

## MISSION TAILORED FOR MELBOURNE'S WESTERN SUBURBS

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Karl Bath is often quoted as saying that we need to do theology with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. What difference would it make to our approach to mission if this week's local newspaper in Footscray in the inner-western suburbs of Melbourne were to be taken seriously?

There are articles about long-term unemployment and homelessness, because Footscray is a manufacturing area and the economic recession has hit hard. There is discussion of environmental dangers, following a huge fire a few months ago at nearby Coode Island where dangerous chemicals are stored. There is a page in Vietnamese, because 43% of residents are overseas-born, the largest group coming from Vietnam. There is an article showing that housing prices are Melbourne's lowest. This is because local houses are small and the area is full of factories, petrochemical plants, railway yards and transport companies. There is a report of a fun-run over the Westgate Bridge, the huge, elegant bridge which can be seen from all corners of Footscray and which years ago cost the lives of 35 workers when it collapsed while being built.

Footscray is the heart of Melbourne's working-class west, struggling to survive economic hard times, slowly recognising it is a multicultural community and always battling government neglect, pollution and chemical dangers. It is also a lively place, where traditions run deep, where the Bulldogs (the local Australian-rules football team) are fanatically followed, and where the people show all the working-class virtues of friendliness, straightforwardness and being action-oriented.

The difference it makes to take the newspaper seriously is this. We take the people and their context seriously. We start by trying to understand what problems and joys they

experience. We start with the questions raised by life in Footscray, and then see what the Gospel says to this situation. And this is our situation, not only 'theirs'.

### WESTGATE BAPTIST COMMUNITY

Westgate Baptist Community tries to do this. Like all platoons in God's rag-tag army, it fails miserably at times, and is not always Good News to all people. But it remains a story of hope nevertheless. I'd like to reflect on Westgate as an example of urban mission, an attempt to understand the Gospel in terms that speak to Footscray.

The Community is a local Baptist church with a strong sense of Christian community and mission. I can recount its growth and its theological inspiration with intimate knowledge, though not necessarily with objectivity, because I am one of those who have been involved from the start.

Westgate grew out of a vision contained in a report commissioned by the Baptist Union of Victoria in 1977 in the face of declining membership in the 14 Baptist Churches in the western suburbs. I was employed for a year to find out what the human needs of the region were, and how the Baptist Churches could respond. The report was written in a collaborative way, with a group of 35 people commenting on every draft chapter. It contained a simple vision, even though it was radical for the Churches at the time.

The report suggested that Churches should cut back their multiple activities and focus on weekly, home-based groups, so that Christians could experience the support, growth and community which the Gospel promises. How can we share what we don't experience?

Its approach to mission was incarnational, that is, based on 'enfleshing' the Gospel, making the Good News visible in our lives. Churches were encouraged to serve the local area, meet desperate human needs, work for political and social change, defend the poor, co-operate with other human service agencies, and welcome people into homes - in other words, to live out (rather than simply proclaim) the Good News. The average working person in Australia is alienated from the organised Church and distrusts words about God's love. There is a need for western suburbs residents to experience this love before being told about it.

The report also called for Christians from the well-served middle-class suburbs of Melbourne to come over and help, and this call was heard. About 20 young people moved across and later bought houses and settled in Footscray. Mission at Westgate Baptist community is seen as local and connected with the whole of life.

Westgate Baptist community was formed by the amalgamation of three small Churches in 1982, after a period of co-operation. It is now a Church of 120 members living fairly close to each other, meeting on Sundays and in about 8 weekly home groups and committed to serving the local area.

## URBAN MISSION

The Community is one of about a dozen Victorian Baptist Churches which identify with the urban mission movement. Urban mission is usually seen as a style of mission suited particularly to a socially disadvantaged urban context in an affluent industrial society. But much of it flows out of an understanding of the Gospel and would apply to any context. Perhaps much of it would work in a purely suburban context. And there are many aspects of this approach which would suit a 'two-thirds world' context as well. I'll leave that for others to judge, as it is the Australian inner city that I know best.

How can we best define 'urban mission'? It seems to be the name used for a style of Christian ministry which grew from a conscious move by some Christians back to the inner-city in industrialised countries in the early sixties. It is driven by concern for lower socio-economic groups, and so has grown to include mission to housing estates on the fringes of cities as well as to ageing and decaying suburbs. Urban mission usually takes place in a frontier situation, with great social problems and few Christian resources. The term has its limitations. It can unnecessarily divide the city from the suburbs, and also divide those on mission from those to whom they feel sent. So urban mission Churches often don't use the term much, even though they would readily identify with the movement.

What distinctives about urban mission has Westgate Baptist community embraced?

### 1. The Gospel has material, social and political implications

Urban mission tries to keep in view the whole person, in the whole urban context. Salvation refers not merely to spiritual health but to material, social and emotional health as well. It is a holistic concept with social as well as individual dimensions. Christianity must be political if it cares for people, for politics is about how people's lives are affected by government.

The Church cannot be separate from the life of the whole community. In attempting to express God's love, Westgate has not only responded in providing services but also in being advocates for the homeless, the unemployed, Aboriginal Australia and low-income users of the health system.

For example, in 1980 a report on health care showed that doctors in the area were few in number and lived elsewhere. They were unavailable after hours and were not prepared to 'bulk bill' (send bills for low-income patients to the government). When an idealistic young Christian doctor offered to move in, Westgate offered support him and create a high-quality health centre where the poor could receive unhurried, holistic health care. Soon it also offered volunteer transport to specialist appointments, pastoral visits to those who elected to receive them and a 'frozen casserole bank' where meals cooked by Westgate volunteers are kept for families under pressure.

South Kingsville Health Services, as it is known, has evolved into Australia's first health co-operative, run by its patients. Westgate Baptist Community still provides many of the staff, much of the volunteer support and nearly all of the management committee. But it is formally owned by and open to the local community. It is now building a sister relationship with a rural Nicaraguan clinic, offering acupuncture and negotiating for a low cost dentist. It is committed not only to quality health care in a low-income area but also to campaigning for fair health policies nationally. It is well loved by local residents and one way of demonstrating that salvation is for the whole person in a whole context.

### 2. Mission is largely personal and informal

Urban mission tends to emphasise that without personal friendship offered to real, hurting individuals, all of our political involvement is unbalanced. The Church is uniquely placed to span both dimensions, the caring and the advocacy.

At Westgate we struggle with this. As a Church we offer emergency and supportive housing in houses lent to us. Ten years ago, in several cases we were able to offer young people who had been in such emergency housing a room in a Westgate member's home. It was costly ministry, but rewarding as well as frustrating. Now, with young families everywhere, these empty rooms seem unavailable.

Years ago there seemed to be many young parents free during the day for running playgroups (where parents and infants gather socially), visiting others and being involved in local networks.

Now there seem to be more families where both parents work. Our adventurous projects have grown into programs to be managed, and many of our members are on committees. It is harder for us to remember this emphasis on personal friendship, which is given lip-service. The poor, the alcoholic, the homeless and the vulnerable single mothers still gain true and faithful friendship from some Westgate members, but the busyness of organised life makes it hard for us.

### 3. Christian Community is central

Only a mutually supportive group can tackle the complexity of life amongst the poor in the city. Community means sharing the burdens and the joys, celebrating the grace of daily life and naming the Good News amongst ourselves. It means encouragement in taking strong stands and in persisting when solutions are not readily available.

Community is a fragrance which is present when there is common sense of purpose and practical support for each other. Although we can strive for it, more often it seems to be a gift of God. Westgate chooses the name 'Community' not because it feels it has attained community but because it aspires towards it.

Most of the Church meets in weekly home-based 'koinonia' groups. These are intergenerational, autonomous and diverse. They sometimes take on a mission project. A simple meal is usually the centre of the evening, and the children are important and included in some activities. People have bought or rented houses in clusters, and some live in extended households. We have not tried to live from a common purse, but we have a resources directory listing useful things which can be borrowed freely.

Christian community is part of the incarnational approach to mission. It is evangelistic to love each other in practical ways in a society where traditional networks of support are breaking down.

### 4. The local community is taken seriously

Urban mission Churches usually take the local community seriously. Rather than setting up many programs within the Church, clearly labelled as Christian, their life is enmeshed with other local forces for community. They work alongside and in community groups. They value networks. People in urban mission stay for years or decades, settling locally and working for long-term change.

This is the scaffolding model of mission, where educated people from other areas are used at first, while building networks, structures and local leadership. Eventually outside influences are less important as local leadership is grown and encouraged and as 'outsiders' become locals.

The unemployment programs include training courses in either computer skills or electronics for unemployed people. There is also a New Enterprise Incentive Scheme which helps people with good ideas to translate them into a business plan. The Competitive Employment Program helps disabled people to compete for jobs. The Skillshare program trains unemployed people in catering and as waiters. A new project in growing and selling seeds and plants indigenous to the western suburbs is about to start. Money is raised by offering commercial services such as computer training or computer repairs. This group of programs is now a large operation, but it is still driven by concern for the dignity and potential of unemployed people. As for the clinic, its management committee struggles for members, but they are all Westgate members. Many of the staff are Westgaters too.

These programs responded to local need, have become part of local pride, and work in with all the relevant local networks. They are a small part of the road towards *shalom* (health, peace and prosperity) in Footscray.

### 5. Good news to the poor

What is the theological style of urban mission? Its theology is usually about liberation, emphasises Good News to the poor, is positive and creation-oriented, and emphasises the presence of God in the world rather than just in liturgy, devotion and religious experience.

Such theology is obviously contextual, growing out of the urban situation and grappling with powerlessness, structural evil and the presence of God in the 'bruised reed' and 'shoots of grass in the concrete'.

It is a pilgrim theology rather than dogmatic theology, more likely to be a theology of the Cross

than a theology of success or personal peace. It may be evangelical or liberal, charismatic or even liturgical in approach, but these differences are usually of only secondary importance.

Its politics are usually left-of-centre (though not wedded to a political party) and focus on justice, peace and the environment. Christians in urban mission who analyse society soon find themselves campaigning for public policies which put health, education, housing and community-participation high on the list, and which protect the poor from the rich and powerful.

Westgate in particular has an evangelical heritage, but has become a haven for those whose theological journey has taken them towards a more critical faith. It has been influenced by creation spirituality, feminist theology, metaphorical theology and those approaches (such as Carl Jung's) which speak of God within as well as beyond. Visitors often comment that it has an Australian theology, and when questioned on what is meant, say that it is unpretentious, earthy, informal and undemonstrative. These things are truer of Australian workers than middle-class Australians. There is also a conscious policy of using plain English in worship.

There is a real theological ferment due to active links between Westgate and the denominational seminary (Whitley College), and this is in a dialectical relationship with direct experiences of mission 'at the coal-face'. For example, working with Lebanese Muslims has led some to be more accepting of other religions. Also Westgate has modified the traditional Baptist practice of admitting into membership only those who have been baptised as adult believers. Believers' baptism by immersion is still the only practice and teaching of the Community, but those with other backgrounds are not compelled to be 're-baptised' in order to be welcomed into membership. This preparedness to accept others is part of a desire to hold convictions and yet to blur the boundaries at the edge of the Community.

#### 6. Pauline structures and ecumenical ties

How do Churches in urban mission organise themselves and relate to denominational structures? They tend to follow the charismatic approach to Church structure we see in the Pauline epistles and therefore suspect hierarchies. Authority tends to be distributed widely amongst Christians in community. Efforts are made to translate worship and theological language into forms that are more accessible to others. The views of urban mission Churches are often a minority within a denomination, so ecumenical ties with like-minded groups become important, often

more important than ties with central denominational bodies. There is often poor funding for urban mission and finances are nearly always precarious.

In Australia, nevertheless, the urban mission network has lived with these tensions and has largely remained within the mainstream denominations. Westgate has done well denominationally, benefiting from the Baptist tradition of congregational autonomy and yet also receiving denominational support, despite being regarded as a group of slightly dangerous radicals in the west.



#### STILL ON THE ROAD

Summing up, Westgate Baptist Community is typical of urban mission Churches in many ways, and has drawn much energy and direction from others further down the path. It has enjoyed a unique beginning, with denominational support and an articulated vision. Now, ten years after the three small Churches amalgamated to form the new Community, it is going through a process of consciously reshaping that vision. It has been going through problems such as internal conflict, being over-stretched, newcomers not understanding the vision, and adapting to new stages of life. It has not always lived out its dream of responding to the local context.

If it were to read the local newspaper more closely it might be uncomfortable about the extent to which it reflects the multicultural community around it. It might also realise it has a cross-cultural job ahead of it due to it being over-educated and middle-class compared to its surrounding residents.

But in preparing for its tenth birthday celebration there is new life growing again when it seemed that struggle and discouragement might choke it.

This is the story of so many urban initiatives, fragile and vulnerable, but mirroring God's work in the world by surprising us with hope and joy in the face of sometimes overwhelming odds. ■