

1. The Good News We Share: Holistic Witness

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Introduction: Rediscovering Mission

I belong to a local church in the western suburbs of Melbourne called Westgate Baptist Community. Thirty years ago we experienced something of a renewal. We had a vision of being engaged in the local community. We invited young radical Christians to move over to the western suburbs in solidarity with the poor in our area. We wanted to explore living together in various forms of community. And we wanted our faith to be real, grounded and expressed on Monday to Saturday as well as on Sunday.

About twenty to twenty-five people answered the call over a few years, and we soon had quite an array of projects running. We started a bulk-billing medical clinic run as a co-operative by the patients. We started an emergency accommodation that evolved into a fully-fledged community housing group. We started an employment skills project, which continues today, with many different courses and a multi-million dollar budget. We started a craft and activities centre for isolated people, which has developed into a local community centre. I could go on. There was an organic food co-operative, a frig bank (renting fridges to poor people), a casserole bank (frozen meals for those under pressure), a removal van business helping low-income people move house and so on.

What was interesting was that most of those who became involved in Westgate's highly committed forms of mission weren't sure about mission at all. Like so many of us today, they felt that "mission" carries a lot of baggage, maybe too much baggage. Many of the young idealists I shared community with were on a journey from conservative evangelicalism to ... well they didn't know where. They knew they were uncomfortable with theological certainties. They knew they didn't like evangelism the way they'd experienced it. They knew they didn't take the Bible literally. In fact, they knew more about what they didn't believe than what they did believe.

I understood this well, because in some ways that was my own journey too. I had done a masters' degree in philosophy in my early twenties and my faith had been severely tested by the cold winds of British empiricism and analytical philosophy. I spent two or three years on a thesis combatting the views of one writer, Antony Flew, who argued that statements such 'God is love' made no sense because nothing could ever prove or disprove them. It was a strange experience reading the latest book by Flew earlier this year, which was entitled, *There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind!*¹¹ (I'd like to think he had finally come across my thesis and had a life-changing experience, but I'm afraid not.)

¹¹ Antony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese, *There is a God: How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind* (New York: Harper One, 2007).

Anyway, during my study of philosophy I lost my faith and then found it again in a much more chastened form. I went on to study other religions in further postgraduate study overseas, and by the time I came back to begin to study Christian theology I was very aware of how little we really understand when it comes to the ultimate things of life.

The young radicals I lived and worked with fitted neatly into a framework suggested by Scott Peck in his book, *The different drum*.² Peck has adapted the framework provided by James Fowler in his *Stages of Faith*.³ Leaving aside the first stage, which is chaotic and anti-social, Peck speaks of three stages in the development of faith in community.

Stage Two is the loyal, belonging stage, where the rules and the forms are adhered to, partly for the sake of certainty and safety. We see it most in schools, prisons, the military—and in institutional Christianity, particularly where God is seen as an external, transcendent Being.

Stage Three was where many of my friends found themselves, escaping from Stage Two. Peck describes these people as principled, individualistic and committed to social causes. They are often sceptical and agnostic, and some become atheists. Sometimes someone would call our community the last stop on the way out of the church.

Peck labelled his Stage Four the mystical, communal stage. From his perspective those who continue to grow become aware of the inter-connectedness of life and its mystery. They accept, even embrace, the unknown and the unknowable. They make friends with emptiness and the apparent absence of God. We could say they believe less but with greater willingness to stake their lives on it. And they know they need others on the journey.

I give you this background from Peck because my friends in community were, at that time, clearly in Stage Three—sceptical, individualistic and yet committed. They were a real challenge to lead, a bit like herding feral cats.

For a period I was on the pastoral team at Westgate as a lay worker. We planned the annual church camp on the theme of mission. Our aim was clear: to discuss openly between us what we thought the mission of the church is.

We planned four sessions, all of them very interactive. The first one was a Bible study on what the kingdom of God—or Gracious Presence of God—is like. The second session asked the question, “How did I come to faith?”. What it did was uncover how grateful each of us was that parents, friends or other influences had introduced us to God’s love and justice. The third session asked the question, “What difference does it make to you today to be a Christian?”. This uncovered all sorts of things that even radical, sceptical types were grateful for in identifying as followers of Jesus. The fourth session asked the question, “What does it mean to continue the mission of Jesus today?”.

² M Scott Peck, *The different drum: Community making and peace* (London: Rider, 1987), 186–200.

³ James W Fowler, *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1981).

What came out of this was remarkable in our context. Some who had given up on mission came to realise that their own experience of faith was worth sharing in word and deed. On that weekend the pendulum in our community swung a bit back towards the centre. Many of us had been raised on mission as evangelism and had rejected it and thrown themselves into mission as social action. Now some of us were prepared to make the link between the Good News of Jesus and the better world we were working for. Some of us wanted to make a link between living as followers of Jesus (that is, trying to put into practice the values Jesus embodied) and sharing our sense that the presence of the risen Christ is somehow integral to it all. In other words, we were recovering the integration of word and deed, the expressing of our faith and the living of our faith.

In doing so, we were discovering for ourselves what many missiologists call holistic mission, or incarnational mission. We were feeling our way toward a way of being Jesus followers which had integrity for us. We were reclaiming the term 'mission' from its misuse.

We were effectively looking each other and saying, "Do we accept the world the way it is, or do we have a mission to work for change?". As David Bosch once wrote, "Mission ... is that dimension of our faith that refuses to accept reality as it is and aims at changing it".⁴

Mission

It's interesting that just as the church has become uncertain about mission the corporate world has become enthusiastic about defining its mission. Just about every company or organisation tries to be clear about why they exist and what their purpose is. McDonald's mission is "to be our customers' favorite place and way to eat". Google exists "to organise the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful".

To have a mission, of course, is to be aware of being sent, or having a job to do. It is clear as soon as we define it that way that the church is on mission as a people gathered in response to God's outgoing love and forgiveness to both live into God's new life and co-operate with God in bringing that new life to the world.

I use the term "mission" to mean all the aspects of our engagement with the world beyond the church. While the two terms overlap a great deal, for me "ministry" is the church looking inwards and nourishing its life, while mission is the church looking outwards, seeking God's nourishing of life for the world.

Recent theology has come to realise that the church is not so much a church that has a mission as a church that exists for mission. This is the meaning of the fashionable term "missional church". David Bosch put it well when he said:

Mission refers to a permanent and intrinsic dimension of the church's life. The church "is missionary by its very nature" ... and it is impossible to talk about

⁴ David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), xv.

church without at the same time talking about mission. Because God is a missionary God, God's people are missionary people. The church's mission is not secondary to its being; the church exists in being sent and in building up itself for its mission.⁵

What does Bosch mean when he says that God is a missionary God? He's referring to the very centre of Christian faith, which is that God the Creator has become embodied in Jesus Christ and continues to be present in the Spirit to bring about the transformation of the world so that we may enjoy love, peace and justice through living "in God", or as part of the Commonwealth of God.

This talk of the Commonwealth of God—my favourite way of expressing it—or the reign of God, or the gracious presence of God, casts a very particular light on our mission. We do not build or extend this divine re-ordering of relationships; rather, we receive it or enter it, as Jesus kept saying.⁶ We don't only look towards a perfect existence in the future or elsewhere; rather, we have a vision for a better world here and now in all dimensions. We don't look from within our club towards those outside and invite them in; rather, we find ourselves continually being invited in by God and being ourselves converted to God's ways.

This talk of God inviting all of us all of the time also makes a huge difference to how we understand evangelism, by which I mean the articulating of the Good News. Evangelism becomes no longer a compulsion to recruit others to believe what we believe. As Darrell Guder puts it so beautifully, if we could see the church's daily calling as allowing God's ways to become more and more the fabric of each part of our lives, then

the church would witness that its members, like others, hunger for the hope that there is a God who reigns in love and intends the good of the whole earth. The community of the church would testify that they have heard the announcement that such a reign is coming, and indeed is already breaking into the world. They would confirm that they have heard the open welcome and received it daily, and they would invite others to join them as those who also have been extended God's welcome. To those invited, the church would offer itself to ... travel with them as co-pilgrims.⁷

Mission as a journey of co-pilgrims towards a better world in the gracious presence of God. Mission as co-operation with God's mission for love, peace and justice. Now that's a mission I can commit myself to.

Given the long and chequered history of mission, I would like—for the rest of my presentation—to unpack the concept of mission as holistic witness. These days we need to be clear about what we mean by "mission" before we reject it or embrace it. I'm reminded of the saying (I'm not sure where I heard it) that "The God I believe in is not the God you don't believe in". When some of my students come to my classes saying

⁵ Bosch, *Transforming mission*,

⁶ Darrell L Guder, ed. *Missional church: A vision for the sending of the church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 93–94.

⁷ Guder, ed. *Missional church*, 97.

they've given up on mission, I find a gentle way to say, "The mission I believe in may not be the mission you don't believe in".

I won't be developing any of these seven points in any great depth. Hopefully they will connect with thinking you've been doing. And hopefully you will be able to engage with one or more of them in question time or in discussion later.

1 It Is Holistic

The first thing I want to say about Christian mission flows from who God is. I embrace an ecological theology, which is to say that I understand God not to be wholly external to the world but intimately involved at all levels in the universe, creating, sustaining and wooing it. I understand relationship to be at the heart of reality. This vision of reality differs greatly from the Newtonian vision where the universe is seen as a machine and the only essential factors are mass, motion and the laws of nature.

In this vision, what matters most is the quality of relationships—between God and the universe, between humans and God, between humans and other humans, between humans and their environment and, in a metaphorical way, between ourselves and ourselves. What I mean by our relationship to ourselves is that instead of living in alienation, brokenness and dividedness, we have the potential in God's creative purposes to live as whole, integrated beings, at ease with ourselves and alive with meaning and purpose.

If the underlying theme of ecological theology is one of relationship at the heart of life, then the corresponding missiological theme is that of reconciliation at all levels. Reconciliation is the setting right of relationships. A holistic sense of mission, then, seeks a reconciliation in all directions, between humans and God, between humans at the individual level, between groups of humans, within humans, and between humans and their environment.

In simple terms, we have a mission not only to invite others into a transforming relationship with God, but also to work for transformed personal and social relationships, personal wholeness and a restored relationship with the earth. They are all dimensions—interrelated ones at that—of our co-operation with God's purposes.

I know this sounds rather grand, but it is the overarching theological framework for an approach to mission that resists being reduced to evangelism, church growth or social action. It is wide in scope and it sees the whole as greater than the sum of its parts. This is the core meaning of "holistic".

2 It Is Expressed at Many Levels

Just in case we find this vision of mission overwhelming in its scope, it is worth reminding ourselves, as a second comment on mission, that it is expressed at many levels. The New Testament, particularly in Paul's writings, always calls the church to be the agent, not just the individual. The global church might be able to engage at all the levels of mission, from peacemaking to justice seeking, from environmental action to dialogue, from works of mercy to prophetic calls for governments to govern justly and

without corruption, from sharing the Good News to defending human rights, from fighting global poverty to being a good neighbour in a lonely city. But as individuals, as small local churches, as denominations in a particular city, we may only be able to tackle some of this wide spectrum.

We need to remember that there are things we can do as global citizens and things we can do as national citizens or residents in our state or city or municipality or neighbourhood. We can offer a cup of cold water as an act of mercy or be an advocate for a change in social structures, with lasting impact. Some things we will do as Christians; other things in partnership with other people of good will. Mission is expressed at many levels, and all levels can be affirmed.

The principle behind the slogan, “Think globally, act locally”, is helpful here. If our humble actions in co-operation with God’s purposes are specific local expressions of our mission, we should celebrate them. But it is important that they be undertaken against the backdrop of God’s cosmic and universal purposes.

In the last week or two, I’ve done some pretty ordinary things as expressions of my sense of mission, as I imagine you have. I’ve given food supplies to a mentally-ill invalid pensioner who is very good friend of mine. He lives close to us, and he’s broke most of the time. He struggles in many ways to manage his life. He knows he can always get a meal at our place, or a cup of coffee (or four cups of coffee with two spoons of sugar each time ...). I’ve listened to my twelve-year-old next-door neighbour who needed a friend when he’d been in a big conflict with his single mother. I’ve spent an afternoon at the house of another neighbour whose study was in total chaos, mainly as a result of some pretty difficult episodes of mental illness recently. On one hand, it was fun tidying up her office at her request. It’s always more fun cleaning up other people’s houses than your own. On the other hand I found even this small task overwhelming, as it opened up to so many of her other challenges. I’ve written an Amnesty International letter. I’ve taken a bike or train nearly everywhere as a tiny contribution to reducing our carbon footprint.

I’m aware of how paltry my engagement in mission can be. But I remind myself that if all Christians were to share a sense of gentle, holistic, practical mission, then our contribution in co-operating with God’s purposes would be great.

3 It Is Chastened by History

A third observation about mission today is that it is chastened by its history.

I probably don’t need to remind you that crusading zeal has led to unspeakable violence and oppression in the name of the gospel. I speak not only of historical low points such as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the treatment of scientists such as Galileo, the brutal conquest of South and Central America, and the cooperation of missionaries with colonialism and its dispossession and exploitation of indigenous peoples.

I speak also of the disregard of cultures, the confusion of Christianisation with Westernisation and the ignorance of other religions and cultures as mission often entered new places with arrogance, doing all the speaking and none of the listening.

At a more local and specific level, Australians often associate “mission” with city missions, which used to require the poor to sit through a worship service before giving them a meal. Mission stations quickly conjure memories of mistreatment of Aborigines. Mission, for some, is associated with paternalism.

We could go on. The fact is that we now live in a post-colonial era, a postmodern context and, in many places, a post-Christian situation, where people know the faults of Christian mission without knowing the Christian story in any detail. Overarching frameworks of meaning are in disfavour, and people don’t like being persuaded to sign up to any systems of meaning.

It’s a genuine question whether the term “mission” should be abandoned because of its baggage. There is, however, no easily found alternative. I’ve argued that the church is intrinsically missional because of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. So I opt for reclaiming the term rather than abandoning it.

Whether we use the word or not is one question. But the more substantial question is how we engage in mission following a history of bungling it to some extent. The obvious answer is “with humility” and not pretending to have all the answers but venturing forth as co-explorers of what it means to live in the presence of God.

4 It Calls for Christian Unity

The fourth characteristic of holistic witness is that it calls for Christian unity.

I find myself in a minority amongst Baptists on this question, and I feel very much at home amongst Uniting Church people, because you lead the way on this question.

I regard the ability to live at peace as close to the centre of the promise of God in Jesus. Jesus blesses the peacemakers. John’s Gospel portrays Jesus praying to God that his followers will be as united as Jesus is with God, so that the world may believe (Jn 17:23). Paul also repeatedly calls the church to unity (e.g., Eph 4:3) and makes reconciliation, particularly between Jews and Gentiles, a central task of his mission.

Next year we mark the centenary of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. Nearly all the 1215 delegates were white and western, from Britain, North America, Australasia and white South Africa. There were eighteen from Asia and one from Africa.⁸

One of the Chinese delegates was Cheng Jingyi, a twenty-eight year old pastor in a Beijing church. He was probably the youngest delegate at the conference.⁹ Like other speakers he was given seven minutes during the debate on Commission VIII, on “Co-

⁸ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 12-13.

⁹ Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 108.

operation and the Promotion of Unity". What he said was judged by one published report of the conference as "without question the best speech made at Edinburgh".¹⁰

Cheng urged the mission leaders to form a united Protestant church in China, because denominationalism was a real obstacle to the spread of the Good News. He said Chinese people had no taste for the western divisions between Christians.

The way this was received demonstrates how strongly those who were present saw the world through European and American glasses. The official historian of the conference, W H T Gairdner, wrote that Cheng seemed quite unaware of how difficult this would be, and saw him as theologically naïve.¹¹ And the chairman of Commission II, John Campbell Gibson wrote in the Commission report, rather condescendingly, that "It is, we think, disappointing that the native mind ... has not made a deeper mark on church organization".¹²

What Cheng saw clearly, but the European church could not, was that disunity is a huge obstacle to mission. How refreshing it will be when local churches look around and plan mission in their area together. It happens in small ways, with soup van rosters, some opp shops and the occasional social justice campaign where the churches unite. But while all Christians cannot even sit at the Lord's Table together, our proclamation of the unity and reconciliation it promises will always ring hollow.

5 Witness and Dialogue Go Hand in Hand

The fifth observation I'd like to make about mission is that it must involve dialogue; indeed it is inherently dialogical in nature.

It is part of the baggage of mission that it has often begun from a position of superiority, that it has shown little interest in the beliefs of others and that it has talked but not listened.

This requires more discussion than I can give it here. But I'd like to say that dialogue, which involves respectful listening as well as sharing, holds great promise as a way forward for mission. There is the dialogue of conversation. There is a dialogue of religious experience—my wife and a Muslim woman friend of hers often talk about what prayer means to them, and they share a respect for the spiritual journey of the other. Then there is the dialogue of action, such as working together for peace. And finally, there is the dialogue of daily life, in which we work and travel and live as neighbours and do business together. I use the trains of Melbourne's western suburbs nearly every day—yes, they're the ones where Indian students live in fear of racist bashings. From time to time I enjoy wonderful dialogue, just by being a fellow traveller in more than one sense.

¹⁰ In the *Missionary Herald* (Boston), 106 (1910): 354, cited in Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 108.

¹¹ W H T Gairdner, *'Edinburgh 1910': An account and interpretation of the World Missionary Conference* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 184–186.

¹² World Missionary Conference, *The church in the mission field: Report of Commission II*, World Missionary Conference, 1910, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 12.

I find myself out of sympathy, however, with the current philosophical fashion for pluralism, if we understand that to mean that there are many truths. Some people regard the view that one belief might be basically true and another basically false to be intolerant or arrogant. On the other hand, I believe that conviction and tolerance can go together. I believe that most religious believers who enter dialogue actually enter believing that their faith is, in a simple sense, true. I believe that a certain openness is still possible. If we believe that we have an inkling of God's truth, but see through a glass darkly (1 Cor 13:12), then we will approach other beliefs with a certain humility and awareness that we still have a great deal to learn.

6 Reflecting on Mission Is Important in a Time of Turmoil

Finally, there is a real place for reflection on mission.

I'm talking here about mission studies, or missiology. It is theology as it relates to mission. It's not separate from theology. For example, to seek to understand what "salvation" means is both a theological and a missiological activity.

Missiology also ventures beyond theology. It draws on communication theory, sociology, economics, politics, anthropology and linguistics to take a few secular disciplines that give assistance to the task of engaging with the world.

Mission studies are the reflective part of the ongoing reflection-action cycle to which we are hopefully committed. Action without reflection is rudderless; reflection without action goes nowhere.

Whenever there is significant social change, or philosophical change or some tectonic shift, such as the arrival of the postmodern worldview, there is a need to reassess who the church is and how it relates to the world around it.

For example, we need to hear the research that says that the younger generation thinks Jesus is cool but the church is not, and reflect on what it means for mission.¹³ Does it mean we give up on the church? Does it mean that we talk about following Jesus but not about forming communities of faith? Does it mean tackling sexual abuse within the church with more vigour? Does it mean experimenting with café church, pub church and so on? These questions are worthy of solid reflection, because times are changing.

As the name of a book I edited suggests, times of turmoil and social change are the time to reimagine God and mission.¹⁴

Ross Langmead, 28-8-09

¹³ Bible Society of New South Wales, *"Jesus: All About Life" research report* (Sydney: Bible Society of New South Wales, 2004), available at <<http://www.jesusallaboutlife.com.au/jaal/Research.aspx>>; Dan Kimball, *They like Jesus, but not the church: Insights from emerging generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); Steve McCranie, *Love Jesus, hate the church: How to survive in church—or die trying* (Gastonia, NC: Back2Acts Productions, 2005)

¹⁴ Ross Langmead, *Reimagining God and mission : perspectives from Australia* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007),