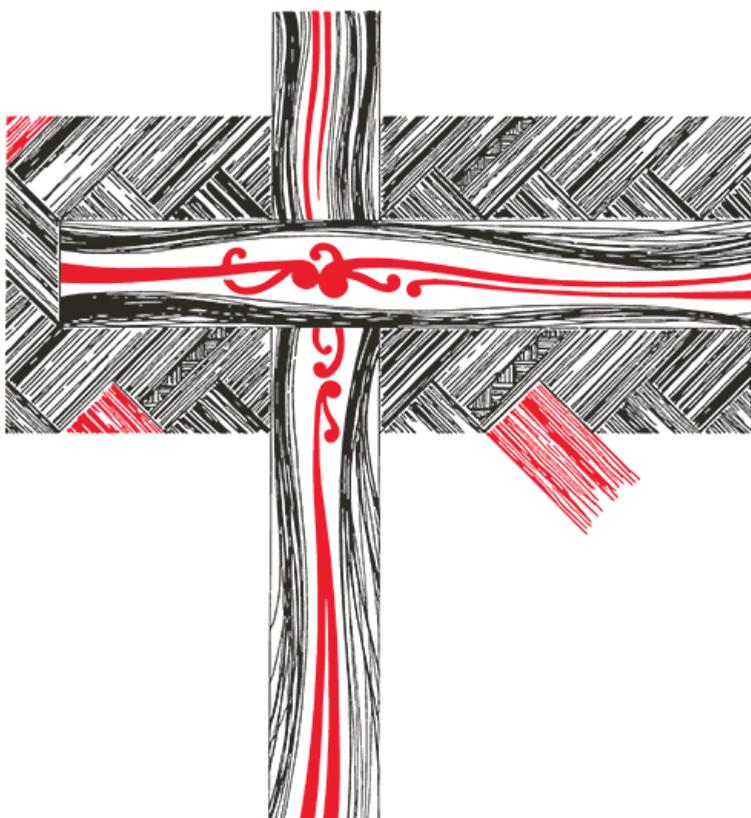


*Who wants to be
an Anglican?*



John Bluck

Introduction

Debates about what it means to be an Anglican are about as fashionable as recipes for tripe. Denominational brands are old hats. No one wants to wear them anymore.

Religion is now defined by new markers; mostly about music choices, hi-tech and cyberspace and the personality of the preachers. The once (rather smugly named) mainstream denominations no longer control the market for anyone under 40 as independent churches spring up online or in hired school halls.

The ecumenical movement that 30 years ago came close to creating a uniting church for all New Zealanders has disappeared, leaving few footprints. It probably fueled the current indifference to denominational labels, leaving a vacuum in its wake.

We're in an in-between time when it comes to shaping the Christian presence in Aotearoa. Maybe some new form of ecumenical church will emerge, better grounded in an environmentally tuned and biculturally aware theology. In the meantime, we've got the old brands like Anglicanism.

This little booklet is written to say some of that is not half bad and more resilient than we once credited. So what are the enduring hallmarks of this Anglican creed?

I'm indebted to the late John Williamson for some of the quotes I use. He wrote one of the very few New Zealand studies on Anglican Spirituality and embodied the spirit of this church. As the secretary of the commission that produced the New Zealand Prayer Book, John is credited with the inclusion of the beautiful prayer, 'Lord it is night..' that ends the Night Prayer liturgy.

It had been considered for inclusion then discarded and thrown into the waste paper bin. John retrieved it at the end of the meeting, photocopied and redistributed it next day when it was finally accepted. That's the sort of dogged and down to earth pragmatism that this church is all about.

So what are the hallmarks of this Anglican brand? There is a list that was written back in England but it needs to be adapted for use in Aotearoa and rewritten in light of the chaos that has hit the Anglican communion.

The rewriting needs to be careful not to get smug about items on the list. Social service for example, something that Anglicans prided themselves on being good at, is now shared by many churches. And music in worship, once an Anglican hallmark, is done much better by others in contemporary forms at least. Our list of bragging rights keeps getting shorter. None of what follows should be reason to boast. This is an exercise not in claiming higher ground but rather to see what is still distinctive about us, and worth recommending to others.

Comprehensive

The "broad church" as opposed to an only high or low church label, that Anglicans prided themselves on for centuries has been tested like never before by the battle to give gay people the right to belong. And not simply belong as they always have, but to play a full part in church life as married couples and ordained leaders. That battle has led to parallel jurisdictions, separate synods and countrywide provinces declaring themselves not in communion with other regions. GAFCON (Global Anglicans Future Conference) declaring themselves to be the truly orthodox and Bible believers is the largest of these alternatives.

What makes or breaks Anglican comprehensiveness has been a moveable feast, ranging from candles on altars, vestment wearing priests, women's ordination, pacifism, infant baptism, the list goes on of issues that threatened to divide Anglicans forever, until a new controversy came along to swallow up the last one.

140 years ago, the first General Synod of the whole worldwide Anglican Church at the time, gathered at Lambeth Palace in London to debate the "heretical" beliefs of John Colenso, Bishop of Natal, Zulu language scholar and Bible translator who was convinced all humans were equal and graceful in God's eyes. He argued that Moses didn't help to write the Old Testament and that liturgy should be conducted in the Zulu language. Charges of heresy soon followed.

This Lambeth initiative did more to continue than close the controversy and the media had a field day, with W.S. Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan fame writing ditties to lampoon the gathering:

From east and west the holy clan

Of bishops gathered, to a man:

To Synod, called Pan-Anglican

In flocking crowds they came

The outcome of that debate was as inconclusive as our current rows and will continue to be as the breadth of Anglicanism keeps expanding and rigid rules become impossible to enforce.

The Anglican church spread worldwide on the back of the British Empire. Missionaries followed traders and soldiers, sometimes went ahead of them as they did in New Zealand. And while that colonial alliance was often compromising it

was also hugely expansive, requiring the church to unpack the Gospel from its English wrapping, over and over.

Today Anglicanism lives in 165 countries around the world, expressed in as many different languages, embracing some 85 million members, bound by the same orders of ministry, sacramental and liturgical traditions. There are strong family resemblances across the Communion but no central authority, save the spiritual leadership of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Comprehensive, yes, but constantly on a tipping point, saved only by focusing on the fundamentals of faith and avoiding getting divided by the details. But it's very hard to decide which is which. In a church near you, sitting next to each other on a Sunday there will be people who believe gay people are more flawed than they are in God's sight, who believe Jesus dying on the cross was punishment for our sins, alongside those who believe, like I do, that's all a bunch of old cobblers. Yet together they stand up and sing Thine be the Glory and retire for a cup of tea together.

National

However eagerly Anglican churches outside England shake off their origin, the ethos of the country we began in still shapes us. Anglicanism began as a national church, rooted in the ancient Celtic tradition which predated the Roman version, shaped more by kings than popes. And when the English Parliament declared Henry 8th as supreme head of the church of England, it cemented the idea of this as a church of all the English people, atheists and believers alike, established by law, with parliament finally responsible for its liturgies and doctrines.

This claim to be the established church of a country has lingered on for Anglicans outside Britain. Once we in New

Zealand stopped seeing ourselves as outposts of Empire, citizens of a Better Britain of the South Seas and gave up importing our bishops from the Old Country, as we did for our first 100 years, New Zealand Anglicans still enjoyed the front row seats in national events. Pakeha bishops but now Maori more so, preside at celebrations at Waitangi, state funerals or the crowning of a Maori king.

And even though churches of every sort slip into the sidelines of national life, the history of being Anglican in Aotearoa still ensures a central role. We began as Te Haahi Mihinare - the church of the missionaries who settled here before the settlers arrived, who promoted and translated the Treaty of Waitangi and shaped the schools, farms, settlements and maps we inherit today.

With the first constitution in 1857, drawn up by the bishop and the Chief Justice of the day, we became the settler church. It took another 140 years for Pakeha to restore the place of Maori, add Pasifika Anglicans and become a three tikanga church as we did in 1992. And just as the earliest Anglicans anchored their faith in their culture and nationality, so do we in ours.

The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia, as we're officially called, is self-governing but still depends on an act of parliament, The Church of England Empowering Act.

At worst, all of this is just a legal nuisance to keep us reliant on lawyers. At best it is an inescapable reminder that we are a church of all comers, accessible to every New Zealander, however much or little they believe. Our cathedrals stand testament to that. They welcome everyone, play host to all sorts of occasions, offer unconditional hospitality. In the years I was privileged to lead the cathedral in Christchurch we hosted everyone from the Dalai Lama to the Queen, the local Muslim community at the time of 9/11, the Transport Union

during a bus strike, and the families of those who died in the Ballantynes fire 50 years before. It was a place for everyone. Being a church with an ethos as broad and national as Anglican allowed us to provide that.

It's a cheap and often repeated line that religion and politics don't mix. But for Anglicans that has never been true. Our church has been embedded from the beginning in the laws and commerce of the country. Our social services, schools, art and music and architecture have been woven into the nation's life. That distinctively English habit of being a national church has been transferred to every Anglican church around the world. So Kiwi Anglicans are a brand of Christian like no other. And the three tikanga overlay on top of that just makes it all the more distinctive.

Pragmatic

Anglicanism is not so much a confessional tradition, centred on doctrinal belief. It's more defined by what we do than what we believe. We're focused on what works, what holds us together which always involves compromise. Through the 16th and 17th centuries from the time of Henry 8th to Elizabeth 1st and the civil wars that followed, the English church struggled to hold together competing differences between Catholic, Protestant and Puritan beliefs, eventually settling on a via media approach to avoid more bloodshed. That middle way is being tested again today just as savagely.

But the structures that govern us are robust. We live as neither a monarchy nor a democracy. It's a model of dispersed authority with three orders of ministry – lay, clergy and bishops, and now three tikanga voices, all having to agree on any important decision. We are led by bishops elected by lay people and clergy together, who shape the church's direction

in provincial synods and less frequently a national General Synod. Decisions take a long time, some of them require an act of Parliament as well, but they are carefully and widely consulted decisions that are rarely overturned or revisited.

Internationally, Anglicanism is a confederation of autonomous churches, acknowledging the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury but only in a spiritual and symbolic sense and working through a series of consultative agencies which recommend but rarely legislate (and when they do are likely to trigger a Gilbert and Sullivan reaction).

This pragmatic ethos allows very unlike-minded people to work through the most divisive issues together. None more so than the understanding of what the service of Holy Communion or Eucharist is all about. Anglicanism encompasses those who think it's just a memorial of the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples, alongside those who think something substantial changes in the physical elements of bread and wine, and in between, those who believe that Jesus is really present in this reenacted meal. Whatever you think is going on it's better to live with those differences, say most Anglicans, so we can still break bread together.

Provisional

Pragmatism fits well with the provisional character of Anglicanism. On a good day with a following wind, we don't take ourselves too seriously. Cobbled together from Celtic and Roman traditions 1500 years ago and made over by a collision between a king and a pope, a queen and a parliament a thousand years later, then reshaped again as it spread globally on the back of a colonial empire, Anglicanism is an attempt to bridge impossibilities with compromises that keep

people together and still talking to (sometimes shouting at) each other.

We're here for the time being until something better comes along; as it very nearly did, falling short by one clergy vote in General Synod no less, to stop us becoming part of the Uniting Church in New Zealand. Right now we're trying to hold onto the essentials of faith and order, anchored in the culture and language of each place where Anglicans gather, trusting that the Spirit will hold us together as we change the shape and style of our church.

That has happened dramatically in New Zealand, leading the Anglican world with the ordination of women, the birth of a three tikanga constitution, a new prayer book with liturgies in five indigenous languages and still to be fully affirmed, acceptance of gay people in leadership. To someone raised in the old Church of England as we called ourselves back then, today's church would be almost unrecognisable.

And though some wanted to die in a ditch over these changes, and did, most of us survived and stayed together. I like to think that's because most Anglicans knew the changes wouldn't kill us and that there are more important things than doctrines and beliefs.

Harvey Cox says there is a huge difference between faith and belief: "Faith is about deep seated confidence..we apply it to people we trust or values we treasure..things of ultimate concern..matters of the heart. Belief on the other hand is more like opinion..often used to express uncertainty.

"We can believe something to be true without it making much difference to us, but we place our faith only in something that is vital for the way we live."

Anglicanism at its best focuses on faith, knowing how to hold onto the things that really matter and being willing to negotiate

on everything else. That's why this church has been able to hold together such diversity for so long and been able to resist successive waves of fundamentalists, puritans, dogmatists and zealots of every kind trying to make their particular beliefs compulsory for everyone.

Reasonable

The classic definition of Anglicanism is that it stands on a three-legged stool of Bible, Tradition and Reason. In other words, that while we hold the Bible to be a sacred text and Tradition to be a reliable guide for shaping the church, it still needs to make sense.

In the Communion service from the old prayer book of 1662, we presented ourselves, "our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice.."

American Anglicans in one of their most successful marketing campaigns, promoted themselves as a "church where you don't have to leave your brain at the door."

You could wonder whether reason is a word that applies to anything religious, given its connection with mystery and the leap that faith requires. Many denominations, especially in Pentecostal traditions, delight in intense emotion and defying what is sensible.

Anglicanism is different (though many Anglicans are Charismatic). Reason stands for moderation, practicality, consistency, sound argument, considered judgement.

An Anglican chicken crosses the road not to get to the other side but to find the centre. We pride ourselves on being a well balanced faith which sounds boring, but in fact is very challenging. Living in the middle of a road, after all, is a dangerous place to be.

In the preface to the first English Prayer Book, written in 1662, this middle road is elegantly phrased. “It hath been the wisdom of the Church of England..to keep the mean between the two extremes, of too much stiffness in refusing, and of too much easiness in admitting any variation from it.”

To stay reasonable requires that you don't take yourself and what you stand for too seriously. Anglicans seem to attract ridicule and satire. The English are especially savage about their national church that they rarely attend but insist on preserving. They call it quaint and outdated but get angry when it tries to modernise, as the Vicar of Dibley attempted to do with mixed results.

At the heart of the gospel there's disjunction between the world as it is and the world as God intends; between the message of Jesus and the impossibility of ever achieving it. That misalignment is a rich source of comedy and silliness. The earliest image of Christianity is a donkey on a cross. Jesus was mocked and laughed at before he was crucified.

Anglicanism understands the power of that comedy better than most traditions. Behind the caricatures of dopey vicars, bickering old ladies, fancy dressed processions, archaic words and buildings with impossibly high ceilings there lies a well buried treasury of inspiration and delight.

Liturgical

The word means the work of the people and it's this work of giving worship and praise to God, daily, weekly, in and out of season, through good times and bad that defines Anglicanism. It's not what we believe but what we do that shapes us first and last. And what we do, if nothing else, is pray together in an ordered way that ensures we don't

disrespect each other, because that would be to disrespect the God in whose image we are made.

That means praying without blaming, or caricaturing, or self promoting. It means using words that are inclusive and able to be owned by all sorts and conditions of people, without undue repetition, excess or hype. Not the indulgent and exaggerated language of advertising, or the cold and clinical descriptions of science, or the overheated and romanticised language of greeting cards.

Liturgical language has to be fit for purpose Sunday by Sunday, built for the long haul, suitable for all sorts, rich enough in its layers and imagery to keep speaking afresh. There's a common myth that liturgy can be written from scratch every week. Instant originality. Those who try it subject their listeners to banality and recycled mediocrity, often injected with personal material that quickly exceeds its use by date.

Good liturgy is an art form, distilled and weathered from centuries of use, carefully honed, drawing on centuries of inspiration, rich in poetry, shaped and balanced by the structures of speech. It took the Anglican Church of England four centuries to revise its prayer book. It took the Anglican Church in New Zealand 30 years to write its own book and another thirty to add more language versions. But our book is heavily dependent on the cadences and rhythms of all the Anglican books that have gone before it. We've got an extra series of variations and models authorised for use, hugely more varied than ever in our history. But we still work within a framework approved by General Synod, of templates and set forms that echo our tradition of liturgy.

We make so much of liturgy because it's what holds Anglican together and makes them who they are. 'The people of the book' is what Maori used to call them. Today we're a people

of several books (and a lot of overheads and digital projections). But well ordered worship, that speaks afresh but connects reliably with a tradition, is still our hallmark.

Our liturgies use words and images to point to a God we cannot see or hear directly, only through hints and glimpses, using words and images that we don't grab hold of in the spur of a moment, as a passing fancy, but gathered over time, refined by the collective wisdom of centuries and patiently polished until they gleam like silver, balanced and weighted to say just the very best we are capable of saying about God, in a way that is meet, right and proper.

We don't do liturgy in a hurry. When we talk about God we need to watch our mouths and choose our words with care as we prepare ourselves to enter the presence of God, the one:

To whom all hearts are open,

All desires known,

And from whom no secrets are hidden.

We need a language to be able to speak to this God who is beyond every language. The liturgy gives us a language to use, like glory and radiance and redemption, when we struggle to find any words at all.

And we need to draw on all the resources available to us. Not only words but images, and music, especially the music. The seasons of the year matched to the seasons of the Christian story, from birth to death to resurrection, through summer, winter and springtime, through the rhythms of giving thanks and being penitent, remembering and dreaming, gathering and going out.

Our liturgies have something more. There are words and stories that you encounter nowhere else as the culture around us grows more secular. You can no longer assume that everyone knows why we celebrate Christmas and Easter.

The Christian narratives that have shaped our culture – creation, incarnation, redemption and forgiveness, death and resurrection, need somewhere to be remembered, taught, recited and reclaimed. And that happens Sunday by Sunday in our liturgy, through the seasons, the lectionary readings. It's all right here. If you followed all the episodes, you'd get the whole story.

And what's more, you'd get the words (and the music) to hear it all and say it and sing it out loud and make it your own.

It's so hard to find the vocabulary to express the faith we share. Ordinary words and images don't do it. How for example could you begin to talk about the mystery and the beauty of God if you didn't have a word like glory? We use it often in our liturgy. It means the radiance of God, the way God's beauty shines like a light in the darkness. So we say "Glory to God, glory to God, glory in the highest", because that's about as close as we come to connecting with that radiance and letting it shine in us and through us.

Hard to make sense of that because it is beyond sense. Not non-sense but beyond our rational, sensible, manageable selves.

Atonement

Western Christianity has been preoccupied with theories of atonement to explain why God let Jesus die on the cross in the awful way he did. So count on finding lots of crosses in a church near you. And Anglican ones are no exception, often with some pretty lurid and bloody depictions of the crucifixion. Why? Because it's a very strange way to introduce new people into Christianity.

It's a bit like inviting people to dinner and putting a picture of the meatworks on the invitation.

Yet for a very long time theologians and the odd bishop or three have tried to shame us into believing, even making us feel guilty, punishing us for our sins and then being grateful that Jesus somehow took our place when we should have been hanging up there on the cross ourselves.

It's called penal or substitutionary atonement and we still sing about it every Good Friday on a green hill far away. "There was no other good enough to pay the price"; only his blood could do the trick. Think carefully before you join in that verse.

This obsession with blood and sacrifice is rooted in Jewish theology that revolved around those ideas. You took a lamb or a goat to the temple to be killed on the altar by the priest; or if you were poor, a turtle dove would do, and God would be pleased.

Early Christian theology picked up those themes and added to them. Origen in the 4th century liked the idea of a ransom, paid to Satan. Anselm, our very own Archbishop of Canterbury, took it further in the 11th century; Aquinas then added the idea of the cross creating a supply of merit you could bank on and add to with sacraments, penances and indulgences – two points for a mass, ten for a pilgrimage and so on. Then John Calvin, father of the Reformation, took atonement on to a whole new level in the 16th century, arguing the cross was a penalty that Jesus paid for every single individual sin. No wonder he always looks so miserable in his portraits.

So we shouldn't be surprised to find atonement as the doorway into believing, as though there is no other way of understanding Christianity. If these theories work for you, if you find it helpful to focus your faith around the cross as millions of Western Christians have, good luck and go well.

But there are choices, other options available that you are free to explore. And you'll find them not on our western side of the street, but on the east side, where the Orthodox Christian tradition offers a very different doorway.

A good friend of mine had a holiday in Istanbul a few years ago and visited the church of Chora, built on the site of a 5th century monastery. The walls of the church were covered in beautiful frescoes of the Jesus story, dating back a thousand years and more. They depict Jesus the teacher, Jesus the healer, Jesus the miracle worker, Jesus the shepherd, and most commonly, Jesus in paradise. The resurrected Christ in glory, living eternally.

But to my friend's amazement, there was not a single depiction of the crucifixion. Not a cross to be seen. He came home and did some research, only to find that crucifixion didn't feature in Christian art till the 10th century and then only in the west. Half of Christendom didn't use those images and half of Christendom preferred the doorway of eternal life and resurrection as the main entrance to faith. Their church windows featured bright colours and visions of paradise.

Anglicans don't legislate on understandings of atonement. The catechism at the back of the prayer book simply says "God has acted in Jesus to bring us back to a loving and forgiven relationship". We leave plenty of room to choose how that works for you. If you have had a desperate life full of pain and rejection, then the appeal of a saviour on a cross who shares that pain and knows that rejection himself is very powerful. He hangs up there for you.

The church in the west is not doing well right now. We're better known for what we're against than what we're for; we're seen to be preoccupied with sin and what's wrong with the world, more fascinated with crucifixion than resurrection, and we've failed to get the message out there that life in all its

fullness - passionate, beautiful, abundant, generous life, pressed down and running over – is what we're all about, because that is what God intends for all of us to enjoy. Now and forever.

We can of course think of Jesus as someone who died for us, but even better might be to think of him as someone who lives for us and shares with us, in each of us, a life that is holy and beautiful, lovely and eternal. And who wants us to enjoy it with him.

I don't know anyone who put this better than Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, mystic, son of a Kiwi artist, who began life as an Anglican.

“At the centre of our being is a point of pure truth, a spark which belongs entirely to God. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak, God's name written into us...It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven...It is in everybody and if we could see these billions of points of light, all darkness and cruelty would vanish completely... I have no programme for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.”

Incarnation

Rather than first focusing on salvation, our Anglican theology starts with incarnation. Our first text is not “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” but “God came and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”. The Word made flesh, God taking human form, meeting and accepting us where and as we are.

Biblical truth is never either/or, always both/and, but it does make a difference where you start.

In a wonderful book called “I’m here if you need me” by the American chaplain Kate Braestrup, she grounds God in the most ordinary and everyday events. ‘It is entirely possible,” she writes, “that God is my neighbour standing out there on the doorstep, come over to deliver a pan of peanut brownies.”

God meets us, Kate believes, body to body as much as soul to soul, and that’s more than enough. “That’s all the God I need.”

The God that people are looking for is not so hard to find if only we could stop looking up in the sky or blaming God for what’s gone wrong with the world. Instead, look for the signs of where love is being shared and where justice is being won and hospitality and kindness are being offered. If we start with the hands that are providing these things then we’ll find where and through whom God is at work in the world. That’s incarnation, the Word becoming flesh, modelled in the one whose birth we have just celebrated, who we call Emmanuel – which means God with us.

The Anglican tradition practises what it preaches about incarnation in the way it worships God. Worship means literally ‘giving worth”.

We don’t leave that giving to airy fairy ways and we don’t depend on the personal whims and fancies of clergy and lay leaders to decide how to value and honour God. There are some seemingly very successful churches led by charismatic preachers who convert thousands to their idea of God. But when they go, their idea of God goes with them and their followers are left bereft and betrayed.

We try and avoid that as Anglicans by offering worship that isn’t centred around a personality or any individual style but is sacramental, liturgical, seasonal, active and engaging but also reflective and contemplative.

It's also a liturgy that points us to God without taking time to blame and judge or even preach. That's best left to the sermon and not infused in the prayers before and after. The eucharistic liturgies in the New Zealand Prayer Book, unlike the old English Book of Common Prayer, are carefully focused on the grace rather than the judgement of God. We don't have to be forgiven before we give praise. We are already accepted by a God "who comes to us before we come to you".

Incarnation means that "coming to you" is both close up and personal and corporate and cultural.

When the missionaries arrived in Aotearoa they very quickly had to rethink and reimagine the Anglican faith they brought. The words of Bible and Prayer Book had to be translated and a written form of te reo that didn't exist was needed. Images and ideas that shaped Christianity through Hebrew, Greek, Roman then English filters had to find Maori forms as well. What's a Good Shepherd mean in a country that had no sheep? The chiefs and catechists trained at mission stations at Paihia and Waimate North carried the weight of that enculturation. And 200 years on, as Pakeha Anglicans struggle to find an authentic Anglican voice, we look to Maori Anglicans who have already done that homework. When it comes to incarnating Anglicanism, the hard yards have been done.

Sacramental

It starts with the words of Jesus having his friends to dinner before he died. They didn't turn out to be very reliable friends at all but that's another story.

The quality of the meal you have with Jesus doesn't depend on the quality of the company. He was renowned for offering hospitality to all sorts of dodgy people.

And in the same way that Jesus lived on after his death, so too does he live on in the bread and wine we share in his name. Consider this ordinary wine to be my blood, this everyday bread to be my body, he said. Ordinary and everyday things speak of what is heavenly and holy. That's what sacrament means. And not just bread and wine but the whole world sings of the glory of God.

As the New Zealand version of psalm 65 in our prayer book puts it:

The tussock land becomes pasture

And the brown hills turn green..

The world itself is a canticle of praise

If you're looking for God, start with the stuff of the ordinary and the everyday, what you had for breakfast, and even more obviously holy than muesli; the mountains, the bush and the sea.

Anglicans are good at helping people find God in these ways, because we are a sacramental people who trust ordinary stuff like food to speak of God.

Spirituality

Anglicans are good at waiting. We've made it into an art form.

The cynic would say it's because decisions about changing anything, from the words of the liturgy to moving the pews take forever. But the better reason is because the liturgy we're accustomed to doesn't spell everything out and fill every silence. It leaves time and space to wait on God.

This is the art of expectant waiting. We share the sacraments, the liturgy and the music because we expect God to meet us in these things as Jesus promised. We look for signs and

glimpses of God, we seek out the connections and meanings in the ordinary things that point to the extraordinary.

Spirituality is defined as the practice of the presence of God. It focuses us not on religious abstractions but earthed in the physical things of the world and the people around us; local, up close and personal, here and now, as a window on God everywhere and forever.

Evelyn Underhill said Anglican spirituality doesn't let us "slink away from the actual to enjoy the eternal".

It is something so all encompassing that it needs to take on distinctive shapes and forms to be able to grab hold of it, express it and pass it on. The Anglican form is as different as night and day from the Presbyterian or the Assembly of God form. Not better or worse, just different. Piety is another (deeply unfashionable) word for the shape it takes; the way we express our faith and devotion, our respect and allegiance to our history.

To grow a new piety takes generations. The ecumenical movement in the 20th century started to do that but was cut short by the overwhelming self-preservation of the old denominational brands. Only a handful of uniting churches around the world managed to survive long enough to develop a new piety.

Most of us went back to being Baptists or Anglicans again.

The Church of England's Doctrine Commission made a brave attempt to define Anglican piety. It's very English, a tad self congratulatory, we'd need to rewrite it for Aotearoa use, but it's not a bad attempt to describe something as elusive as fog:

"The Anglican Church has a genius, not so much for compromise, as it is generally said – but for forbearance, for sensing when it is God's will that we all agree to differ. The cement that binds our church together is not a supreme

ecclesiastical authority, nor an established confession of faith, nor an unshakeable reverence for the decisions of certain councils. It is something difficult to define – a state of mind and an attitude to our religion instilled into us by history. Compromise, tolerance and agreement to differ all play their part in it – and a respect for the individual conscience, a love of freedom, a distrust of authority, a sense of humour, a reluctance to be piously demonstrative, a love of understatement, a hesitation to take ourselves too seriously on the stage of the world, a reticence, a scepticism, a reverence for mystery.”

Aotearoa Anglicans have absorbed all of that and given it a distinctive tweak as they’ve grounded that heritage in our three tikanga setting and our natural environment. We sing the Benedicite Aotearoa, we look to find God in the “mountains, the coast and the sea” as our Prayer Book says; we make decisions in our church councils that have to work for Maori and Pasifika as well as Pakeha, and even though we dress our priests and bishops up in robes and coloured stoles, we don’t take them too seriously, and hardly ever call them Father or My Lord anymore.

Buildings

Taking the church building seriously and taking good care of it is part of that Anglican piety. The brass cleaning and polishing, the dusting and roof repairing is a powerful way of expressing faith, as is the flower arranging and the baking for morning tea.

The building didn’t get here by accident. The shape of its windows, the layout of nave and sanctuary, the furnishings of altar and font, lectern, the candles, bell and steeple are all forged from two thousand years of devotion. At St Leonard’s,

Matakana, where I worship, a 107 year old building goes right back to the beginning of Christianity in Aotearoa. The fund raising to build this church had begun back in 1863 when Bishop Selwyn saw the need as he passed this way, as Henry Williams and Samuel Marsden had before him. The cost of building it in 1914, out of the finest totara logs, costing 221 pounds, has proved to be a good investment for us all.

God doesn't need a house to meet us, but we do, to meet God, in and out of season.

The gathering prayer we often use reminds us that what is special about this place called Matakana and the story it holds, is embodied in this building.

Just as every building embodies a local story. In the Christchurch Cathedral, before it was shaken down, we prayed this prayer:

*God of every place
You meet us now within this place
Inside the shelter of these stones
And the hull of wood above.
Matai from Barry's Bay, stone from the Port Hills,
The rock and timber of Canterbury was formed by your
hand
And crafted by our forebears to form this cathedral
church.*

When things are not going well and the time is out of kilter, a church building is a place to restore equilibrium, where body and soul can be rebalanced again for a while, and our past can catch up with our present.

Traditionally churches have been places of sanctuary for all who pass by, even for those in trouble with the law, refugees, desperate fugitives. In medieval times the king wouldn't dare

to pull them out of a church under a bishop's protection. That's no longer so.

When I drive past the mangrove swamps just past the Puhoi turnoff, I always think of the young Maori criminal from Opotiki whose car chase ended there a year or so ago, where he was shot dead while confronting the police.

And I wonder how that story would have ended if he'd made it to Matakana that day and sought refuge in this place?

I don't know, but I do know St Leonard's is no ordinary building.

Corporate

And I do know our church building houses no ordinary community.

Anglicans are a corporate people. Corporate with a small C, not as in Coca Cola.

If you want to go looking for God, for the first time or rediscovering God ever more deeply, then it's good to work at it together.

And wait on God together. Because we're all at different places in our search for the holy. Some of us feel as though we've arrived. Some of us feel as though we're forever wandering in a wilderness. Life for some of us is rolling along. For others it lurches from crisis to crisis. Sometimes we need to carry each other along for a while and let others do the singing and praying on our behalf. Like the birds that fly in formation, spelling each other to take the brunt of the head winds. Like the swimmer who floats on her back and lets the current carry her along.

This search for God is best not attempted alone. We work at it together. Tell our stories to each other. We need to belong to believe. So we can wait on God together, supporting each other through the mean times and enjoying the good times. And by together I mean not only those of us who gather here regularly but also those who only come very occasionally, like the people who turned up on Christmas Eve, who we'd never seen before.

As a congregation we are a unique assembly of friends and strangers whose only connection is a faith we share or are searching to find. That's a connection that is hard to explain. I met a parishioner in the New World supermarket a while ago and she introduced me to her husband who is not a churchgoer. "This is John," she said. "He goes to church." The husband looked at me, a little quizzically, and smiled. I was a little lost for words and feeling the need to reassure him that I wasn't so strange, replied, "I do other things as well."

The connection eludes easy words but it is powerful and it can make all the difference in the world. It binds us together in love as the song says, with chords that cannot be broken. Not only with each other but with all who have gone before us in this place.

Richard Hooker was a 16th century Anglican bishop who expressed this interconnectedness beautifully: "God hath created nothing simply for itself: but each thing in all things, and of everything each part in each other have such intent, that in the whole world nothing can be found where unto anything created can say, 'I need thee not'".

The heritage of faith we share surrounds us on every side, including some, excluding others where that heritage has been broken or forgotten.

One reason why we have failed to include Maori in our local Anglican congregation is because in 1928 our bishops in their wisdom excommunicated all Maori followers of the prophet Ratana. And Maori in this region are strong disciples of Ratana to this day.

Our heritage needs constant healing.

I come to church because I get as close as I can to talking to God and, having begun the conversation, much more importantly, letting God talk to me in the silence, in the company of others, and in the language of sacrament which speaks through holy things: words, melodies, rituals, bread, wine and asparagus rolls that point me to Jesus.

There's a new survey about NZ's religious habits and attitudes. Churchgoing is way down, respect for church authority is even lower, but interest in Jesus is way up. Half the population see him as a figure of authenticity worth respecting.

The challenge for each local church is how to make this place more welcoming, more accessible, more comprehensible for people who are curious about Jesus, but baffled by churchgoing if they are interested at all.

Imagine if instead of having church every Sunday designed for people like me who speak the lingo and the tunes and know not only when to come but where to sit and what to hope for at the morning tea. Imagine if once in a while we had a service for people who don't come to church, who were brought along as friends on the strength of our invitation and in our trust that nothing weird would happen. And who were able to hear something of the Jesus story, to experience through music and silence in a beautiful building, the presence of something lovely, even something divine. And then of course to have a cup of tea and meet some new people.

We hold a treasure in the churchgoing that we enjoy. But it's a treasure that we protect by holding it in a chest. We're sitting on the lid. And we need to get off.

Club????

Church for Anglicans is not like belonging to a club; not Rotary or Lions with Jesus added for good measure. There are no conditions for joining, no minimum attendance records, no joining fees, no platinum or gold memberships. A Victorian era habit in some wealthy communities tried a reserved pew system but happily it didn't last.

Some denominations take membership very seriously and separate members from mere adherents with requirements to sign up to confessions of faith and doctrinal allegiance. Anglicans don't. It's because of that tradition of being a church for all the people regardless of how much or little they believe; a comprehensive church that includes all shades of grey as well as black and white.

Anglicanism is the easiest church to belong to and the easiest to leave. Belonging, however loosely, always comes before believing. It's a church with some clear and hard convictions about a trinitarian God at its centre but around the edges it's soft, even mushy.

The focus of this tradition is outward facing. Archbishop William Temple once said Anglicanism is the only church that exists for the sake of those who don't belong to it. The interests of those who attend are always secondary to serving those who don't. There are of course other churches that do as much social service as Anglicans but none are as unfussed about brand boundaries and loyalties.

And when Anglicans do try to enforce rules about who's in and who's out, they usually make a mess of it. Witness the first Lambeth Conference that tried to call Bishop Colenso to task and inspired a comic opera instead. And the New Zealand Anglican bishops first effort at ex-communication. Aimed at the prophet T.W.Ratana, for preaching a theology too fond of angels, it alienated many Maori for generations.

More recently, the attempts by successive synods to ban, then partially recognise the ministry of gay people, with insulting caveats, continues to be a source of public embarrassment for a church in a country where homosexual law was reformed nearly 40 years ago.

There are rules (they are called canons but they are designed to guide rather than shoot people) to ensure decisions are made in orderly and consistent ways. You need to be listed on a parish roll to vote at AGMs and stand for vestry. You need a police check to work with children, to attend training courses to be in licenced ministry. You need to accept the authority of the three tikanga General Synod/Te Hinota Whanui. There are rules but they don't determine who is in and out of the community that gathers for worship.

And it's that freedom that allows each Anglican congregation to embrace and welcome the most amazing mix of people; like and unlike-minded, the very fit and the very fragile, the very blessed and the broken hearted, the success stories and those who've lived fractured lives, some heroes and some cowardly custards. Yet they are all able to gather and meet without judgement, or rank or privilege (though it does bother me why some always sit on the right side instead of the left side of the church). And they come Sunday by Sunday with empty hands, knowing they will be filled, and uncertain lives, knowing they will be healed and restored by the gift of life richer than anything we can imagine or desire.

