Our Anglican Communion has just begun its sacred Lenten journey. In the face of a challenging present and future prospect for our church, the Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting and a commitment to the needs of this world, locate our unified Anglican identity in the dust of repentance. Our reflective gaze is downcast to the dust of this earth.

Our communion with one another is directed towards the reality of this earth, to which our own participation in Christ’s incarnation is called. Our ecclesiological vocation therefore has an implicit necessity for conversation, connection and transformation within our varied geographic and cultural contexts. Our theologies, our understanding and articulation of God, will always necessarily be formed in conversation, in communion, with the cultural and socio-economic and environmental realities and experiences within which the church is located. These theologies will therefore express a particular outworking of public theology.

As our Lenten journey invites us to remember, we are dust; we are connected to this earth and our Divine calling is an incarnational witness of God’s presence amongst the dust of this earth, which is both our home and the home of many. Our witness is to an incarnation that holds within it the resurrection promise of God’s re-creating companionship intended for all that are dusty.

Public theology is often referred to as the theology which takes place in the public square. Reflective of the North American and European contexts from which academic public theology has principally spoken, this is a theology of public engagement characterised by rational discourse and the political economic lens which dominates the construction of such a public and such a square. The Anglican Communion, however, as a world-wide communion, is not shaped by a singularly imagined public square. Instead the Communion’s day by day reality reflects myriad engagements in public and private spaces in which the good news that God-is-with-us and calling us as Disciples of Christ is wrestled for in its communication in word and in deed.

The call by academic public theologians, particularly from South America and Asia for the relocation of public theology into more diverse contexts, is a call which surely resonates within the Anglican Communion. Implicit within such a call is a challenge to recognise people, and places that have been historically excluded from both the politically defined public and the ‘square’, which is the meeting place of public acceptability. Within this challenge is the necessary tension, expressed most keenly in
conversation between Duncan Forrester and Marcella Althaus-Reid and by the growth of feminist public theologies, between the fragmentation of centralist discourse possible as a result of the edges being in conversation with the centre.

This interchange between the centre and the edge is pertinent to the context of our Anglican Communion. As liturgical people we are asked to respond to the invitation to “hear what the Spirit is saying to the church”. In our wider church we can clearly hear a growing emphasis on recognising and addressing global and local experiences of poverty and inequality. Following his pilgrimage around all of our Anglican Communion, our Archbishop of Canterbury recently summarised that the Anglican Church is a church of the poor and for the poor. A similar song currently sings over our Catholic brothers and sister.

As William Sachs expressed in the first Occasional Paper for the Centre for Anglican Communion Studies, in the wake of global Anglican decline, local expressions of renewed engagement in transformational mission and deepening spirituality are generating a new vitality. It is from this combination of engagement that a grass roots, or we might say, dusty, public theologies may well be emerging within our Anglican context. What is it that the uniqueness of our Anglican expression of the Christian faith gives witness to in the communities, earth and contexts where we dwell deeply with God.

These dusty communications between the church and the earth will always necessitate a re-imagining because they will always be directed towards God’s re-creating work in our ever-changing world. Our Lenten journey began with the words, “from dust you have come, to dust you will return: Repent and believe the good news”. This is a calling into incarnational communion with the places and people we belong to, or to which we are asked to belong. If that communion is genuine, it will create transformation and change, because genuine communion requires the giving and receiving of self and other; a communion modelled by Christ.

One example of this re-imagination can be seen in the discipleship and mission movement encapsulated under the banner of 3DM (3 Dimensional Ministries). Growing out of an Anglican parish context in Sheffield, U.K, under the leadership of Mike Breen, 3DM supports a wide ranging network of grass roots missional communities growing from transformational deep discipleship within the local church context of a wide range of denominations. At the core of their discipleship culture is an intentional patterning of reflection based upon the challenge of imitating and innovating a personal and communal response to Jesus’ invitation to repent and believe the good news. In practice this is a commitment to spiritually discern both the challenge and invitation to change ones thinking (taken from the Greek word used by Jesus in Mark 1:15 (metanoia)) which is then evidenced in ones action (walking in belief). A consequence of this dusty communion in local contexts is the evidence of a re-imagined expression of church.

This birthing of networked missional communities, which grow within and alongside our church structures, can also potentially be seen as an expression of the new monastic
emergence characteristic of times of upheaval and rebirth identified by Phyllis Tickle in the long range view of our church history. This currently experienced re-creation is potentially a return, in the European context perhaps, to the Celtic Christian communities of deep connection to each other and deep transformational connection to the land and people of the earth.

To return therefore to the tensions within academic public theology between what we might over simplistically call the centre and the margin (those whose language and reality have shaped the public square and those whose language and reality have been historically excluded), we can perhaps see a parallel creative tension invigorating our Anglican Communion. As western contexts, such as the Church of England, reorientate towards pioneering ministries, a reality of renewed missional communion in a post-Christian cultural context, and as global contextual expressions of Anglicanism gain ever greater vocality, a new public square of communion becomes formed and forced into realisation.

A very tangible expression of this re-formational demand is currently being experienced in my context of the Anglican Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and Polynesia. Following the devastating earthquakes of 2010 and 2011, the city of Christchurch remains in a very real experience of dust and rubble. The Anglican Cathedral which acted as both a physical and symbolic centrepiece in the public square of the city kneels in brokenness and, arguably, unviable repair. Its future has been a source of great public debate. Could this be an opportunity to create a newly born expression of the church in communion with the land and people of Christchurch city, or is the expression of the communion that the public really want the old replaced identically.

Whilst this is a debate of heritage, it is also a debate of what a public can bear a church to communicate. Can the communication of centrality, stability, a God who was and is and is to come, unchanging and eternally expressed in a particular era of theologically articulated architecture, the only sort of God-being-with-us that the good news of the church can embody? And what of the complex bi-cultural history of the church in this particular land that lives with an enduring tension between a missionary church founded in indigenous language and creative expression overtaken by a settler church that brought with it a different sort of dusty alignment which then shaped its cultural expression? In a land where one in four children live in poverty, with increasing income inequality and stark cultural bias in health and incarceration statistics, what kind of church should stand in a public square and what should it communicate? And correspondingly what will a ‘public’ accept or bear, and to which acceptably determined ‘public’ should the church indeed be most concerned to speak?

On Easter Sunday the gathering of our Anglican Church communities burgeon. I imagine our collective gatherings for Ash Wednesday are far more intimate. Can a public accept a suffering church, bereft of the vestiges of privilege, stability and in some cases, power? Could we as a church accept ourselves in that way?
As the tension of communion amongst our world-wide Anglican expression of church continues in contentious issues in the public square of its own synodical councils, there is another renegotiation of communion taking place in the myriad public squares, hidden backstreets, and safe houses all around where the people of our Anglican communion are called to be. This is the sort of dusty public theology that asks what the love of God looks like in this particular place and then has the courage to rebuild the stones of the church out of that dust. The challenge is to simultaneously enliven the mortar of our deep ecclesiological heritage.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand we speak of our human connection to our land and our people through the phrase *turangewaewae*. This literally means a place to stand. It can sometimes also be referred to as the anchoring place of ones heart. The public theologies emerging from and potentially re-shaping our Anglican Communion will stand on many places and amongst many peoples and reflect the communication of a divine love anchored to the dust of this world’s reality.

Such theologies must seek to plant in that dust the flax, palms and reeds which welcome Christ and the resurrection promise of Christ’s kiss of peace.