mother is losing her hearing. She got a new hearing aid recently so, I asked her: "what kind is it?" and she said: "About 7.30."

We have lots of conversations like that. I honestly think she hears better without the hearing aids.

But the issue of hearing is very relevant to tonight's topic... and I'd like to tell you a story about attempted eavesdropping and a bit of guesswork. The Melbourne Comedy festival finished recently, and one comedian who performed there told this tale:

'I was out for dinner the other night with my kids, brothers and parents. It was an all-in family affair at Mum and Dad's local Vietnamese restaurant. Good for one reason, the food is excellent. Bad for another reason, Dad was in the Vietnam War and tries to make jokes about this to the 18-year-old waiters. "Hey you remember me, I was there for the fall of Saigon?" Cue confused-looking waiter who was born in Australia and has no idea what Dad is talking about.

Technically, this place is Vietnamese/Chinese, which means you can get a pho, some spring rolls or some sweet and sour pork. Which suits a family that goes from a prep to a 79-year-old. They've got something for everyone.

About two tables away sat six very tough-looking dudes. Now, I never use the word "dude" but these guys were dudes. They were all huge and had a combination of tattoos, piercings, long hair, mohawks, shaved heads and beards. Seriously, they looked like extras from that bikie show Sons of Anarchy. I couldn't stop staring at them, wondering how they all knew each other – and what were they doing at my parents' local Vietnamese. My brother had a peek and said "Looks like the local meth lab is having a tea break". We all theorised about the connection of these six burly-looking dudes. I concluded that they all worked at a gym. These guys probably owned a gym and did a bit of dealing steroids on the side. That was it. For sure.

I went up to pay and one of the dudes said "hey man, how's it going?" I stopped and realised that they had probably noticed me staring intently at them from across the room. "I'm good, hey great food here, yeah?" They all nodded and then I went in hard. I had to know. I have no level of embarrassment being a comedian. "So you guys, do you work together or something?" Nuh we're just friends they said. "Come on," I said, "there must be some connecting factor, same school, same gym? Same prison perhaps?"

I read recently about an Australian comedian who literally hid in a locked safe while a bikie gang completely trashed the venue looking for him, threatening to kill him. He wasn't sure whether he was going to die of suffocation or of violence. I'll let you know a bit later how this one fared.

But have to appreciate the boldness of this comedian, don't you? He's curious, he asks questions, and he's willing to listen.

Listening is an important life discipline. Churches of Christ seek to be alive and responsive to the voice of God. We call ourselves a movement, not a denomination. We resist being ossified into creeds or traditions, instead, we seek the will of the living God at the local, state and national level. Churches of Christ in Australia consists of the 5 member states, WA, Queensland, NSW, Vic/Tas, and SA/NT, with two representatives from each state. Your representatives are Greg Elsdon and Phil Burgess, and the council meets twice a year to discuss issues of national significance.

Back in November when the council of Churches of Christ in Australia gathered together, we decided it was time to enter a period of focusing on the title of tonight's address... what might God be saying to Churches of Christ in Australia? We agreed to pray, to listen to God, and to share what we believed we were hearing from God. We also agreed to have a retreat in March to listen more deeply to the promptings of God's Spirit. And we are continuing the process of seeking the will of God in this season. I'll tell you a bit later some of the things we've begun to discern.

Listening is an important theme of the Christian scriptures, for the God we worship is a God who speaks. In the opening chapter of the bible, God speaks light, land, and life into existence. God speaks to Adam, to Noah, to Abram, to Isaac, to Jacob, to Moses, to Joshua, the Judges, and to the prophets. When John writes about Christ in the first chapter of his gospel, he calls Jesus the Logos. "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God." It's usually translated as "Word", but logos can mean "something *said*, something *thought*, a *topic*, *motive*; cause. It's so much more than words on a page. The logos is about communication. In John's gospel the Logos is God revealed most perfectly through Jesus Christ.

Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit that he would send to the disciples. In Acts we read again and again of the Holy Spirit communicating with God's people. Paul's epistles outline the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation is a message to the churches.

In the early church and beyond, the Christian community developed an understanding of God as Trinity... Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A God whose very nature is communication and communion. When John wrote in his first epistle that God *IS* love, he was saying something far deeper than that God loves people... which is true. Trinitarian theology says that God is by very nature love through the eternal loving communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It says we are invited into a relationship with this relational God. It reveals that this loving Triune God is on a mission... God the Father sent the Son who sent the Spirit, together sending the church into the world.¹

The mission of God works like bringing people into a loving family, and the heartbeat of that family is the relationship of Father Son and Holy Spirit.

Christian theology is also vitally concerned with the relationship humankind has with God. And perhaps one of the biggest laments in scripture by this God who speaks, by this God whose very essence is love, is that people do not listen.

Listening is about attentiveness, curiosity, and opening ourselves to something new.

¹ Bosch, David (1991:390) *Transforming Mission: paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, N.Y.:Orbis,

But all human beings struggle to listen sometimes.

My youngest son had issues with hearing when he was small. My Matthew had extremely waxy ears, and wax would regularly fill up his ear canal and stop him from hearing effectively. This was frustrating both to him and to me. His speech was quite indistinct because that was how he often heard the world, and that made communication difficult.

Not only did he have trouble with physical hearing, but he was a high energy child who did not always wish to listen... particularly if the instructions were around things like... sit, stop, come back!!!!

In perhaps his most infamous “not listening” incident, I was in a toy section at Kmart when I noticed my toddler son needed a nappy change. I popped him on his stroller and asked him to sit. However, in the 7 microseconds it took me to look up and tell my eldest son it was time to leave, my youngest had managed to completely disappear.

My eldest son and I began to search the store. Before too long, I spied my laughing youngest son, with his curls streaming behind him, streaking through the store naked from the waist down. I managed to run after him, catch him, wipe him, wrestle a new nappy onto him, strap him more firmly into the stroller, and then begin the search for his trousers.

The reason this story is infamous is because I did find his trousers, and I did find his old nappy, but the brown pellet that had been in his nappy was gone. So I began a very embarrassing search through Kmart for the missing pellet... but the conclusion to that search is another story.

The Greek word for listen is akouo, from which we get the English word “acoustics”. When Jesus said “he who has ears to hear, let him hear” it meant physical hearing, but it also has a deeper sense of listening.

All of you in this room are hearing physical noises. Your eardrums are vibrating and sending a message to your brain. But some of you are not listening... you are daydreaming. And grace to you... I’ve been known to do the same in sermons often enough. Someone here might even be asleep... how about you look at the person next to you and see if they’re awake. (If they are, leave them be; they probably need the sleep!) But some of you here are really listening. You are attending. You are focusing.

But like the child who has trouble sifting out their mother’s voice from background noise, we can struggle to discern the voice of God from all the other noise that surrounds us. Listening is difficult sometimes.

One of our issues can be familiarity. When I remind my husband that going for a check-up at the Doctor’s is a good idea, he is strangely impervious. However, just occasionally, a stern message from a complete stranger on television seems to get his attention.

The writer Francis Wheen quotes a CEO, who declared that while what (management) consultants are saying is ‘a lot of common sense and not really new ... if I pay him \$15 000 to say it, my general managers and my people listen. If I’m paid to say it, my people don’t listen in the same way’. Familiarity may not bring contempt, but it can bring a kind of deafness.

Perhaps sometimes we struggle to tune in to the God who speaks, because of familiarity... we think we already know it all. Same old church services, same old bible, same old state conference, nothing new under the sun. Sometimes it's hard for us to even believe we could ever hear a fresh word from God.

One of our struggles with any kind of listening is about "tuning in".

I'm wondering whether we can all be quiet for a minute? I'd like to challenge you to listen to 6 different sounds in this room while we're all trying to be as quiet as we can. Do you think you can do that?

- Hands up if you heard 6 different things?
- Hands up if you heard some sounds you *hadn't* heard earlier?
- Why did you not hear those sounds earlier?

Well it's partly because my voice was drowning out the other sounds. But it is also about focus. It is about attending. Listening is about becoming attuned to particular sounds. In the context of listening to God, it is about becoming attuned to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

It can be a bit like tuning in to a radio frequency; we can tune into different stations, or perhaps simply into static; which makes no sense to us.

But of course, in all these things hearing physical sound is a metaphor. Hearing the voice of God audibly is very rare. Even in the life of Jesus, the synoptic gospels only record the Father speaking audibly twice; at Christ's baptism and transfiguration. Listening to God is really about spiritual discernment.

God speaks in multiple frequencies; through the reading of Scripture, and through sermons and songs and communion in our corporate worship. God may speak through the inner witness of the Spirit, through our attending to the words and actions of others, through our relationships. We might notice the voice of God by reflecting on nature. We might notice changes in culture, in our streets, in our families. God may speak in our imaginations, our intuition, or our conscience. We read our bibles, our newspapers, our feelings. God might speak through feedback from Natural Church Development surveys. It's even possible we might discern the voice of God through conference speakers. I encourage you to be attentive to what God might be saying right through your state conference this weekend.

We understand that prayer is much more than an exercise of talking to God. Andrew Murray writes that "Prayer is not monologue, but dialogue; hearing God's voice is its most essential part." Many of us have difficulty quieting the chatter in our heads to make space for discerning this voice. Our lives are busy and our brains are full. It's hard to find truly quiet time. For most of us, discerning that still, small voice doesn't come naturally.

Biblical listening is also intimately related to obedience. James noted that faith without works is dead. The Greek word for obedience is a composite word, *hypakouō*, which literally means: "*under hearing*". It means to act *under* the authority of the one who speaks. It means really listening to the one who is in charge. It suggests attentive listening, being responsive, and compliant.

So this brings us the core of our topic tonight... what might God be saying to Churches of Christ in Australia?

The things God is saying to Churches of Christ in Australia today are perhaps no different from the things God has already spoken about through scripture.

How did God first respond to the humans created in the image of God, male and female? The first thing we read is that God blessed them.

This is an astonishing word in my mind. The Hebrew word *barak* (to bless) literally means to bend the knee. It is an expression of honour, of giving something immense value. This awesome God who can create by power of the spoken word, figuratively bends the knee and honours humankind.

It is on the heart of God to bless. We see this in the call to Abram in Genesis chapter 12.

“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...
3 and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

This astonishing idea of the God who bends the knee to bless is echoed most potently by Jesus Christ, who bends down before his disciples and washes their feet. Their Lord and teacher stoops down in humility to bless this ragtag bunch. They don't understand it, and they understand it even less when out of love, Jesus goes to the cross and bleeds and dies for them. What amazing grace.

This God wants us too to be agents of blessing. This loving God is inviting us to look around in our communities and ask “where can we bless others?” How can we be a blessing to the local school that is up the road from our church building? How can we be a blessing to the people involved in childcare centre near us, or the nursing home across the street? To the young families living up and down the road from our building? To the migrant community in our midst? To our local shopkeepers? I wonder what would happen if your church entered discernment around the question... how can we be a blessing to our local community?

My own church, Ringwood Church of Christ, has sought to be a blessing in many ways... to preschool families through playgroups and a mothers' group, to a local school through chaplaincy and kids hope, to people doing it tough through a meals ministry, to refugees through an English language class, to men in the area through a men's shed. Last year we asked a new question... “How can we be a blessing to our local government?” As a result we put on a dinner for the members of our local council. They were blown away and said “no one has ever thanked us before”. Isn't that interesting? I wonder what groups God might call your church to bless?

What else might God be saying to Churches of Christ in Australia?

Well I wonder if there are clues for us in remembering our founding stories? Steve Addison states in “Movements that Changed the World” that “over time every movement wanders from its founding charism (gift of grace) and can only be renewed by returning to it in a fresh way. That return must be both true to the movement's unique calling and innovative in how that calling is lived out”²

² Addison, Steve, (2009: 61) *Movements that Changed the World* Missional Press

A landmark in the Churches of Christ story was the Cane Ridge revival of 1801. At a gathering like this most of you would be familiar with the open communion service organised by Barton Stone, the wave of prayer that preceded this time³, and the extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit that occurred at Cane Ridge over a period of days. From this point onwards the Stone Campbell movement took off like wildfire... it really was a movement! We grew from a handful of people with some nonconformist ideas, to a group which had over million adherents within less than a century. It is a story of explosive growth.

Churches of Christ still call ourselves a movement, not a denomination. Perhaps that tells us something powerfully what God is calling us to be.

How does our founding charism speak to us? Might it be about releasing all believers into ministry... wherever they are, whatever they do? Might the Cane Ridge revival remind us that we are to be open to the Holy Spirit in fresh ways? Might the deep repentance that occurred there remind us of the many ways we miss the mark, our need to confess, and the Christ-like way of life to which we are called? Might it be about passionate prayer?

Might a passion for mission be the way our founding story speaks to us?

A key metanarrative in all of Scripture is that of the mission of God.⁴ From beginning to end of the scriptures, God is on a rescue mission to seek and save the lost, and to bring all things under the Lordship of Christ. Is this on our heart too? Are we hearing the voice of the Spirit calling us to participate in the mission of God? And are we discerning what this will mean for us?

I recently visited a church which is small and ageing. It has become aware that it is a dying church, and that needs to find its mission if it is to survive.

When I looked over the church buildings I noticed a fenced and tan barked outdoor play area, next to a large hall and a kitchen. When I looked across the road, I saw a primary school. They have an enthusiastic young ministry intern with them with a young child. They have a woman in their church who wants to start a children's ministry.

I didn't want to short-circuit the work of prayer and discernment that this congregation needs to do, but everything within me went... why doesn't this church start up a playgroup for preschool

³ Methodist James Smith, traveling near Lexington in the autumn of 1795 feared that "the universalists, joining with the Deists, had given Christianity a deadly stab hereabouts." ... Churches and pastors did not merely wring their hands; they clasped them in prayer—at prayer meetings, at worship, and at national conventions. In 1798 the Presbyterian General Assembly asked that a day be set aside for fasting, humiliation, and prayer to redeem the frontier from "Egyptian darkness." <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/revival-at-cane-ridge/>

⁴ Moltmann: "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church." Moltmann, Jorgen (1977:64). *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, London: SCM Press

children? What if the best way for this church to bless its local community was right under its nose and they didn't have eyes to see it?

So I did ask whether a playgroup had been considered. I was told "Oh, we used to have a playgroup but we shut it down because the families didn't come to church".

I couldn't help but wonder whether this church may have missed the voice of the Spirit to bless those playgroup families, and find to new ways to share more of the love of Jesus with them. I wonder what opportunities I miss too.

Sometimes we do discern the way God is working in lives and communities, and it's hard to imagine a more joyful thing when we participate in that. On Sunday I sat next to a woman called Rebekah in our church service. When I first met her through our church mothers' group a number of years ago, she had a baby who slept very badly, and was feeling pretty much desperate. After I'd known her for a while, we ran a group for people curious about faith using the DVD series called "Journeys". Rebekah attended that with interest. Then, we ran an "Alpha" group in her home. She was baptised in a private service a couple of years' ago.

On Saturday I met with Sarah, who has just started attending my home group. Sarah is also a mum I met through our church mothers' group. Her husband literally ran off with the secretary leaving her alone with two young children. When my husband offered to grout her shower, this moved her so much she started coming to church services to say thanks to God. When we went to her child's birthday party she kept introducing us as the people who had "transformed her life". It was embarrassing – but it's also such a joy when people find new life in Christ.

You know, maybe mission isn't really that hard. Maybe there are lots of people out there like Rebekah and Sarah ready for transformation, whose hearts are hungry for the love of God... though they might not have found the words for it yet.

I met with another person from my church called Ken Morgan a couple of weeks ago. He has done a great deal of research around where people are becoming Christians in Australia. Do you want to know what he's found? For the most part it's not through big conferences or super-cool niche ministries in hip urban cafes, or even through house churches. It's mostly through ordinary local churches.

When reports that Mark Twain had died appeared in a newspaper, he quipped "reports of my death have been exaggerated". I believe reports of the death of the church have been GREATLY exaggerated. Average attendance at Churches of Christ across Australia has increased by 10% over the last 5 years; some churches are thriving in their mission.

Now not all local churches are good at making disciples. But the ones that are, do some simple things:

- they work out who they're trying to reach – the discernment piece - and run activities that cater for them.
- they form meaningful relationships and real friendships over time.

- they expose people to Jesus. This can be through one on one conversations, small groups, running alpha groups, or special church services... but it's something intentional. And they give people opportunities to respond to Jesus.
- they disciple them... through friendships
- they help them find a ministry and get established in it
- they give them an opportunity to develop as a leader in ministry.

In summary... they connect with people, make genuine friendships, and provide opportunities to engage with Jesus. Does this sound difficult? What do you think?

Maybe if we are tuning in to the Spirit of God, and following the Spirit with our fumbling steps, we'll find it's just not that hard after all.⁵

I mentioned earlier that the representatives of Churches of Christ in Australia have been seeking to discern the voice of God for us today.

Some of the most important things we are discerning really can be summarised by that phrase so core to our founding charism... in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love. Unity in the Spirit... liberty in conscience and in practices... and in all things love, and more love, and more love... they are easy words to say, and difficult words to live.

We are called to love with Christ-like sacrificial love. It looks like I Corinthians 13... patient, kind, humble and so on. It looks like covenanting to speak well of our brothers and sisters. It looks like seeking reconciliation privately and immediately if we know that someone had something against us. It means we have no tolerance for game-playing, politics, gossip or triangulation. It means we care about church unity deeply.

Love like this is difficult. But when such love is lived out in community, however imperfectly, it's incredibly attractive. It touches the deepest need of the human heart. In a world blighted with loneliness⁶, who wouldn't want to be part of a community like that?

Of course, all of us and all of our churches fall short. The Anglican prayer book notes:

We confess that we have sinned against you
In thought, word, and deed,
By what we have done,
And by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves.

We do miss the mark again and again. Hopefully we confess our sins as individuals, and as local churches, in the ways we fall short. When the Council of Churches of Christ in Australia met recently we had a time of corporate confession. I wonder what your local church would confess if it were to name the ways it falls short? What do you think? We confess not for self-pity, but for repentance, for the hope of new life.

⁵ Acts 16:6 – 10 poses some interesting issues: Despite the need for gospel ministry everywhere Paul was led by the Spirit not to preach in Asia or Bithynia but Macedonia. Who might our churches be called to reach, and who should be left for others churches or ministries?

⁶ <http://www.smh.com.au/national/you-are-not--alone-20120722-22i3d.html>

We always remember there is no condemnation for those of us in Christ Jesus. We take communion weekly and remember we live in grace, and we ask again that the Spirit of God pour love into our hearts.

I began this lecture with the story of the huge tough looking dudes in the Vietnamese restaurant. I guess you've already worked out the comedian, who is Dave O'Neill, at least remained alive to tell the tale. Dave tried to dig a bit as to how these scary blokes knew one another, and I'll pick up on his words again:

"Come on, there must be some connecting factor, same school, same gym? Same prison perhaps?"

There was a pause and then one of them said "Jesus is our connection". I couldn't help myself – I started to laugh and then I realised none of them were laughing. They were deadly serious, they were all into Jesus, and this was their regular meeting place. You see, they didn't like churches and they liked to get out, eat some food and talk about ... well, Jesus.

Then it got a bit odd. The really big one said, "Can we pray for you David?" I said there was nothing wrong with me, I was fine. "No," he said "you're not fine, you have a bit of a limp." Sure, I'd hurt my knee that day but it was just a temporary thing. But no, they wanted to pray for me. They were big, so I let them pray. I sat down with them and the one with the most tattoos held my leg and rubbed it, while the other one said stuff about Jesus and put his hand on my shoulder.

At this point, Dad wandered over, probably wondering why these bikies were giving his son a massage. "Dad, all these blokes are Christians," I said in a loud voice. "And he thought you blokes were all drug dealers."

Dad chuckled. And then everyone laughed like at the end of a sitcom.

Those guys could be drug dealers, just Christian ones. Tell you what though, my leg felt better almost immediately. I'm not saying a miracle happened in my parents' local Vietnamese joint, but I was on a high for some time. It could have been the MSG.⁷

Maybe what God is saying to you, or to your church, is that you are called to reach out to big, tough, tattooed scary looking dudes with the love of Jesus. Or maybe... you are meant to touch the poorest people in your midst with the love of Jesus. Perhaps you're called to reach out to refugees? Perhaps young families in your local schools? What about those God-forsaken investment bankers and insurance brokers? What about people in the nursing home up the road? What about the teenagers in your local high school?

But how will you know who God is calling you to touch with the love of Jesus, unless you are listening to the Lord of the Harvest... to the God who speaks? To the God who is present? To the God who fills us with love and power by the Holy Spirit?

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen.

⁷ <http://m.smh.com.au/entertainment/comedy/dave-oneil-its-not-cool-8211-dont-judge-a-book-by-its-cover-dude-20150408-1mfmo5.html>

We're going to finish off tonight in a time of prayer, and of seeking to discern the voice of God together.

I invite you now to get into small groups, and I'd like you to discuss together your answers to one of these questions:

What might God be saying to your church?

What might God be saying to you?

Then I'd like you to pray for one another about what God might be saying.

After a time of prayer we're going to have a short time of reporting back any reflections you'd like to share with the larger group, and we'll close off in prayer together.

(After reporting back):

Have you sensed God stirring something tonight?

Have you ever been to a conference all fired up, and find nothing ever happens to it? That glowing ember is nothing but ash in a few months' time?

As you drive home, I'd ask you to think about how you can keep that glowing coal inside you alive... how you can blow oxygen on it... how you can fan into flame the gift of the Spirit.

What might you need to do? Who might you need to talk to?

Scott is going to close off the evening in prayer.