

Rethinking mission in Australia

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We tend to rethink a project when our current efforts are not working, when the context is changing rapidly or when new possibilities keep presenting themselves and won't go away.¹ Each of these conditions is present for Christian mission in Australia.

Therefore it is not the time simply for urging Christians to work harder at what they are doing. Rather, it is the time to ask again the basic questions about culture, God and mission: What is happening in this culture (or cluster of cultures)? How is God experienced in this context? And how is the Good News of God best shared in this society?

In the dialectical relationship between reflection and action, this is the time when reflection becomes critical, a time when missiology is as important as mission.

The cultural context

When we ask what is happening in the Australian cultural context we should recognise that many Australian cultural trends are actually trends in Western culture, linked through the effects of globalisation.

1 Post-Christendom

The label of 'post-Christendom' is one that applies across the West.² We might think that Australia, settled by Europeans in 1788 and formed as a nation in 1901, was never a candidate for Christendom, the marriage of church and state in a generally-accepted 'Christian society'. But the disintegration of the arrangements of Christendom, at their peak in Europe between the fourth and sixteenth centuries, has been a slow one, and their influence extended across the oceans even to the new colonies.

Following the English model, Australia flirted briefly with an established church in its early colonial days.³ Church attendance was compulsory. The government paid stipends to Anglican clergy; granted land for churches and church schools; paid for churches to be built; and required that births, deaths and marriages be registered through the Church of England.⁴

¹ Here is a sample of books aiming to rethink aspects of mission due to an awareness of the changing context: Eric S Fife and Arthur F Glasser, *Missions in crisis: Rethinking missionary strategy* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962); Ben Campbell Johnson, *Rethinking evangelism: A theological approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); *Rethinking Mission in the 90's*, Awakening '94 Mission Manual (Croyden, NSW: Awakening '94, 1994); Robert E Webber, *Ancient-future faith: Rethinking evangelism for a postmodern world* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2001).

² The label does not apply to Orthodox Christendom or the 'pre-Christendom' of Asia and Africa. On the latter, see Philip Jenkins, *The next Christendom: The coming of global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³ Ross Langmead, 'Not quite established: The gospel and Australian culture', *The Gospel and Our Culture* 14.3&4 (Sep/Dec 2002), 7-10.

⁴ Ross Border, *Church and state in Australia, 1788-1872: A constitutional study of the Church of England in Australia* (London: SPCK, 1962), 16-18, 45, 47.

By 1836 the Church of England was in a position of high privilege.⁵ From that time on other denominations gained a share of government money. Then, partly as result of the churches squabbling so much, their influence on colonial governments declined over the rest of the nineteenth century. The separation of church and state was made official in the Australian Constitution in 1900; the government cannot establish any religion nor prohibit its free exercise.⁶

Australia's 'Christendom' has been largely a mindset (symbolised architecturally by cathedrals), in which churches have assumed that they deserve legitimacy and wide influence. In 1901 ninety-six per cent of Australians identified as Christian, and even today nearly seventy per cent still do.⁷

But the influence of organised Christianity in Australian culture has declined steadily. The shifts to post-Christendom felt elsewhere are felt keenly in Australia as well. Stuart Murray, writing in the United Kingdom, summarises these shifts well, noting the implications for Christian mission in a post-Christendom context. They are transitions from the centre to the margins, from the majority to the minority, from being at home in our culture to being aliens in it, from privilege to plurality, from control to witness, from maintenance to mission, and from institution to movement.⁸

The first evidence of this marginalisation could be found as early as a few months after the arrival of the English in the colony of New South Wales, when, despite compulsory church attendance, as few as ten people attended the Sunday services led by the chaplain, Rev Richard Johnson.⁹ Hostility towards Christianity was obvious in the 1820s as secularist newspaper editors openly ridiculed the clergy, seeing them as gloomy and negative.¹⁰ From then on, the development of distinctively 'Australian' culture, along with its pantheon of Aussie heroes, has tended to ignore Christianity, except for a few practical Christian heroes such as Flynn of the Inland, who pioneered the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

One of the features of post-Christendom is that the Christian story is unknown in general society. Since the rapid social changes of the 1960s, when institutions such as Sunday Schools lost their attraction, two generations have lost touch with the stories of the Bible. Australians are largely ignorant of the gospel. It was reported recently that a retail assistant in a shop selling ecclesiastical goods was asked for a small crucifix. She said in reply, 'Would you like one with or without the little man on it?'

The secularisation of society is another feature of the post-Christendom context.¹¹ Secularisation here refers to the marginalising of the Christian perspective in politics, economics, education, the law, the arts, the media (particularly television) and the intellectual life of the nation. It is part of the trend to pluralism, where the market of ideas is no longer dominated by one worldview and religion becomes less important in a range of areas. The recent Australian Community Survey shows that in Australia, 'compared with most other

⁵ J S Gregory, *Church and state: Changing government policies towards religion in Australia; with particular reference to Victoria since separation* (North Melbourne: Cassell Australia, 1973), 260

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, 'Australian Constitution (1900)', <<http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/general/constitution.htm>>, Accessed 3-9-2002.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Census guide: A comprehensive reference to the 2001 Census*, CD-ROM (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002); Philip Hughes, *Australian Religious Communities*, CD-ROM (Nunawading, Vic.: Christian Research Association, 2004).

⁸ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 20.

⁹ David Millikan, *The sunburnt soul: Christianity in search of an Australian identity* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1981), 69-70.

¹⁰ Roger C Thompson, *Religion in Australia: A history* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 9.

¹¹ Bert Hoedemaker, *Secularization and mission: A theological essay* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 2.

factors, religion does not rate highly among Australians in their self description'.¹² Other factors are more important, such as being Australian, being male or female, the job we hold, our income, our education and our country of origin.

Secularisation, however, does not mean that most people are atheists; the widespread predictions of the 1960s to the 1980s that people would abandon belief in the spiritual dimension or in God have been wide of the mark. This leads to the next cluster of trends in the Australian context, the decline of the churches and their disconnection with the majority of Australians.

2 Spirituality, not religion

The decline in church attendance in Australia is not a simple trend. For a start, there was never a golden era when most people attended, as we saw when considering early colonial days. Church attendance is currently estimated at ten per cent of the population on any Sunday,¹³ or about twenty per cent who go at least once a month, the lowest figures in fifty years of counting.¹⁴ The 2001 Census shows that overall identification with Christian churches, while growing slowly in absolute numbers, continues to decline relative to the population. Several denominations, among them the Anglicans and Uniting Church, experienced an actual decline in numbers, with further losses predicted due to ageing congregations.¹⁵

Charismatic and Pentecostal churches are still growing, according to the Census, though their rate of growth is declining.¹⁶

The great challenge to the church is that while only ten percent are to be found in churches on Sundays sixty-one per cent of Australians believe in God, or seventy-nine per cent if we include those who believe in a 'higher power'.¹⁷

Many younger Australians are very interested in spirituality, but few express it through organised religion.¹⁸ Their beliefs are likely to be a mixture of New Age philosophies and Eastern worldviews. In typical postmodern ways, many reject traditional institutions, and are sceptical of overall religious answers ('meta-narratives'). They tend to emphasise present experience, seek new ways of networking, seek creative and artistic expression for their views, and share ecological concerns. They make fewer long-term commitments. They take technology and media saturation for granted, often emphasise style and show a heightened sense of irony.

3 Other social trends

While the post-Christendom context and the decline in religion are obviously of direct relevance to Christian mission, other wide social trends are equally important if mission is seen in terms of cooperating with God in working towards the transforming Reign of God in

¹² Philip Hughes, 'Trends in religious identification: Details from 2001 Census', *Pointers* 12.3 (Sep 2002), 4.

¹³ Peter Kaldor et al., *Build my church: Trends and possibilities for Australian churches* (Adelaide: Open Book, 1999), 15.

¹⁴ Ruth Powell, 'Why people don't go to church ... and what the churches can do about it', *Pointers* 12.2 (June 2002): 8.

¹⁵ Hughes, 'Trends in religious identification', 1-2.

¹⁶ Hughes, 'Trends in religious identification', 2.

¹⁷ Philip Hughes et al., *Believe it or not: Australian spirituality and the churches in the 90s* (Kew, Vic.: Christian Research Association, 1995), 13.

¹⁸ David Tacey, *The spirituality revolution: The emergence of contemporary spirituality* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2003).

all of life. They are also relevant if the gospel is to be expressed contextually, responding to the shape of the cultural context.

Of the many trends we could mention I will choose five, even then only to note them, as space precludes a full analysis. They are growing inequality, indigenous issues, multiculturalism, tribalism and political conservatism.

There has been a steady growth of *social and economic inequality* in Australia since at least the 1960s. In economic terms there was once a large middle class, with smaller groups that could be labelled the poor and the rich. The middle class has been declining, however, leading towards a nation of 'haves' and 'have nots'.¹⁹ There is an increasing number of glossy lifestyle magazines and newspaper supplements, but they cater for an expensive lifestyle that is open only to the affluent. The path to education, power, wealth, status and influence is increasingly limited to certain suburbs, schools and university colleges. Meanwhile about fifteen per cent of Australians live below the official poverty line and the figure has increased over two decades.²⁰ Church-based welfare agencies report that they are serving record numbers of welfare clients. Our major cities' wealthiest suburbs and poorest suburbs are worlds apart. This social context echoes that of the eighth century Old Testament prophets, who proclaimed loudly that worship is unacceptable where there is gross injustice and a wide gap between rich and poor.

As long as the *relationship between Australia's indigenous and non-indigenous people* remains unresolved, the nation is condemned to a 'search for its soul', to use Norman Habel's words.²¹ The double injustice perpetrated by non-indigenous Australians has been that of invasion and genocide: first to dispossess indigenous people of their land without treaty or compensation and then to almost wipe them out, leaving them as the most disadvantaged group in the nation. The life expectancy of indigenous Australians is twenty years shorter than Australians as a whole, the incidence of diabetes triple the norm and the unemployment rate estimated at over thirty per cent. The trend is the same for nearly every indicator of social health, including high rates of poverty, imprisonment and alcoholism and low rates of home ownership, school completion and tertiary qualifications.²² The majority of Australians (though not the government in power since 1996) senses the appropriateness of both 'practical' and 'symbolic' reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, referring to both addressing social disadvantage and acknowledging the wrongs of the past. Though once complicit in the mistreatment of indigenous people, the Australian churches, for the most part, have come to see the issue as central to Christian mission and have been leaders in the public debate.

Australia's *multicultural society* brings both challenge and opportunity for the mission of the church. At its best, a healthy multicultural society is a foretaste of the rich diversity of the rainbow kingdom of God.

It makes ecumenical cooperation more important as Christian migrants come from all parts of the world church, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox. I well remember the racist

¹⁹ Frank Stilwell, *Economic inequality: Who gets what in Australia* (Leichhardt, NSW: Pluto, 1993), 18; John Wicks, 'The reality of income equality in Australia [St Vincent de Paul Society, Social Policy Issues Paper 1]', <[www.vinnies.org.au/files/NATIONAL.MicrosoftWord-SPIP1\[1\]\[1\].doc.pdf](http://www.vinnies.org.au/files/NATIONAL.MicrosoftWord-SPIP1[1][1].doc.pdf)>, Accessed 31-8-05, Date of material 29-5-05.

²⁰ Peter Saunders, 'Poverty and deprivation in Australia', in *Year Book Australia* (Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996), available at www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/5D709B83B7F7C25ECA2569DE00221C86

²¹ Norman C Habel, *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's soul* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1999).

²² Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Draft document for reconciliation [study kit]* (Canberra: Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1999), 9.

remark of a Baptist in Melbourne's Western suburbs when the dominant influx was from Italy and Greece. She was asked about the opportunities for mission, and said, 'There used to be lots of people around here but now they're all migrants'.

Multiculturalism brings racism to the surface, which calls for prophetic engagement by the church. A multicultural society is also a multifaith society, which calls both for dialogue with those of other faiths and cooperation with them on issues of justice. The tense atmosphere since 11 September 2001 has, ironically, resulted in both increased fear amongst Christians and increased dialogue between Christian and Muslim leaders.

Another significant trend in Australian society can be labelled '*tribalism*', or fragmentation into a series of social groups without a great deal of overlap. This is often listed as a feature of postmodernity, with its rejection of one overarching vision of society, or a feature of urbanisation, which brings together millions of people who sort themselves into sub-groups. In the larger cities we become used to seeing gays, Greeks and Goths in one day. I can lean on the fence and chat with working-class men in my neighbourhood, attend a meeting of Asian students and then go to a party at my son's place where his 'alternative' friends are a twenty-first century version of the hippies I knew in the seventies. These are different worlds. They are tied together by the common elements of society, from shopping centres to educational institutions, but they illustrate the dual phenomenon of globalisation and localisation. They invite mission which takes account of homogeneous units, as the Church Growth Movement has argued, a difficult road to take because the emphasis on diversity between groups makes it difficult to work towards diversity within groups.

The final social factor I have chosen for mention, *the trend towards social and political conservatism* is recent, and Christians are likely to be divided about whether it is a good or bad thing, or contains some of each. Very briefly, the evidence that Australia is moving in this direction includes the dominance of conservative politics at the federal level (and conservative Labor premiers at state level); the continuing reign of free-market capitalism; adoption of international free trade agreements which give private international corporations power over public policies; reluctance to sign international environmental commitments; a trend towards small government, lower taxes and tighter welfare policies; an emphasis on conservative personal moral values; an unwillingness to be more compassionate towards asylum seekers; reduced international aid for development (with the response to the 26 December 2004 tsunami disaster an exception); Australia's close identification with the United States in its fight against terrorism and its preemptive war in Iraq. A speech in early 2005 by the federal Health Minister, Tony Abbott, owned this trend in positive terms,²³ though I see it largely in negative terms on the basis of my faith and where it leads on issues of justice, peace and concern for the poor. One of the challenges for mission lies in the fact that Christians line up on either side of most of these issues, particularly when it comes to those of personal morality.

So far I've tried to summarise some of the most important trends in Australian culture (or cultures) in response to a double awareness that the way Australian churches been doing mission is in many ways not working and that the context is rapidly changing.

Who is God in this context?

If we are to develop a 'local theology',²⁴ that is, a contextually-shaped theological response to Australian culture, we need to engage in a conversation with the questions raised

²³ Tony Abbott, 'The new conservatives', *The Age* 29 January 2005; Insight, 11.

²⁴ Robert J Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985).

by that situation, a conversation informed by our Christian sources (including scripture, tradition and experience) and yet which, following the insights of Paul Tillich, takes seriously the theological significance of culture.²⁵

1 God's image in Australia

If we ask how God is experienced in the Australian context the answer (although it varies greatly, of course) is rather discouraging. God is largely seen through the church, so the way the church has engaged with the culture around it has been the main factor in the way Australians have seen God.

Indigenous people have experienced the Christian God largely as paternalistic and disapproving of their culture. The majority have adopted Christian belief, and many have experienced it as genuinely good news, even though its forms were foreign and it lacked a deep connection to the land. The missionary record is mixed, with much to celebrate and much to lament. It is only in recent times that serious theological reflection (by indigenous and non-indigenous leaders) has been given to indigenous forms of Christian belief and expression.²⁶ There are only the beginnings of an indigenous Christian theology.

The dominant type of Protestant religion exported to the new colony of New South Wales in the years following 1788 was a moralistic strand of Evangelical Anglicanism. It was unsupported by the men of the Enlightenment who governed the colony.²⁷ It was ignored by the military, who were notoriously irreligious.²⁸ It was opposed by the Catholic Irish convicts. And the church had long been alienated from the English working class, from which the rest of the convicts came. The church was seen as part of the oppression of the criminal classes.²⁹ It was a very bad start for God in Australia!

God has remained European for most of the two hundred years since and has been confined mostly to churches. Despite the different climate, church buildings copied the European styles and clergy wore heavy, dark clerical garb. This imported faith was seen as 'somber, constricting [and] stifling in a land of colour, fun and freedom'.³⁰ The poet who best captured the working man's view of God and the church was Henry Lawson, who wrote in his poem, *The Shearers*:

No church bell rings them from the track
 No pulpit lights their blindness —
 'Tis hardship, drought and homelessness
 That teach those Bushmen kindness:
 The mateship born in barren lands

²⁵ Frank Rees develops Tillich's method of correlation helpfully in the direction of 'theological conversation' in Frank Rees, 'Beating around in the bush: Methodological directions for Australian theology', *Pacifica* 15 (2002), 266-293. Tillich's method is defined in Paul Tillich, *Systematic theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1951), 67-68.

²⁶ See, for example, Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit theology: Towards an Australian Aboriginal theology* (Blackburn, Vic.: HarperCollins, 1997); and Ivan Jordan, *Their way* (Darwin: Charles Darwin University Press, 2004).

²⁷ Michael Hogan, *The sectarian strand: Religion in Australian history* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1987), 10-12.

²⁸ Iain H Murray, *Australian Christian life from 1788: An introduction and an anthology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 4.

²⁹ Ian Breward, *A history of the Australian churches* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 13.

³⁰ Patrick O'Farrell, 'The cultural ambivalence of Australian religion', in *Australian Cultural History, Vol 1: Culture and the state in Australia*, eds. S L Goldberg and F B Smith (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities and the History of Ideas Unit, Research School of the Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1982), 4.

Of toil and thirst and danger
 The camp fire for the wanderer set
 The first place to the stranger . . .

They tramp in mateship side by side —
 The Protestant and the Roman —
 They called no biped Lord or sir
 And touch their hat to no man!³¹

Whether or not it reflected reality, one of the dominant myths of Australian culture in its nation-building phase was the one expressed in Lawson's poem, namely that Australians (usually meaning men) are easy-going larrikins who will do anything for their mates. They saw themselves as egalitarian, anti-authoritarian, self-reliant and impatient with abstract thought—nearly all opposites of the image of the church and its clergy.

The church's theology emphasised a transcendent God, distant and judging, just as Australians were coming to appreciate the bush and this ancient continent. The European 'sky God' was not well integrated with a God who was immanent in the landscape. Australians have often felt themselves to be pioneers but also aliens, on the edge of the sacred but not sure of how to understand it.³² As a result, there is an inarticulateness about Australian spirituality, a silence before the mystery.³³ In many ways God is yet to be properly discovered in this land.

There is a challenge for Christians here, to find in the Australian experience where God is present and to make the connections with the life-giving, transforming Spirit of Jesus Christ. John Gaden puts this well:

In place of a God concerned with narrow piety and petty morality or else a God totally remote from the harsh realities of daily life, many Australians have exulted in a vital immanent Spirit, who is experienced in the sensuality of good food and drink, in sunshine and physical exertion, of crowded arenas and rowdy bars. But they have also been awestruck at craggy mountains and raging seas and been appalled by wilting deserts and relentless bushfires. They have been touched by the struggling underdog, stood by those in need [and] brought down the pretentious from their thrones. Yet few knew that in all this they were encountering the living God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.³⁴

2 There is more to God

If, instead of asking how God *has been* experienced, we ask how God *could be* experienced by Australians, there is much in the biblical and theological tradition to contribute to the conversation. It is appropriate in contextual theology to select and emphasise strands of the tradition that speak particularly to a culture. (In the brief outline that follows, I am not claiming that the emphases speak uniquely to Australians, only that they 'converse' particularly well with the current cultural context.)

³¹ Selected from Henry Lawson, 'The Shearers', <<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~natinfo/lawson/shearers.htm>>, Accessed 30-1-05.

³² David J Tacey, *Edge of the sacred: Transformation in Australia* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1995).

³³ Tony Kelly, *A new imagining: Towards an Australian spirituality* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990).

³⁴ John Gaden, 'An Australian theology?' *Bulletin of Australian Studies* 2 (1985), 22-23.

The central Christian affirmation, that God was in Christ reconciling the world, has great relevance for Australian culture. God is experienced by Christians as taking shape amongst us and becoming one of us. God comes to where the people are. God is alongside. God is intimately involved in life for seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day, not just on Sundays. And God's Spirit is at work in all of life, not just in churches.

Incarnational theology says that God is to be experienced both within and beyond the material universe. This is the paradoxical idea of 'transcendent immanence'. It sees transcendence not in terms of distance from us (as in a 'sky God') but as a dynamic process of overflow or self-surpassing,³⁵ in which God reaches out in creation and redemption, seeking embodiment, identifying lovingly with the world, indwelling God's material universe and always incarnate as Spirit within humanity.³⁶

Incarnational theology also affirms that God has entered our suffering and borne our pain with us, with liberating effect. The Australian desire to see religion with its sleeves rolled up, demonstrating by its deeds what its words proclaim, is met in the integrated life and teaching of Jesus.

Jesus engages the iconoclastic, egalitarian and anti-authoritarian sides of Australian culture, puncturing the respectable and pompous and repeatedly showing the reign of God to make the powerful uncomfortable and the 'little battler' at home.

Recent ecological theology also engages the postmodern sensibility in which relationships, networks and interconnectedness are key concepts.³⁷ To experience God not as a static being but a dynamic 'community of love' (as the Trinity is now often called) is to discover God wherever there is love, wherever there is justice and reconciliation and wherever relationships are whole and life-giving. God's justice is merciful and forgiving.

Even the inarticulateness of Australian spirituality is matched in Christian tradition by the *via negativa*,³⁸ the way of silence in the face of ultimate mystery and, at times, in the face of the apparent absence of God in a world of evil and suffering.

These are just several ways in which 'rethinking God' in the current Australian context can be productive in the way the gospel engages culture in conversation about ultimate reality.

The task of contextual theology is not just to find ways in which the gospel resonates with culture, but also to discern the ways in which the gospel challenges culture. I have mentioned in my summary of Australian culture several trends that the biblical prophets would challenge loudly and clearly. The ongoing critical contextual task involves seeking both to be culturally attuned and to allow the gospel to challenge the cultures we live in.

This task of cooperating with God in seeking transformation at all levels is, of course, the mission of the church. In the light of the overview of Australian culture and aspects of our experience of God which touch that culture, how can we best share the Good News of God in Australian society?

Rethinking mission

The mission of the church is to cooperate with God's purposes to bring the whole world into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Mission flows out of the Christian

³⁵ John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in modern thought* (London: SCM, 1990), 380.

³⁶ Geoffrey W H Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 23.

³⁷ For example, Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an ecological, nuclear age* (London: SCM, 1987)

³⁸ Matthew Fox, *Original blessing: A primer in creation spirituality* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1983), 132-172.

experience of God's Good News. It is a natural response to having begun to discover something we believe to be the ultimate jewel. We should remember that two of the central biblical concepts for the dynamic state for which we long are *shalom* and the reign of God. These visions of God's gracious presence are rich and multidimensional. They are far more holistic than mission seen merely as evangelism or as social engagement.

1 Incarnational mission

My analysis of Australian society and ways of thinking about God points first to an incarnational approach to mission. If God's way of engaging the world is by becoming embodied in a person, we have a clue to how we can engage too. In Jesus we see a life at one with his message. Incarnational mission is mission in Christ's way. This is not just following Jesus' example, as if in heroic discipleship. We know that we cannot succeed simply by trying. It also involves opening our lives to the power of the risen Christ, allowing ourselves to be conformed to Christ.³⁹

I have developed this elsewhere, but among the implications of this approach are integrating word and deed, costly discipleship, identification with the poor and engaging the powers.⁴⁰

It also means that our engagement is primarily outside the walls of church buildings and occurs mostly at times other than during church functions. Incarnational mission is way of life, a style of being a disciple that is open to those around us. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch point out that we need to be found in natural and neutral territory, where people normally go (labelled 'proximity spaces').⁴¹ There are a growing number of churches experimenting with this approach.

If Australians generally dismiss the church as locked away in a 'holy huddle' incarnational mission is an urgent need. If Australians are suspicious of 'Bible bashers', preachers and those who feel 'holier than thou', Christian witness desperately needs to begin with practical concern and a sense of being alongside in the human condition. All mission probably ought to be dialogical in spirit—more like a respectful conversation than a sermon—but it applies especially in Australia, where Christian faith is so easily dismissed. More and more Christians are deciding that they will cut back on the number of church meetings and be a more laid-back member of their local neighbourhood, taking part in the football club or 'Friends of the Local Park' group because they want to, and then letting God's Spirit work through them as they simply live as Christian witnesses where they are.

2 Cross-cultural and multi-pronged

As many returned overseas missionaries can see clearly, mission in Australia needs to be intentionally cross-cultural. As with most societies across the world (but more than most), Australian culture is really a complicated and overlapping set of sub-cultures, many of which are extremely different. Most mission these days is cross-cultural. So we need to be intentional in order to engage effectively with a people group. We need to take time to learn the language. We need to use the basic tools of anthropology to understand kinship, rituals, worldview and so on. The sign outside the general purpose church building which says that Jesus welcomes everyone means nothing if newcomers, from a wide range of sub-cultures,

³⁹ Ross Langmead, *The Word made flesh: Towards an incarnational missiology*, American Society of Missiology Dissertation Series (Lanham, MD: University Press of America/American Society of Missiology, 2004), 52-55.

⁴⁰ Langmead, *The Word made flesh*.

⁴¹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The shaping of things to come: Innovation and mission for the 21st-century church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 24-25.

have to assimilate to the Anglo-Australian sub-culture that operates unreflectively in that congregation.

The multicultural nature of society refers not only to migrant cultures but also to postmodern cultures, youth cultures, professional cultures, working class cultures, welfare-client cultures, gang cultures, music cultures, rural cultures, indigenous cultures, establishment cultures and so on.

So in rethinking mission we should welcome a wide range of experiments, from home churches to language-based initiatives, from pub congregations to retreat centres, from radio broadcasts to music events, from housing provision to communities of healing. This is not a time for programs that aim to fit all contexts.

The mission curriculum at the college where I teach is a reflection of this awareness. We offer units in holistic witness, anthropology, contextual mission, the emerging church, evangelism 'out of the box', reconciliation, Australian culture, justice and faith and the environment. It is a time for many bold initiatives and experiments.

3 Ecumenical and credible

Division and competition among Christian churches denies the gospel of shalom and unity. Our mission is compromised if we cannot work together in the name of Jesus Christ. Variety in ways of being Christian is inevitable, but non-recognition of each other's baptism and ministry is not. The inability of Christians to sit together at the same table to celebrate the life-giving body and blood of Jesus Christ is a symbol of a squabbling and divided family. How can such a divided church carry the message of barrier-breaking love and forgiveness?

Sectarian strife in the nineteenth century was a large factor in the establishment of universities such as Melbourne with a secular charter, the setting up of secular government education systems and the dismissal of the churches by ordinary Australians. These days a state premier generally refuses to see a particular denominational leader on a social issue: "Get together and bring me a joint submission", the premier is likely to say.

Fortunately missiology is a highly ecumenical theological discipline. It is a time for those at the cutting edge of mission to look around and see if they can work together with those from other traditions. We see the beginnings of this, whether it is in soup van rosters or community drop-in centres, but we have a long way to go.

The credibility of the church is low at the present time, not only for historical reasons nor just because traditional religion is out of fashion intellectually.⁴² It has allowed shocking sexual abuse to occur in its schools, youth groups, camps, orphanages and even churches. Worse, when these things have surfaced it has until recently handled them poorly, appearing to defend its predatory leaders. Australians are scathing of the record of the church in this area and it has a long way to go to prevent further abuse and deal properly with past abuse.

Another word for holistic mission, used particularly amongst Latin American radical Evangelicals, is 'integral mission'.⁴³ It refers primarily to the integration of words and deeds in incarnational mission, what we might call the integrity of mission.⁴⁴ But in the context of the reputation of the Australian church we might want it to carry a little more weight and

⁴² Bible Society of New South Wales, "The church an insurmountable problem but Jesus is cool", says research', <http://www.bibles2theworld.com/misc/CMP_General_Research_release.pdf>, Accessed 7-2-05, Date of material 12-9-04.

⁴³ Orlando E Costas, *The integrity of mission: The inner life and outreach of the church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), xii-xiii.

⁴⁴ Part of the theme of the most recent conference of the International Association for Mission Studies in Malaysia from 31 July to 7 August 2004. See <www.missionstudies.org>.

refer also to integrity in mission. While our deeds point in directions other than our words our message will be scrambled.

4 Engaging the culture

The comments I made when suggesting that it is worth rethinking God point to a way of engaging our whole culture in the church's mission. Christians can express their faith publicly in all areas of cultural life—the arts, sport, recreation, entertainment, the media, social reform, intellectual life and so on.

Some of this engagement will be largely affirmative, discerning ways in God is experienced in normal life. Where is grace? How is God's Spirit at work? As we enter into conversation, both at the individual level and at various public and institutional levels, we can ask and suggest answers to life's ultimate questions.

Much of this engagement, however, will be profoundly countercultural. The gospel challenges cultures, and the Good News is sharp-edged as well. The prophetic dimension is crucial. Australia needs a church that stands out as a clear sign of the Reign of God. Only something as radical, mysterious and broad as God's gracious presence is worthy to be called the mission of the church.

This overview shows that there is a need to rethink God and mission in Australia. It also suggests some ways ahead, painted with a broad brush. Because Australian society is made up of a variety of cultures and sub-cultures, these ways ahead will vary enormously. In common, however, will be an awareness of the changing context, a commitment to an ongoing conversation about who God is and readiness to try new ways of engaging missionally with Australians.

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