

I've just finished our UCANZ Forum and "Big ideas for smaller churches" conference in Lower Hutt. I'm exhausted. But it is a satisfied exhaustion – a bit like the weekend before when I spent all day Saturday getting the spring garden sorted. I imagine it is a bit the same for rugby players – but it's the winners that have the satisfied exhaustion and the losers who have a frustrated exhaustion.

Our four days together was a wonderful time of resourcing, fellowship and networking. There were great speakers, workshops and conversations – more details on the event at a later time. But it got me to wondering why there weren't more people there. I received a few emails from people who wanted to be there but had other commitments on the day. I can totally understand that.

I also had comments from a number of churches saying that they couldn't afford the time or the cost of sending people. I'm not so sure that I can understand that. As churches become smaller it is even more important that they develop strong networks of support and retrenching both expenditure and networks is not a positive step. A smaller church needs that outside connection to support and provoke new ideas of being church.

A number of ministers have commented that when times are busier there is an even greater need to take time out in prayer. Research has shown that an antidote to ministry burnout is collegial support – but ironically most burning-out ministers opt out of attendance at church meetings and gatherings.

Smaller churches that find they have no money or energy to connect with the wider church often find themselves more isolated and struggling hard to build enthusiasm and generate new ideas. While saving time and money by not having people go to regional or national events seems a good idea, it is generally false economy. The value of networking, inspiration and growth is nearly always higher than the costs of attending.

But there also needs to be an affirmation in the local church. Too often churches might go to the expense of sending someone off to a meeting or conference – but then fail to use their experience to generate ideas for the church. People are sent off to national or regional events and are given little space or time to report back, and even less time to work through the innovative ideas with others in the local church – especially the leadership.

So two pleas. Firstly – always rate the value of sending members of your church to resourcing events or national meetings far higher than just the cost of travel, accommodation and registration. Secondly – if you are spending the money, get even more value by sharing in any inspiration as soon as possible and allowing those who attended to 'infect' others with their enthusiasm.

I'm going out to water my garden – if I get too busy to do that, all my good work gets undone. As a church – keep learning and networking, it is deeply satisfying.

Peter MacKenzie