

E kore te wai, e kore te tangata.  
Whakataukī

Water is powerful in the web of life: humanity does not own it.  
Professor Fernando Enns, Director of Peace Church Theology, University of Hamburg

If there is no water, human beings, indeed all all, cannot exist. Water can be dangerous, a danger always in awareness for families living near Canterbury water races and epitomised internationally in the tragic image of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year old Syrian boy drowned in 2015 en route from Turkey to Greece. Water is not something we humans can manufacture or control, but rather it is received by us from our environs. It is a gift from God, spiritual matter of dependency and inter-relationship with creator and creation. What is more, clean water is surely worth more than diamonds and rubies or all the gold in the world. It is indeed a taonga.

With this talk of water, what issues come to mind for you?

In the forefront will be the managing of water resources for the long term. In Canterbury and the Hawkes Bay there is concern and contention over water supply, for rural and urban use, for livelihood and recreation, for now and for the future. Waterways and aquifers impact life in whole regions and more. The Waikato and Waitaki Rivers move through several geophysical and local body districts and are of benefit to human habitation in a large variety of ways. It is a no brainer that what happens upstream impacts downstream. Internationally this need for perspective and management crosses even national boundaries. Fraught enough crossing State boundaries within one country, as is the case with the Murray River in Australia, think of the situation with the Nile, the Danube, the Amazon, and all of Pakistan's rivers which first flow through India. Water resources are unevenly spread across the world's inhabited areas, and the potential for dispute over water is expected to become even greater than it has been over oil.

One of our questions has been: should we develop more irrigation, and bigger irrigation schemes? When it is groundwater that is being drawn on, as in Canterbury, could the supply eventually be exhausted? When it involves building dams, can we be sure water courses will be maintained and dams will not collapse? With lower river flow or reduced supply in aquifers, is irrigation a public health risk? Is there a clear voice from science on these matters?

But what about the voices of those on the ground who have deeper knowledge, the people of the land, particularly local iwi hāpū, also long term Pākehā locals. A lot more conversation would certainly help.

And does irrigation solve key problems facing farming? Many involved in commodity production on the land have taken up irrigation in recent years to try to drought proof their farming business, at the same taking on a large debt bill. The theory is higher outputs from higher inputs. Currently lower commodity prices are making it very difficult to meet the costs involved and in fact drought is only one of five weather related factors that affect farming. Too much rain can be a problem, causing a wet harvest or flooding. And think of the damage to crops and young pasture from wind, frost, and hail.

Also the weather is only one of three uncontrollables in farming – an unholy trinity of weather, markets (commodity prices), and government (regulation and monetary policy).

What can we afford to do? Sensibly, considering the wider perspective? What can we afford not to do? Are we able, as local and regional communities, to agree on the fair use and distribution of water? Is it reasonable to allow water to be sold from pristine water sources at the same time as increased restrictions on put on land use for productive purposes?

For clean water is a crucial issue too. Many rivers we swam in as youngsters have “No Swimming” signs now. Whether they were actually enough back then, we know that now they are not. The Commissioner for the Environment<sup>1</sup> has highlighted from the science three major factors – pathogens, sedimentation, and nutrients, being the impact of human sewerage systems, forestry clearing, and increased use of fertilisers. Many creeks around the country were once the main food source for local families. Listening to Te Paparahi o te Raki (Northland)'s regional inquiry hearings before the Waitangi Tribunal, it has been salutary to learn about life in this region around the time I was growing up in rural Southland. The means of livelihood was still abundant, from the land (before opossums took over) and, even more significantly, from the streams, lakes, and the sea.

What a waste! And now so much effort is being spent trying to get a healthy life for people whose predecessors were able to live well with what was provided by land and waterways.

I take heart from the combined efforts of iwi hapu and local government which are slowly but surely having positive effects on the Waikato River and on the Rotorua Lakes. Things can be done, and the key to it is co-operation. First of all, build relationships with those for whom the waterways are common ground: those with an interest, a sense of responsibility, a need for the supply of water to be healthy and sustainable. Whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) is important for us all, whatever our cultural background. For those of us who follow the way of Christ, it is the foundation. What develops is respect and an ability to affirm the different views of others, realising that it is a complex and interconnected task to move from unhealthy to healthy, from dead water to living water.

Yes, the language of this most practical of topics is spiritual language. The issue itself is spiritual. The Spirit of God, the life-giver, is always involved when previously distrusting people with divergent views start acting together with the common purpose of well-being. The Spirit of God, the giver of all good things, including water, will be involved in any and all efforts to sustain our life as humans and the life of Aotearoa and Te Wai Pounamu for much more than just this generation.

Anō he awa e rere iho nei  
Anō he awa maringi iho nei  
Haere mai tātou ki tēnei awa nui  
Anō he awa e rere iho nei<sup>2</sup>

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1 “Water quality in New Zealand: Understanding the Science”, Report of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment Te Kaitiaki Taiao a Te Whare Pāremata, March 2012, accessed April 2016 from <http://www.pce.parliament.nz/media/1278/pce-water-quality-in-new-zealand.pdf>

2 Te Reo Maori version of the David Sapp song “There is a river”.