

FITZROY NORTH COMMUNITY CHURCH

OUR SHAPING STORIES

It can be hard to come to grips with what our church is about. Perhaps the best way to understand us is simply to hang around and listen to the stories of those who have been at Fitzroy North Community Church for a while. However, to help things along we've created this document to help try and make sense of who we are as a community and why we're about the things we're about. We're a church and we share what is common to the majority of Christian communities, Christ at the centre, a commitment to remembering together who we are as followers of Jesus, community, communal worship and formational practices.

But by nature every community is shaped by its context and therefore unique. Traditionally, churches have vision and mission statements. We have opted to recognise particular stories and themes that have captured our imagination and influence our culture and practices. Although these are often hard to describe briefly we've given it a go.

There are fancy theological terms behind a lot of these ideas but we've tried to use everyday language where possible. They do not attempt to outline everything we think or practice, just some of the shaping stories and ideas that have made us who we are. They aren't set in stone, and will continue to change and grow as we do. If any of them need further explaining just ask us sometime...

Hope infused realism

If you close one eye, squint with the other, and hold your finger very carefully to cover selected passages it's possible to read the Bible and conclude that being a Christian makes all your problems go away and everything gets better all the time. Unfortunately, this pose is difficult to hold for long periods of time and can be disturbingly interrupted by tragic events, painful experiences and accidentally peeping at the previously covered scriptures. When this kind of Christian triumphalist bubble bursts, people often feel the pendulum swing rapidly the other way, and find themselves sliding into despair. When the world begins to feel irredeemably pain filled and hopeless old clichés do little to counter the despair. We feel that both extremes miss something vital. Healthy faith should never be used to avoid difficulty or pain; instead Scripture points us towards pain having the potential to transform faith, and faith pain. We want to face the darkness and hurt of our world with open eyes, and enter into it when necessary. But we want to be open to grace, redemption and resurrection life in the midst of the mess, believing that God is mysteriously and surprisingly present in the world, especially where we least expect it.

Our ethical challenge

The early church summed up a pretty radical decision with these words in Acts 15, "...It seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit..." In response to the unfolding circumstances and the movement of the Holy Spirit they discerned that the Gentiles could become believers without

being circumcised. This wasn't in the textbook, so they had to make a decision based on the circumstance they found themselves in. With an ear to the Spirit, an eye to the unfolding story of Scripture and the wisdom of both those chosen to lead and the wisdom of the community they were forced to make an ethical improvisation... to try and work out what God would have them do with this new question.

While it would be far easier to approach Scripture as a textbook filled with clear answers we don't have that luxury, Scripture simply doesn't bend that way. This is not to say that the Bible doesn't give answers, simply that they don't all lie unfiltered on the surface. Scripture tells us the story of God's activity in the world, it shows us people of faith that have gone before us and their response to what God was doing in their midst. But even within Scripture there is ethical movement and debate, for example the role of sacrifice, the place of women and racial intermarriage.

While God's love for humanity is steadfast each generation, each must discern what it looks like to follow God in their context. We acknowledge the need to engage Scripture while carefully studying the pattern of those who have gone before us, understanding our context and listening for the guiding nudges of the Holy Spirit.

For those of you with an academic bent, this is known as redemptive-movement hermeneutics. This is an interpretive approach that views ethics within the biblical text as a trajectory, moving progressively through biblical history and beyond the canon of Scripture toward an ultimate redemptive ideal, embodied in the person of Jesus Christ who is our ultimate source of meaning and the fundamental ethic by which we interpret Scripture.

The role of doubt in the life of faith

Many of us who gather at FNCC find ourselves wrestling with Christian belief. We question, doubt and experience anxiety over traditional evangelical responses and interpretations concerning the biblical themes of violence, genocide, conquest, sexuality, the treatment of women, judgment... the list goes on. Many of these things prove also to be considerable obstacles to the ongoing faith development of Christians who have grown up in an era of postmodernism. When you throw in experiences of feeling abandoned by God and the presence of immense suffering in the world a simple, unquestioned relationship with God is not an option for many of our community. We're ok with this, faith and authenticity should go hand in hand. Christianity requires faith. Sadly, faith has at times been confused with dogmatic certainty to a concrete set of beliefs rather than a relationship of trust. Faith is not the same thing as certainty, it is perhaps a little more like "robust confidence". Learning what to hold on to and what to let go of is a process of testing and trusting. Life asks questions of our faith, of our relationship with God, of our most sacredly held beliefs. Excuse the flimsy metaphor but we are inclined to see mature and robust beliefs to be like soccer balls, they've been kicked around a bit and are able to hold their shape. Beliefs that must be treated like Ming vases in case they shatter, or violently explode like landmines when interfered with prove themselves to be immature and poorly formed. We acknowledge that both particular beliefs and our trust in God itself will be tested throughout our lives. Our quest for an authentic faith will ask us to ask questions of that faith, and we feel like God is big enough to handle this. We hope and pray that in this process what is most real, most true and most beautiful will endure.

Embracing a diversity of opinion

Every week we eat communion together, whether in the form of a full meal or small symbols of bread and wine. This reminds us that at the centre of our community is Jesus. We gather around the person of Christ, what he has done for us, and who He has called us to be together. While growing together brings a sense of commonality to our community we acknowledge that it is Jesus, not homogenised beliefs and lifestyles that sit at our centre. Our goal is loving unity not enforced homogenisation. We affirm the Creeds, acknowledge the revelation of Scripture and are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit but our list of “essentials” is kept deliberately small. We don’t expect everyone to agree on everything, including within our leadership team. This should not imply that beliefs don’t matter, just that they are held with grace and humility.

Dialogue as a statement of a communal theology

When we gather as the church, where possible we talk as a community. Most of the time this is great, sometimes it’s not but either way it makes a statement about how we view our community. We believe that everyone has something to add. Our ministry/leadership team take our role as teachers seriously but teaching is very different than being a guru. We don’t have all the answers, we’re not always right, and we only provide a limited perspective. There is wealth in the breadth of our community and learning how to follow Jesus in our everyday life is a richer experience together.

The Kingdom of God

Jesus’ central message was the good news that the Kingdom of God was at hand, among us, breaking in! Israel had been waiting for Messiah to come and put the world right. While this was what Israel was waiting for it wasn’t quite in the package they’d expected. Quoting Isaiah Jesus announced good news for the poor, the marginalised, those on the underside of justice. His announcement of this upside- down Kingdom calls us to first acknowledge that we are recipients of grace and respond by recognising the value and ‘belovedness’ of all people. This calls us away from lifestyles that climb over others for personal gain and towards lives that share in the self-giving love of the Trinity. We believe that the Kingdom is now but not yet, breaking in but not fully here. This makes Christianity a subversive alternative to the power structures of the world. Ultimately, our allegiance is not to a particular political theory, country or people group but to Christ the King, (whose practice is so different from human monarchies that we should keep asking questions of what exactly we mean by kingdom!) This means issues of justice, peace and embrace of the outsider will always be at the forefront of our imagination and practice. We are a community of hope with an eye to the third way between violence and indifference.

Gathered and scattered

First and foremost we are a community of people attempting to follow Jesus in our everyday lives. As we journey together we try and keep in mind that we are the church when we are gathered and when we are scattered. God is at work in and through us when we are together, and God is at work in and through us when we are going about our ordinary lives. Churchy things and churchy jobs are not more or less important than activities or jobs outside our gatherings, they just serve a different function. Our gatherings intend to nourish, equip, facilitate community and communal worship, and remind us who we are as followers of Christ. Our goal is not to get people busier doing church things but equip and

release people to participate in Kingdom things. Learning to live within our means will be a constant balancing act. In a community of our size sometimes organisation and structure is necessary and important but hopefully it will add to the depth and beauty of our relationships rather than replace them. Time and energy will be given to our gatherings to make them places of nourishment, but our aim will be to keep things simple where possible to allow our whole community to carry the load together without diminishing our ability to do what we feel called to do in the everyday.

Giving space on the margins

For the last few years the story of our community has involved a large number of people experiencing FNCC as a place of refuge, reconstruction and re-entry to (or gracious exit from) the Christian faith. While at our core we are a community that shares the load together we acknowledge the need for plenty of room on the margins for those who just need a safe space to re-engage while hiding under tables and resisting the urge to throw a shoe.

Taking responsibility for our experience

Some of us have been staff, burned out trying to be magic people who meet every need. Others of us have been congregants, burned out trying to fulfill the unreasonable vision of one person. Because our culture trains us to view institutions this way, it is easy to mistake church for a machine that will meet our needs with as little input from us as possible, powered by magic elves who mysteriously buzz around unseen making things happen. While this is the default lens through which we view goods and service providers it gets pretty unhealthy when applied to Christian community. All in all we have to work out together how to do what we can do and what we can't, to wisely discern what is worth giving energy to and when to say no. Wherever possible we will look to meet a need through the grassroots initiative of our community, when it is deemed necessary and effective we'll respond with organised structure. We try and take responsibility for life together. A band makes singing nice but unless we all sing there is no singing. Teaching is good but unless we invest in learning together information is not enough. Real community is wonderful but between us we have to work out how to connect and learn when we're at relational capacity. We refuse to dehumanise our community, treating each other as limitless resources rather than finite people.

The unbusy pastor

Sorry to bang on about us so much but it might help to know how we see our role as Pastors (or whatever we're called). Eugene Peterson has deeply impacted how we approach our work, especially his description of the "Unbusy Pastor", one who is set apart to listen, to learn, to pray, to reflect. "Be our pastor, a minister of Word and sacrament in the middle of this world's life. Minister with Word and sacrament in all the different parts and stages of our lives — in our work and play, with our children and our parents, at birth and death, in our celebrations and sorrows, on those days when morning breaks over us in a wash of sunshine, and those other days that are all drizzle. This isn't the only task in the life of faith, but it is your task. We will find someone else to do the other important and essential tasks. This is yours: Word and sacrament." We see our role as listeners, sitting with multiple voices: our people's stories, our experience, the Christian tradition, Scripture, the leading of the Holy Spirit, the culture we live in. In this way we are conduits, people who attempt to see where God is at work in the everyday lives of our

faith community and the neighbourhood we live in. We are voices that help our congregation remember together what it is to be the people of God in amongst the busyness of their everyday. This means prayer, listening, reading and reflecting will take priority for as long as we serve. On the flip-side, to avoid the warping of perspective that can take place by being immersed in the church bubble where possible our Pastors also work part time outside of the church.

Part of an ongoing history

Our church was founded in 1873, and in that time has tried to contribute to our local community. The church began with a small group of Christians who gathered to live out the message of Jesus and practically serve the people of Fitzroy North. Within a short space of time, the church grew rapidly and became a thriving congregation.

Our current building was initially the church's Sunday School and Youth Hall that was built by a working class congregation as a gift to serve the community. It housed a range of spiritual, social and sporting programs and activities for the hundreds of children and young people who flocked to the centre each week. As custodians of this building, the practice of opening the space to our neighbourhood is a legacy that we feel a great responsibility to continue.

Times change and so did the church. The focus shifted in the 1970s toward the needs of the poor and marginalized who lived in nearby social housing. The church became an important provider of accommodation, meals, employment training and welfare assistance. Since then the community has undergone a number of changes and renditions, but has tried to remain faithful to the intentions of those who founded it. The reoccurring themes of the church have been practical spirituality, engagement with culture and a presence in the neighbourhood.