

*John Docherty, 2020-06-21*  
**What has helped get you through?**

Although the theme for today's service is “What's new, and what is getting you through?”, and it's intended to be focused on how we're managing during this pandemic, I've decided to broaden out my meditation a bit and look at some of what I've learned, and what has gotten me through the last seven and a half years in a pastoral role here at MFM.

That's not to suggest I've experienced the last seven and a half years as something similar to what we've been through over the last few months – it's just that I figured this might be my last chance to properly address a majority of MFMs before people start trying to escape to the country while they can, and before my looming retirement catches up with all of us in about a month from now.

So I'd like this short meditation to be a bit of a retrospective on this role, and an attempt at summarizing what I hope I've managed to do over these years.

In my first meditation, in January 2013, just after I'd been asked to consider taking on a pastoral role alongside Gary and Lydia, I focused on the diversity of MFM and some of the potential challenges I anticipated in trying to respond to such a varied gang of people.

I opened that meditation by greeting you in 25 languages – 25 mother tongues of the people who had attended MFM during the time that Mary Lou and I had been members. I didn't admit it at the time, but I cheated a little bit by including a greeting in Scottish Gaelic : “Hallo. Ciamar a tha sibh”. This is not actually my mother tongue. The first language I spoke at home is actually a lowland scots dialect from Glasgow : Glaswegian. But, ciamar a tha sibh sounded a bit more exotic to my own ears than “hallo, how're ye daein? Ye a' right?”

The point of that exercise, and that meditation, was to try and underline the idea that any community of faith should be enriched by the life experiences and world-views of a diverse body of members who each contribute something unique to the whole, even if there's a daunting learning curve in being able to hear and understand each other.

But one thing that's helped get me through these last years is the sense that MFMs are ready and able to make the effort to ensure that all voices are heard and appreciated. It doesn't mean that everything has been smooth sailing – we *have* lost members along the way, though we've also gained members – but it *does* indicate to me that the MFM boat is sea-worthy enough to weather the occasional storm, in part because I think we're also learning to trust each other to have the best interests of our community at heart.

Another thing that's helped get me, and MFM, through the last few years, is our wonderful team of elders. I'm only too aware of my own limitations to think that I could be as present for everyone as some might want. I have my own strengths, weaknesses and blind spots, and I think the elders have done an amazing job of keeping in touch with the pulse of the congregation, its various needs and struggles, and by being proactive in anticipating and promoting the well-being of the congregation. Thanks to Pam, Patricia, Rebecca and Martha Lucia for all the time, energy and prayerful concern they've demonstrated.

I've also been immensely grateful to the kids and others who've been good sports in letting me put them through their paces with the various skits I've concocted over the last couple of years. With virtually no rehearsal and very little direction, the kids unfailingly stepped up to the plate and batted those skits home like the pros they are. I hope the skits that have drawn directly on some of the Bible passages have helped breathe some life into words we've all heard over and over again. And I hope the skits or photo animations have given the kids a chance to shine in ways they might not otherwise. If I hadn't been laid up in pain and nausea for the last few weeks I would have loved to have tried to pull something together again for today's service.

It's been a ball, from my perspective, and I'm grateful that I've been able to get away with some of this stuff during worship here at MFM. Mind you, I suspect Dave's embodiment of King Herod wouldn't fly in some contexts ...

So to all those who've taken part in some of this theatre at some point over the last couple of years : Dave, Hanna, Kim, Nicole, Milo, Portia, Noa, Kai, Thomas, Elfrieda, Georgiana, Sasha and Dora Marie, Oscarcito, Oscar and Lili, Fred, Cynthia – to all of you a huge thank you. Of all the things I'll miss about being pastor of MFM, I think I'll miss the skit productions most of all. If I have any regrets, I think it might be that we didn't get most of them recorded.

I've repeated many times that most of the time, the subtext to most of my meditations has been that it matters how we treat each other. I think this is the essence of Jesus' response to the question of which is the most important Law in the Torah : “Love God with everything you have, and love your neighbour as much as you love yourself”.

But another subtext, from time to time, has been the nature of what I believe it means to be born again, and this is where I think the work with the kids has some impact on our own lives as Christians.

I remember very clearly the day I decided, as an adult, to commit myself to trying to follow Jesus. It wasn't a decision to embrace a particular theology. It was rather a decision to better understand who Jesus was and what he taught, and to reclaim and re-embrace a set of values I had learned as a child in the catholic church, though I hadn't

really learned much of the biblical underpinnings of those values.

You've heard me say that Christmas, for me, is a time to embrace anew the promise inherent in this infant in the manger. The promise that peace on earth is possible. The promise that it really is within our capacity to have good will towards all. The promise that if we are able to recognize, and value, and aspire to the innocence of a child, with all of the risks and vulnerability that that implies, that we really do have some hope of finding our way to heaven."

I don't think that aspiring to have the innocence of a child is a Pollyanna-ish approach to life – a bubbly, optimistic outlook that is blind to reality and that always finds a silver lining in every situation. I doubt that many people would accuse me of being bubbly anything, much less bubbly optimistic. I'm temperamentally more inclined to recognize obstacles than opportunities.

But recognizing obstacles doesn't equate to a dour pessimism or a passive fatalism. I'm quite capable, I think, of trying to find my way over, around, or through obstacles. Even obstacles to living with the innocence of a child.

That decision to follow Jesus was one step in my aspiring to the innocence of a child. It was my way of re-entering a world where ideals were within reach; where mystery was still alive; where life had a purpose and a guide.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I had another 'epiphany' moment some years later when I was caught up in a church crisis (not here at MFM), where these biblically well-read followers of Jesus used their familiarity with scripture to attack one another and to push hard for particular actions that were, in my mind, inconsistent with my understanding of Jesus' teachings.

I was devastated. All of my child-like 'illusions' of what the church was, or could be, were shattered, and I came very close to losing my faith and walking away from what now appeared to be a failed experiment. My eyes were opened to an ugliness that I couldn't, or wouldn't, see before.

I think part of the problem in that particular situation was that the people involved were from very different backgrounds, and had come to faith in very different ways, acquiring very different understandings of what it meant to be faithful. There was also a rigidity that didn't allow the conflict to play out in a healthy way.

It took me a long time to come to terms with the 'failure' of Christianity that I saw in that conflict. My eventual 'epiphany' in this regard was a realization that what I had witnessed wasn't a failure of Christianity. It wasn't even, *per se*, a failure of evangelical Christianity. It was the failure of a group of followers of Christ to choose to act in love,

and with some compassion, *precisely* when they were convinced that they were right and that the others were wrong.

And that realization that the problem wasn't with Jesus' message, but rather with our occasional inability to live up to the challenge of that message, has meant that I have been able to remain a Christian, such as I am, in the face of any number of failures on my part, and on the part of people around me.

Because I *do* believe that we are capable of living up to that message, even if it means that every choice, every decision, every act is fraught with the danger of failing.

Because, alongside the occasional failures that I've been witness to, or that I've been responsible for, there have also been the occasional inspiring examples of love and compassion in action. That has certainly been the case here at MFM.

We *do* sometimes live up to our calling.

And we do have a diverse group of people here at MFM who are all trying, in their way, to lead faithful lives.

Yes, we are a supremely imperfect group.

Yes, our personalities can sometimes get in the way.

Yes, we have our share of obstacles to living in harmony.

But alongside the difficult personal issues, there is, I think, a desire to find our way through.

Alongside the occasional stiffness of our structures, and our committees, and our processes, there is a willingness to make something good of all this effort and energy.

Alongside the struggles and the disappointments, there is Faspas, and our arts nights, and our Easter brunch, and our Sunday School picnic, and our corn roast, and our retreat. All times when we simply enjoy being together.

Alongside the manure and noise and smells of a stable at Christmas, there is also the warmth and comfort of a place of security, where a child is about to be born.

*A place of security, like MFM, where a child can be born in each of us.*